

Opinion: Why women would prefer to be alone in the woods with a bear than a man

May 4 2024, by Lisa Sugiura



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Would you rather find yourself alone in the woods with a bear or a man? This is the question currently [dividing social media](#). Based on the responses online, it looks like most women answering the question say they would choose the bear, a decision that is [shocking many men](#).

The reactions show some men don't understand [women's experiences](#). The assertion that women would prefer to encounter a bear is based on evidence about the rate of male violence against women, and on a lifetime of learning to fear and anticipate this violence. This is especially true of sexual violence, something which would not be associated with encountering a bear.

According to the World Health Organization, [one in three women](#)—around 736 million globally—will have experienced sexual or [physical violence](#) by an intimate partner or [sexual violence](#) from a non-partner in their lifetime. This figure has largely remained unchanged over the past decade.

Being attacked by a bear is much less common, with only [664 attacks worldwide](#) over 15 years, and very few [fatal attacks](#). And bears tend to avoid humans, attacking only when provoked or protecting their young.

This is not about generalizing or fearing all men. Women know that not all men are dangerous. But women don't know which men they should fear, only that male violence and male entitlement to women's bodies is something that they have to be on guard for.

Women are [commonly victims](#) of sexualized violence, and men are overwhelmingly the perpetrators (including [against other men](#)). There are enough men who have hurt or are capable of hurting women, and women have no way of knowing which ones these are.

While much violence against women comes from men they know, the risk of danger from men they don't know is something that informs their day-to-day lives.

For example, research shows that women change their behavior—making certain decisions about the routes they take or what they wear—to avoid harassment or abuse from men in public. Scholars such as Fiona Vera-Gray refer to this as [safety work](#).

Women's view of men is also colored by their non-violent actions that harm women. Clearly, bears also do not contribute to or uphold systemic sexism and misogyny, but most men do.

My [research](#) on misogynistic online groups has explored how men engage in acts against women that reinforce gender inequality.

Writer Emma Pitman has described this phenomenon using the analogy of a [human pyramid](#). The choices of some men to stay silent about abuse is the base of the pyramid, holding up other men who engage in misogynistic jokes or commit violence.

The overall effect, whether deliberate or via ignorance or indifference, is to normalize and support the actions of male sexual predators and domestic abuse perpetrators.

This culture props up the men who are silent bystanders, observing sexism, harassment or abuse but doing nothing, the men who make or laugh along with the sexist or rape jokes, those who are rape apologists and blame women for their sexual victimization, those who become aggressive when women turn them down, those who stalk, control and abuse women, and those who are rapists, sexual harassers and murderers. This continuum of misogyny is women's everyday reality—and at no point do bears feature.

Men on the defensive

Men are generally surprised, defensive even, when the subject of male violence against women is discussed. This is often where people invoke the response "not all men."

When women took to [social media](#) to express their anger and devastation following the murder of [Sarah Everard](#) by a [police officer](#) in 2021, #NotAllMen trended online. Meanwhile, police advised women not to walk alone at night, placing the burden of avoiding violence on women.

This conversation is about privilege, and not recognizing it. Many men are able to move through their daily lives not being worried that they are going to be attacked or raped, can walk alone late at night without taking any [safety precautions](#) or even not having such thoughts cross their minds, and do not feel their hearts beat faster if they hear footsteps behind them.

It may not be all men, but it is all women, who live smaller lives because of the threat of some men's violence.

These discussions are an opportunity for men to understand women's genuine fears and to be part of the solution rather than the problem.

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