



# Abolishing militarised masculinities

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# 01

**INTRODUCTION**

# Militarised masculinities extend beyond the military.

Other structures of state violence – such as police, prisons and borders – utilise militarised masculinities to police, guard, enforce, control and kill on behalf of the interests of capital, privilege and power. Capitalism is at the heart of these institutions – the military, the carceral system and border “enforcement” are all meant to protect and serve the extraction of capital, and the suppression of human beings who produce that capital.

In this process, the state perpetuates militarised masculinities within these structures, creating soldiers, police and others who enact power through violence. But the violence of those employed by these institutions also perpetuates militarised masculinities in the wider population: the harms created by these structures exacerbate harms committed in the world, in particular by those looking to survive the patriarchal, racist, militarised system, and those looking to achieve their own power and wealth through violence – ie those the state considers “criminals”.<sup>2</sup>

Both sides of this equation – the state and the “criminal class” – claim to offer protection or security through violence. Of course, this only begets more violence, not security.

Life in the capitalist system imposes economic inequalities and poverty; climate change and conflict; colonial controls and imperialist wars. The state’s structures of violence are built to contain and control the majority, who struggle to survive this system. Harm, violence and brutality are the result within this cycle of violence, that celebrates and facilitates militarised masculinities at all levels.

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<sup>2</sup> Note: Most of the harms described here are carried out by men, particularly cisgender heteronormative men, enacting their idealised version of such. The fact that women and LGBTQ+ folks also commit harm does not undermine this reality. They are still engaged in militarised masculinities. This is about gender norms of masculinity, which can be performed by anyone of any gender or sexuality.

**Change** is imperative to **a better life, a better world.**

**Abolition** provides a framework for **enacting this change.**

Abolishing structures of state violence includes defunding, demilitarising, disarming and disbanding the institutions that cause harm, including militaries, police, prisons and borders.

Abolishing the capitalist system, and instead pursuing degrowth economic policies, environmental care and human rights, prevents the alleged “need” for these structures in the first place, by building a more equitable and liveable world. Abolition cuts through the masculine protection racket, and seeks security in care instead of violence.

Deconstructing militarised masculinities is vital to the work of abolition; and the work of abolition helps to deconstruct militarised masculinities. Each is entwined with and reliant upon each other. Abolition disrupts the cycle of violence, and builds instead a cycle of peace.



02

**MILITARISED MASCULINITIES IN STRUCTURES OF STATE VIOLENCE**

**Military institutions engage actively in the processes of differentiating and “othering” that reinforce the ideal of gendered hierarchies.**

The state deliberately militarises human beings – it converts civilian bodies to military use and inculcates military practices into these bodies (Armitage 2003). It also inculcates practices of the dominant conception of masculinity – “toughness, skilled use of violence, presumption of an enemy, male camaraderie, submerging one’s emotions, and discipline (being disciplined and demanding it of others)” (Enloe 1990, p150).

Turning humans into warfighters, requires breaking down their sense of ethics and morals, and building up a violent masculinity that is lacking in empathy, and glorifies strength as violence and physical domination over others portrayed as weaker. Hierarchy is fundamental to military training. Teaching human beings to kill other human beings “requires dehumanizing others by promoting the belief that another human is somehow a ‘lesser’ creature,” explains feminist scholar Cynthia Enloe. “One of the central forms of dehumanization promoted by military training and the culture of daily life in the military has been the supposed inferiority of women – that women are less than men.” (Enloe 1988; see also Strange 1983)<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> As Barrett, argues, integrating women in military isn’t going to “dilute the tough image associated with the ideology of masculinity” (Barrett 1996, p134). They are often seen as having been cut a break by being “allowed” in without having to go through the same rigorous training as men.



Patriarchy, however, is intersectional. It imposes a hierarchy between men and women and oppresses not only on that basis, but also along lines of race, sexuality, class, (dis)ability and more. Militarised masculinities assert the supremacy of cisgender heteronormative able-bodied men; patriarchy further celebrates the white and wealthy. bell hooks notes that patriarchy is not only “a political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females” but it is a system that endows the hegemonic male “with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence” (hooks 2010, p1).

