

Misogyny against climate justice activists

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Abstract

The 2019 climate strikes were led by women with Greta Thunberg being the first to start the Fridays for Future schoolstrikes. Anuna followed this example in Belgium. Being in this leading position, both received a huge amount of online harassment. The harassers were mainly young boys. The harassment was mainly sexual. This goes to show how the patriarchal masculinity experienced by the boys is felt to be threatened and needs to be defended by instigating violence against women. The deconstruction of patriarchal masculinity into caring types of masculinities/humanities, is to be prioritised in feminist and climate movements.

Author's preamble note: With a master's degree in gender studies and having worked in academia for many years on this topic, I'm a gender expert, however currently working for Oxfam Belgium. This is why this essay is not written in academic language. I rather use the style of a narrative. Telling a personal tale, hoping this brings enough elements to vibrate in the academic context and theory building.

In 2015 researchers (Kasumovic, and Kuznekoff 2015¹) observed the behavior of bullying during online gaming. Most bullies were boys and victims were girls (no surprise there). However, the researchers wanted to dig deeper and find out why some boys' behavior was ok (fair, respectful play) and others' was bad (harassment of other players). They found out that the variable determining if a boy was more likely to be a bully or a gentleman, had to do with his performance in the game: when losing he would be much more likely to bully girls (especially girls outperforming them) and when winning they would be more likely to behave like a gentlemen.

'We hypothesised that female-initiated disruption of a male hierarchy incites hostile behaviour from poor performing males who stand to lose the most status.... We suggest that low-status males increase female-directed hostility to minimize the loss of status as a consequence of hierarchical re-configuration resulting from the entrance of a woman into the competitive arena.'

(Kasumovic MM, Kuznekoff JH (2015))

All of this comes as no surprise. After all, we live in a world dominated by patriarchal gender stereotypes, where many boys grow up with the message that the worst thing that could happen to them 'is to be like a girl (a sissy, a pussy,...)'. Many boys are taught that their position is and needs to be superior at all times. So, a woman out-performing them feels for some boys like an existential threat to the core of their identity: their masculinity.

A couple of years after this research, that is exactly what my daughter did, outperform boys and take up a leadership role. December of 2018 – my seventeen-year-old daughter (Anuna De Wever Van der Heyden)² was really outraged upon hearing that the Belgian government refused to join the high ambition coalition at the end of the COP meeting³ despite the fact that almost 100.000 people had protested in the streets of Brussels in favor of that. We discussed the complexities ... And she realized that she was too young to vote in the next election. While voting was not an option nor the protests proven effective, I explained to her that civil disobedience could be another way for resistance. Naively I showed her the video of what Greta Thunberg had just started doing in Sweden. Striking on a school day and sitting in front of the Parliament, more or less on her own.

The next day Anuna assembled her friends (all of which were girls and just one boy) and organized the first school strike in Brussels. To our complete surprise 3000 pupils walked out of the class that day, the next week 7.000, then 10.000 and they kept striking every week until the election in May 2019. While definitely Greta Thunberg was the public face of the Fridays for Future movement worldwide, in Belgium it was Anuna that became the public face and de facto spokesperson. She quickly amplified the scale to thousands of youths walking out of school every week. It quickly spread throughout the rest of Europe and the world and became the biggest youth movement we've had for decades.

Anuna became an overnight celebrity in Belgium. Her success in gaining wide support for the schoolstrikes and navigating the complexities that come with it was impressive, to say the least for a seventeen-year-old. But in this essay, I will not linger on the success but rather look at the downside and dark shadow cast on her being a girl leading a movement.

Start of harassment

The first death threat came about two weeks into the school strikes. Some commentators on social

media had discovered that Anuna had a twin sister, so they commented they could take care of that 'with a twin-barreled gun'. And that was just the start of daily death threats that would last for about a year (until Corona struck and the bullies turned their attention to the virologists).

Death threats were one thing, sexual harassment another. Having been close to them, I estimate Anuna and Greta together received the biggest collection of dick pics ever. Anuna was also a subject of constant threats of 'corrective rape' because she was openly lesbian. It was suggested that 'a black man should rape her, so she'd become a real woman', thereby creating an all-time low example of how misogyny and white racist patriarchy go together.

Now this is interesting because if the world would not be patriarchal, you'd expect the backlash to be full of arguments denying climate change. But that was not the case, it was never about climate. The focus of the backlash was on the gender, sex and sexual orientation of the women involved, with Greta also receiving very demeaning harassment about her autism. The school strikes of 2019 turned out to be an exemplary case of gender policing whereby women are punished for stepping out of their patriarchally imposed league, resonating with the very findings of the research mentioned above on computer games and gender. Symbolically the image could not have been more powerful at the dawn of the 21st century of young women taking on old white men in politics and (fossil fuel) businesses. And so the gender policing backlash was enormous.

