

## Patriarchy and violence against women and girls



In the nearly 20 years since the Beijing World Conference on Women,<sup>1</sup> there have been both advances and setbacks for women and girls. Many of the 30 000 activists who gathered there have continued the struggle for equal human rights, making important progress. More women are rising up and making their voices heard in every sphere of life. Yet age-old patriarchal structures and attitudes make sustained progress difficult.

Most societies were shaped by religious doctrine mandated by male authorities, so attitudes and systems that promote male dominance have become the norm. Such doctrine came from religious leaders who distorted religious scriptures by selecting texts that depict women as inherently inferior or subservient to men.<sup>2</sup> Alongside such patriarchal systems, violence in society has also become normalised.<sup>2</sup> My nation, the USA, and other countries accept violence as a way to solve problems—from the use of the death penalty and mass incarceration in addressing crime, to pre-emptive and unjust warfare abroad.

Many societal structures are built around the expectation of violence, and this is illustrated by the existence of brutality in the family. Violence against women and girls happens far too often, from intimate partner violence to honour killings. The numbers are horrifying: globally, one in three women will be assaulted in her lifetime; homicide of a woman as a result of domestic abuse is six times more likely when a firearm is in the home, illustrating the deadly consequences of permissive gun laws; and one in five women in the USA is sexually assaulted during her time in higher education.<sup>3,4</sup> Poverty is also a factor in these societal structures. Women employed full-time in the USA earn around 22% less than men on average, making it much harder for poor women to lift themselves out of poverty.<sup>5</sup> Young girls also suffer under such societal structures. More than 1.5 million girls worldwide are married each year who are younger than 15 years.<sup>6</sup> Unbelievably, about 160 million girls are missing around the world, as a result of selective abortion of female fetuses or female infanticide, because families believe a son will be a better provider than a girl in societies where girls are deprived of education and gainful employment.<sup>7</sup>

As the *Lancet* Series on violence against women and girls<sup>8–12</sup> shows, the abuses I describe here pose an

ongoing threat to public health and social progress. The international community is undertaking a review of commitments articulated in the Millennium Development Goals, notably MDG 3, so that a sustained process will enrol nations into the urgent task of reversing these patterns of behaviour.

Our society has become increasingly desensitised to violence. The recent GamerGate controversy revealed the severe harassment of women who seek to expose and mitigate extreme violence depicted in popular video games.<sup>13</sup> Media critic Anita Sarkeesian has highlighted how vicious treatment of women is used as decoration in these games, giving the impression that women have no reason to exist except to be brutalised.<sup>14</sup> Sarkeesian faced death threats as a result of her work.<sup>13</sup> A 2008 Pew survey found that where the internet is available 97% of youths aged 12–17 years play video games on a regular basis.<sup>15</sup> It defies credulity that attitudes and tolerance for violence among our young men and women are not influenced by these engrossing experiences.

Violence is accepted in these and many other spheres of life. As long as this is true, abuse of women and girls will continue. Efforts to promote non-violence within our families, culture, communities, and between nations must be increased. Our churches, mosques, and synagogues can be a source of peace, justice, and spiritual nourishment, but entrenched patriarchy often condones violation of women's rights.

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Patriarchy is not new. It is a system created and maintained by men of faith and politics who hold the levers of economic, cultural, and political power and who confuse strength and masculinity with domination and brutality. Patriarchy must be replaced by a system in which equal human rights and non-violence are promoted and accepted. This will happen if we embrace the kind of love and mutual respect exemplified and preached by the founders of the world's great religions, and through the persistent efforts of those who speak out and work for a more equal and less violent world.<sup>2</sup> Equal human dignity is a human right, as codified in many global treaties. It is my hope that political and religious leaders will step forward and use their influence to communicate clearly that violence against women and girls must stop, that we are failing our societies, and that the time for leadership is now.

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I was the 39th President of the USA and am the founder of The Carter Center and a member of The Elders. I declare no competing interests.

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