This system extends well beyond the military. The military plays a primary role in shaping images of masculinity in the larger society (Kimmel and Messner 1989; Morgan 1994), to the point where “the dominant adult male role model could largely be the product of the military” (Arkin and Dobrofsky 1978). One does not need to be part of the military or have access to military-grade weapons to be militarised. One just needs to see violence as the solution to perceived threats and to see this violence as the source of one’s power or survival.

Just as the military engages actively in the processes of differentiating and “othering” that reinforces the ideal of hierarchies among humans and makes it easier to kill, injure or subdue certain categories of people, so too do other structures of state violence, including policing, prisons and borders.

**While police officers, prison guards and immigration enforcers may not necessarily undergo the same warfighting training as soldiers - though many are former military or receive training and equipment from militaries - their institutions enforce the patriarchal hierarchies described above.**

03

POLICE

**Police, for example,  
are responsible for the  
deaths of thousands of  
people a year.**

In the United States, the Mapping Police Violence project has found that in 2019 there were only 27 days when police did not kill someone.<sup>4</sup> Part of the problem is that US police forces receive direct training from the US military, and from private military and security companies.

Alex S Vitale notes that the police have been trained to respond to uncertainty or fear with deadly force. “Part of this emphasis on the use of deadly force comes from the rise of independent training companies that specialize in in-service training, staffed by former police and military personnel,” he explains. “Some of these groups serve both military and police clients and emphasize military-style approaches.” (Vitale 2018, p25)

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<sup>4</sup> *Mapping Police Violence*, <https://mappingpoliceviolence.org>

But the other part of the problem, is that the police are built to protect and serve the interests of capital, not the public. The enclosure of the commons<sup>5</sup> and privatisation of land, goods and services lead to dispossession and poverty, leading to the establishment of the “police state” to enforce “law and order”. This is how policing was borne across Europe and in settler colonies – which also deployed police to commit genocide against Indigenous populations and control slave populations. Since the abolition of slavery, incarceration has been used to suppress and control. Thus, the institution of policing is rooted in colonialism, capitalism and white supremacy.

**But police violence is not just a Western phenomenon. In countries of the global south, institutions of policing likewise protect the privileges of the elite, particularly those gained by neoliberal capitalism’s enclosure of the commons – ie corporate profiteering and extraction of “resources” and labour.**

**The brutal violence of Colombian police in May 2021 against people protesting against austerity measures and lack of support during the Covid-19 pandemic, resulted in scores of deaths and injuries, sexual violence and incarceration (Democracy Now! 2021). Nigerian police forces responded to protests in 2020 against police abuse with tear gas, water cannons and live ammunition, killing several people (Human Rights Watch 2020). The examples are endless. Police brutality is transnational, as is its pursuit of protection for capital.**

George Jackson – a Marxist who was ultimately murdered by prison guards – argued that law is a political construction designed to manage the poor and the unemployed.

“Crime is simply the result of grossly disproportionate distribution of wealth and privilege, a reflection of the present state of property relations,” he wrote. (Jackson 1972, p106) Class determines the way the law is applied and implemented, and what kinds of activity are counted as “criminal”. The most violence is coming from – and the most dangerous weapons are in the hands of – the military, police and border control agencies (Haymarket Books 2020). Yet their violence is permitted by the state, and those who carry it out are almost always immune from prosecution. Furthermore, not all violent or criminal acts are considered either violent or criminal. Pollution and contamination of water and land, war profiteering and the military-industrial complex, corporate greed and the oppression of labour – these are not considered criminal or violent acts, despite the incredible harm they generate for billions of people and the planet (Kaba 2021).

The patriarchal valuation of wealth and power determines who is a criminal and who is free to harm. Those who create the conditions that generate “criminal behaviour” are celebrated, while those who try to survive this system are punished. In short, policing and prisons are the state’s answers to the political, social and economic inequalities created by the state.

<sup>5</sup> The enclosure of the commons refers to the capitalist process beginning in 13th-century England of consolidating land and restricting access to it, which disenfranchised people from having access to common land for communal use and benefited the capitalist elite landowning class. This process continued throughout history, with the capitalist economic system building from the 15th to the 17th century.