Since we'd been an anonymous family up until Dec 2018, we'd never taken measures to protect our privacy too much online and people could easily find our address resulting in dog shit in the mailbox and needing police assistance to open up certain suspicious letters. My children were no longer allowed to open the front door when the doorbell rang and ultimately, we needed police protection almost 24/7. Threats were made to bomb an event where she would receive a prize for her work and we needed undercover protection during the strikes. Anuna was the subject of a horrible hunting party at a festival

(luckily they could not locate the tent where she was hiding). Often stuff was thrown at her by random boys crossing her on the street and she received a never-ending stream of online threats day and night. You start to wonder if trolls ever sleep, but more likely they work in shifts, as well as being cyborgs multiplied and magnified by AI-algorithms and fossil-fueled computers and conservative think tanks all night long.

It is quite remarkable that she always escaped physical injury, but the mental scars of living through this with your head held high, are obviously there. Now, three years later, I would like to unpack in this essay why this misogyny happened and what lessons learned might help us to move on.

Looking at masculinity

There is of course the mechanism mentioned earlier, boys growing up with the clear message that they should be positioned higher up the chain of command than the women in their lives. When this is upended it seems to be perceived as a threat to the core of their identity, their masculinity. If you've learned that the world is a nail, everything starts to look like a hammer and so if you learn that life is about competition, everyone becomes a rival, especially girls who break the rule and start to compete in the boys' league.

At this point, it might also be interesting to look at the profile of the men who harassed her. At first, we were not too scared because when we investigated the profiles most turned out to be old retired white men who've become very angry as life didn't deal them the cards they'd wish they'd got. The post-WWII generation of white European men is riddled with false entitlement about their status and power in society. They were infused with the 'alpha male myth' and felt that if they didn't end up at the top of the power chain at the end of their life, something was terribly wrong with society or with the women in their lives. Sad as their position may be, we did not think they'd have the energy or strength to leave their computer screen and arrange a physical attack on Anuna.

However, quite fast the profile of bullies became a lot younger. The age range of 18- to 30-year-old boys with hoodies, fast cars, swastikas and guns in their profile pictures came into play. The far right was weaponizing climate denial. This worried us much more because it only takes one of them whose anger issues are out of control to create a disaster. This is the generation of boys who – unlike their fathers or grandfathers – are told that false entitlement is a problem of white masculinity (Kimmel, 2013 calls them angry white men; Connel, 2005 talks about life fast fie young and Hultman & Pulé, 2018 talk about industrial breadwinner masculinity). That they will be dealt with accordingly by a generation of woke diverse youth who believe diversity and inclusion are the keys to a well-functioning organization and society. These are the boys who see their privilege melting in front of their eyes before they get to the age they can start claiming it properly. So, while their fathers are angry because the promise wasn't held, these boys are angry because no more promises are made. If life is considered as one big competition, then finding themselves on an equal playing field feels threatening to them. If you consider privilege to be your natural prerogative, then fair play becomes a threat.

Also, we cannot ignore the role of social media with algorithms that push these boys easily into the rabbit hole. Algorithms can strengthen misogyny and hardly any proper moderation is done by the social media platforms⁴. Internet accelerates radicalization of extremist 'incels' or radicalized boys drowning in the toxic manosphere (Joe Whittacker, 2022⁵).

So, their harassment addressed to Anuna was no more than an already existing anger that they funnelled towards her as a symbol of the very wrong turn society had taken, according to them. Greta, Anuna and all the other women in Fridays for Future became the icons of the 'justice' movement (climate justice, gender justice, economic justice, ...); a justice that feels so unjust for those presuming their privilege is natural and untouchable. This is most likely the greatest challenge ahead for the young generation: to push through the justice agenda and upending

the entire patriarchal, capitalist and colonial system that is built on structural and fundamental injustices. Seen from the perspective of this bigger context it was no wonder that there was so little argument about climate itself by her opponents, but rather raw aggression towards her very existence. The preferred weapon in this battle is sexual harassment and intimidation, an old-time favorite to keep women in line in many societies.

This was quite a challenge for my daughter to take on, and no wonder she became for some the icon of evil or the angelic prophet to others, depending on where you stand on the spectrum of justice.