04

**PRISONS**

**Just as police are deployed to control, suppress and kill those who do not conform to or are harmed by the capitalist, white supremacist, patriarchal order, prisons are designed to confine them.**

The criminalisation of certain communities and segments of the population, coupled with the violence and harms generated by prisons, means that it has become a self-reproducing system. Much like the military-industrial complex, the prison-industrial complex is a force unto itself. It is, as scholar Julia Sudbury characterises, “a symbiotic and profitable relationship between politicians, corporations, the media, and state correctional institutions that generates the racialized use of incarceration as a response to social problems rooted in the globalization of capital” (Sudbury 2004).

The prison-industrial complex is also a site for militarised masculinities to prosper. The “warrior mentality” of police forces is also taught to so-called corrections officers. On paper, guards are not supposed to suppress fights or respond to perceived threats with lethal force. But violence by guards against those incarcerated is endemic, including beatings, sexual assaults, humiliation, cruel and unusual punishment and torture, including through solitary confinement (FogelLaw). The violence of those incarcerated perpetrated against each other is also part of the militarised masculinities infused in prisons. Violence is a primary form of communication, socialisation and order of life behind bars, which is reinforced and reproduced by the entire carceral system (Parenti 1999).

The carceral state not only demarcates mobility and freedom, but informs the performances of masculinities, argues educator Liljuan Gonzalez. “Carceral masculinity is a consequence of subjugation by hegemonic masculinities within prison and prison-like spaces,” he explains. “Institutional and structural imprisonment subordinate us to limited forms of expression, access and being. With such restricted motion, negative emotions are born with no legitimate outlet or sense of change. This feeling situates many of us in a state of powerlessness, rage, and inadequacy.” (Gonzalez 2018)

The history of genocide, slavery, incarceration and exploitation in various national and global contexts has been a foundation for gendered violence. Violence against women to dominate, violence against men to “emasculate”. Violence is also used to oppress and criminalise those who do not conform to sexual or gender norms. Examining the intersectional experience of carceral masculinities, Gonzalez argues that compounding violence of racism, heteronormativity and socioeconomic inequalities is often expressed by Black men through violence against women and queer people, in order to prove power and dominance. “Our masculinity must exist in opposition and domination of ‘something’ to validate our manhood,” and in this context, many non-queer, cis Black men “don’t want to relinquish this lie of power engineered by centuries-old white supremacist machinery” (Gonzalez 2018).

But gendered violence does not just come from individuals, it is state sanctioned. Policing and punishment of queer and non-conforming bodies has been and remains part of how the state has exerted its control over racialised and gendered “others” throughout its history and in modern times.

Enforcing gender conformity and heteronormativity remains a central feature of the carceral state, scholar Eric A Stanley explains (Stanley, Spade and Queer (In)Justice 2012).

The reinforcement and reproduction of binary gender is part of the deliberate work of prisons, including through violence against and repression of queer identities.

Rather than protecting women or LGBTQ+ people, the carceral system is stacked against survivors of gender-based violence, including sexual and domestic violence. This system does not create accountability or lasting change; it does not deal with patriarchy, misogyny and sexism. It focuses on individual behaviour, rather than the cultures of militarised masculinity that lead to the systemic and structural nature of gender-based violence.

Furthermore, the carceral system actually *disincentivises* accountability, argues abolitionist organiser Mariame Kaba.

Under threat of incarceration, the inclination of perpetrators of harm is to deny the harm, thus putting the survivor on trial to prove that harm was committed (Kaba and Hassan 2017). Most perpetrators of sexual assault are not arrested, convicted or incarcerated (RAINN). The failures of the current system are so widespread and well known, that many survivors of sexual violence don’t even bother reporting cases at all, understanding that it is more likely that their reputations and lives will be damaged, and that they will be further traumatised, than it is that those who caused them harm will ever be held accountable.

In addition, the carceral system itself is a site of sexual- and gender-based violence. Police rape people in custody (Bote 2019) and commit acts of domestic violence (Friedersdorf 2014) within their families. Sexual violence is rife within prisons, committed by guards and by those incarcerated. There is no safety or protection from sexual and gendered harm within the existing system. It is itself a source of this violence.

05

**BORDERS**



**Borders are also a source of masculinised violence, and – like police and prisons – are another state response to the social ills it created.**

The brutal impacts of colonialism, capitalism, climate change and conflict work in tandem to create vast numbers of people on the move. The establishment and entrenchment of the concept of borders has been structured to serve the capitalist system. This system allows the free flow of capital and corporations between borders, while constricting the movement of people, creating the perfect conditions for exploiting workers and the environment with impunity. The effects of this exploitation are felt globally, but they are carried out unevenly across the world. Borders, writes journalist Todd Miller, “largely serve as a neocolonial scaffolding for a planet divided into exploiting and exploitable countries and people.” (Miller 2021, p33)

The framing of the global movement of human beings as a crisis has led to the expansion of budgets and the weaponisation of the border in a “War on Migration”, which in turn has led to horrific human rights violations, abuse, and the deaths of thousands of people. Western countries are working hard to prevent access to millions of people: Fortress Europe spends billions of euros a year to shore up its militarised response to migration; Australia has built offshore detention camps on nearby islands; while the US and Israeli governments have initiated “exchange programmes” that bring together US police officers, US Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Border Patrol agents, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation with soldiers, police and border agents from Israel (Deadly Exchange).

**Border militarisation reflects the influence of military strategies, culture, technologies, hardware, and deploys many former military personnel as border agents. It means that the use of force and preparation for armed conflict are used as the guiding principles for “protecting” and securing the border.**

This reflects a process through which “police and military combine into an all-encompassing logic of perpetual war, surveillance, and security,” notes scholar Reece Jones.

“The historic distinction between the internal and external roles of the police and military has blurred, and the border is a key site where the emerging security state is visible and where privileges are maintained by restricting movement through violence.” (Jones 2017, p40)

Violence against refugees, asylum seekers and migrants is extreme. Militarised masculinities are ruthlessly deployed to prevent and prosecute those who attempt to cross borders. Along the Balkan Route in Europe, for example, violence by border guards, police and private security is endemic. Gender-based violence, particularly sexual violence, is also rampant. The UN Development Fund for Women reports that at least 60-70% of women migrants who cross borders alone, experience sexual abuse.

While this is the case everywhere, the danger is greater “for migrants from Central American countries, who must pass through two militarized borders – between Guatemala and Mexico and between Mexico and the US”, where “sexual violence often occurs while being robbed, as ‘payment,’ or in exchange for not being apprehended or detained by immigration authorities” (INCITE!).

Immigration authorities also exercise their militarised masculinities against migrants. Journalist John Washington describes the culture of abuse inherent in the US Border Patrol and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agencies, based on accounts of whistleblowers and survivors (Washington September 2018).

In addition to humiliating, degrading and enacting violence upon the bodies of migrants directly, officials of these agencies also have a habit of destroying any life-saving mechanisms deployed by humanitarian activists, such as dumping water that has been left in the desert (Washington May 2018; Frey 2019). Documentarians embedded with ICE even found that the agency “evaluated the success of its border policies based not only on the number of migrants apprehended, but on the number who died while crossing” (Dickerson 2020).

Like police or soldiers, ICE officers burst into homes in the middle of the night in a virulent display of their power, hurling abuses and dragging off in handcuffs those they suspect of being undocumented (Miller 2014).

If people survive the deserts, seas, bullets and beatings, and manage to make it to a country of possible refuge, many are then arrested and incarcerated – sometimes for days, sometimes for years. The conditions in detention centres from Australia to the United States are like concentration camps, due to the overwhelming violence, abuse and degradation.

All these myriad forms of violence against people on the move, are indicative of militarised masculinities ruling state policies and practices. The patriarchal force behind border and immigration enforcement – same as that behind policing, prisons and militaries – dictates dominance, oppression, violence and human rights violations. Rather than seeking alternative approaches to migration, “crime” or conflict that would prioritise human wellbeing over protection of wealth and corporate profit, structures of state violence reinforce the oppressive circumstances that lead to social ills and inequalities in the first place. And they gaslight entire populations to do so.

06

PROTECTION RACKETS

**In each of these cases  
- militaries, prisons,  
policing and borders -  
militarised masculinities  
that oppress along racist,  
sexist, homophobic and  
classist lines are shaped  
by and reinforce dominant  
narratives around safety  
and security.**

These narratives purport the “necessity” of prisons, police and soldiers to protect, defend and maintain “law and order”; they are constructed and perpetuated to ensure that the accumulation of wealth by the few is not disrupted or constrained by the needs of the many.