That was then and this is now. We are in 2023, Anuna is non-binary, so I will refer to them as they/them for the rest of the text, but wanted to use she/her in the beginning since this is what society perceived them to be. Which is as such a very interesting example of how our societies still stick to the binary code and label people as fits their categories. At the same time, I do not think the harassment would have been any less if they'd been outspoken non-binary, because belonging to the LGBTQIA+ community is enough to be branded as a threat.

Masculinity and care

Now, besides the argument described above of many boys not being attracted to the justice movement as this upends their privileges, there are other reasons why men and boys were at the forefront in the battle against female/LGTBQIA+ climate activists. It is the argument of care (Kimmel, 2013⁶; Connell, 2005⁷). Being a climate activist means taking on care duties. Not only for yourself or for your community, but caring about the entirety of humanity and life on this planet. That is taking caretaking to the next level.

Men have definitely been providing care in patriarchal societies (as heads of households, organisations, countries, and so on); a kind of care that came with privilege and power. However, the kind of care that is called for by climate activists is rather the kind of care that is relational rather

than oppressive. It is a form of care that is kind rather than authoritative, supportive rather than exploiting, care that is healing rather than punishing. The kind of care women are supposed to provide in patriarchal societies is an invisible care and free of charge. Care that is about connection and not about establishing a power relationship. When we expect men to take up the kind of care reserved for women, we actually invite them to let go of their long-held beliefs about what it means to be a man. It is in this encounter with care that they expose themselves and are subjected to gender-policing by other men who do not value their radical act of upending the status quo.

It is one thing when women /LGTBQIA+ find themselves on the frontline of the transition to a gender just world, but when they are joined by men, these men are – to patriarchal men - not just rebels with a cause but downright traitors to patriarchy, succumbing to the lure of a feminine identity that no men should ever want to aspire to in his life. No wonder so few men hear the call and join the transition to develop their healing, caring and nurturing side. Patriarchy, capitalism and colonialism (these last two being, in my opinion, mere symptoms of the first), are based on establishing and maintaining unequal power positions, so anything calling for connection, intimacy and caring for others is a threat to all three of these destructive structures.

In my understanding this is exactly what Martin Hultman⁸ calls moving away from the **ego**-logical male position towards the **eco**-logical position. The ego-logical position being the patriarchal man or breadwinner who puts himself at the pinnacle of power. The eco-logical position however, assumes a place among and in connection to others in a caring way. The tension between the two is exactly the great divide stretching out on the horizon of male identity at the beginning of the 21st century. The path of destruction or care. Obviously, destruction is not the core objective of patriarchy as it would leave them with little to overpower in the end, but destruction is a sure strategy to get to the real objective which is domination. Destruction is the weapon. As such the fact that the harassment is so sexual, comes as no surprise as it takes away the agency and dignity of

the women involved over their own bodies. By destroying the power women have over their bodies (by raping them or threatening them with it), men embody the ultimate power over the female body. Cynically power here becomes having the power and liberty to destroy the very thing you want to possess. Rape is meant to destroy the female sexuality and is all about power. Same with the planet, in the greediness to get to the top of the pecking order, men are willing to destroy the very thing they want to preside over, our planet Earth.

Even three years later I am still amazed at the strength of the hate and anger expressed by these men and boys. The unrelenting threat was real and it left me with a panic disorder that needed long-term treatment afterwards. But make no mistake, I would do it all over again in a blink of an eye because unfortunately, this is the dark tunnel we need to go through if we really want the transition to succeed. And as such I was still very lucky and privileged to be living in a country like Belgium where we really got great assistance from the police offering us all the protection they could, and having access to a good psychological care system that helped us to recover. In many other parts of the world, the police might join the bullies and therapists would be unavailable. The global majority would be on their own, whereas I am still a privileged activist despite the horrors we went through.

As for Anuna, they and I continue our path. Occasionally, I still need to file a complaint with the police for threats against me, while for them it remains a daily matter of being harassed, threatened and bullied online. They found a way of dealing with it, like so many activists have. But it shouldn't be like that. Because the moment we start to accept that receiving death threats, on a daily basis, just because of our ideas, is something normal, we undermine what it means to live in a democracy.

Now how do we move away from this?

It takes a lot of inner work and courage to step down from the ladder of privilege, share power

and build genuine connections. Moreover, stepping away from something doesn't work unless you know what you are stepping towards.

Exactly the capacity to imagine a desirable future would be my first suggestion of remedy. Many young people have a very clear picture of the apocalypse waiting for us, they visualize it and fear it. Fewer though are the young people who can visualize their desirable future. What world would that be and what would their place be in it? Do we focus on the fossil fuel cars people will have to give up or on the clean air we will finally be able to breathe? This shift in focus is crucial, not only when it comes to our climate future, but also when it comes to our gender future. Men and boys often focus on what they fear losing without being able to visualise what they will win: it is not just about stepping down from their privilege. It is also about belonging and creating intimate relationships which are more fulfilling than standing on the stage of power. We need to amplify what we can win in this future and how it can give meaning and healing to so many toxic relationships in our lives. This means finding the radical courage to fiercely reach out in a kind way. Fierce kindness sounds so contradictory, but it might be a feminist answer to angry white men.

This essay has been very binary in its description of female/male differences to emphasize the challenge of the crisis in gender relationships. When describing the men and boys who spend their days harassing women who challenge their worldview, I am well aware that this section of angry white men does not represent men at all. There are so many more masculinities out there. Some men and boys are just discovering other ways to live their lives, some broke away from the messages their fathers gave them, some have embraced connection and some are totally into all the justice movements. This means there are untold possibilities of bridges that can be built between different men to navigate the minefield towards transition. All it takes is one person at a time.

As a gender expert, I was once involved in a project with men who took the training to become gender trainers. When interviewed about

their motivations to step into this role and embarking on a journey to bring other men around, they all told tales of how gender stereotypes had traumatized the women in their lives. Rape, violence, toxicity had traumatized some of the women close to them. Being a by-stander to gender harassment trauma up close and personal they had seen first-hand the scars such forms of violence have left on the women they loved, which was the tipping point for these men to decide to get involved.

But what does this mean as a lesson learned to get men on board (or at least behaving respectfully towards climate activists)? Obviously, we do not want more traumatized women to get men's attention and empathy going. But we do want to get under their skin, up close and personal to talk more about our already-experienced trauma.

It took a long time for women to create safe spaces where they could do that. Maybe now is the time to start creating more brave spaces. A brave space where women can say it as it is, supporting each other in doing so and knowing that there are men who are genuinely listening and caring. It is about believing that our stories are worth being heard and that our voices can be amplified across continents. As in many movements we owe so much to the black women who made these brave spaces possible. Think for example about the #MeToo movement started by Tarana Burke.

As I was lying in bed at night, wide awake with thoughts of my three kids going off on a school strike the next day, wondering if all three would come home that night safe and sound, I felt an enormous connection to all the mothers out there who had been standing on the frontline of their battles and were able to voice messages to make people turn. Not in anger, but in wonder, in curiosity, in empathy, in support, in care.

Since my 17-year-old child decided to walk out of school to strike for the climate on that dark December night at our kitchen table, I have never once doubted the power of brave women. Yes, we have scars, my life has become divided between the period before and after. Yes, the fear was

sometimes unbearable and the hurt deep. But, as we amplify our voices – as I am trying to do in this essay – the caring women and men of the world can carry ourselves and our children through the tunnel of unsocial media and flood it with words of support, courage, love and connection. In the

end that is the narrative we will remember that got us through the night.

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Notes

- ¹ Kasumovic MM, Kuznekoff JH (14 Sep 2015) Correction: Insights into Sexism: Male Status and Performance Moderates Female-Directed Hostile and Amicable Behaviour. PLOS ONE 10(9): e0138399. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0138399>
- ² Since it is a very important feminist principle to not talk about without talking with, I have asked both Anuna's and Greta's review and approval of their being mentioned in this essay.
- ³ Every year a COP meeting is held (Conference of the Parties) to discuss climate change. The COP's participants are countries represented by their governments. Some of these governments are much more ambitious with regards to climate goals than others. So in 2018 there was a group of highly ambitious government and the Belgian government decided not to join this coalition.
- ⁴ Institute for strategic dialogue: Algorithms as a Weapon Against Women: How YouTube Lures Boys and Young Men into the 'Manosphere'. April 2022. <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/algorithms-as-a-weapon-against-women-how-youtube-lures-boys-and-young-men-into-the-manosphere/>
- ⁵ Joe Whittacker (2022), *Online Radicalisation, What we know*, European Commission, https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/RAN-online-radicalisation_en.pdf
- ⁶ Kimmel, Micheal (2013), *Angry White Men*, Nation Books.
- ⁷ Connell, R.W. 2005 second edition, *Masculinities*, University of California Press.
- ⁸ Martin Hultman and Paul Pulé, 2021, *Ecological Masculinities: Theoretical Foundations and Practical Guidance*, Routledge Studies in Gender and Environments. Part of: Routledge Studies in Gender and Environments (6 books) | Sep 26, 2021.