The military, the carceral system and border control are all part of the system of “national security”. From Hobbes’ Leviathan to the United States’ post-9/11 hypermilitarised complex of homeland security, CIA black sites and remote-control warfare, the idea of security has relied on militarised masculinities for its shape and its justification. “A security regime has an external and an internal aspect,” writes political theorist Iris Marion Young. “It constitutes itself in relation to an unpredictable aggressor outside. It organizes political and economic capacities around the accumulation of weapons and the mobilization of a military, to respond to this outsider threat.” (Young 2003, p225) It also, in a broader assessment, organises police, borders, prisons, surveillance and other mechanisms for control, coercion and the pursuit of omniscient cognisance and response capacity.

The national security state sets itself up as a protector, to which citizens are expected to subordinate in exchange for safety. In this construct, the rights and wellbeing of all people – citizens and non-citizens alike – are expendable. While purporting to be “a political and economic movement towards ever-increasing amounts of wealth, freedom and liberalization,” argue Phil Graham and Allan Luke, it is actually “a system of increasing militarization, oppression and aggression” (Graham and Luke 2003, p150).

The national security state is a classic protection racket. The profiteers are those who make the weapons, build the prisons and walls, and benefit from the global extraction of wealth and resources enabled by imperialist war and capitalist exploitation.

**The political economy of violence is engineered to incentive state brutality against foreign governments and residents of all countries, including its own. The more bombs dropped, the more people in cages, the more violations of human rights, the more oil ripped from the earth, the greater the profits for those that already have the most money.**

07

**MILITARISING AND MASCULINISING SECURITY**

**This protection racket is highly gendered. It relies on tropes of men protecting women; it requires subordination of those in the “protected” position to acquiesce to the demands and desires of those peddling security.**

Young notes, “Central to the logic of masculinist protection is the subordinate relation of those in the protected position... His will rules because he faces the dangers outside and needs to organize defenses.” (Young 2003, p224)

In a domestic setting, the “masculine protector” utilises violence and intimidation to shore up his dominant position. He extends guardianship to his household or group or community in exchange for obedience. The security state is not so different. It “demotes members of a democracy to dependents, a form analogous to the patriarchal household” (Young 2003, p226). Patriotism is deference to the patriarch. It compels the support of citizens for war and even potential restrictions on their own freedom in exchange for the pledge and perception of security.

The security state, like the patriarch, engages not just in aggression towards external threats, however. This masculinised approach to security means that aggression does not stop at the international border or the door to the house. Just like the “masculine protector” will be violent towards those under his “care”, so too is the security state violent towards its citizens. Both systems also employ classic patriarchal techniques, such as gaslighting and victim-blaming. In a domestic setting, the “masculine protector” may purport that his abuse was “asked for”, while the security state claims to be a victim of terrorism and thus justified in waging 20 years of war, killing hundreds of thousands of people, destroying or disrupting millions of lives, and curtailing the human rights of even more both at home and abroad.



Similarly, the security state claims that police and prisons are necessary to control and contain the violence of racialised people, even though the state's system of capitalist inequalities, history of slavery and genocide, and continued oppression, is what leads to commission of harms.

Or its narrative that border controls are necessary to prevent and deter immigration, when its own policies that have generated conflict, climate change and exploitation globally are responsible for the amount of people currently on the move in search of a liveable life.

The aggression of the protectorate is irrelevant. It is accepted as a "necessary evil" or the only way to prevent or deter whatever those seeking protection are looking to avoid.

In this context, the security state, or the masculine protector, can get away with extreme levels of violence, and can justify this violence as part of its job. Even overtly aggressive acts that clearly have nothing to do with protection are excused.

"The state's identity is militaristic, and it engages in military action, but with the point of view of the defendant rather than the aggressor," says Young. "Even when the security regime makes a first strike, it justifies its move as necessary to preempt the threatening aggressor outside." (Young 2003, p225)

**This goes for everything from air strikes thousands of miles away (Associated Press 2021; Philipps and Schmitt 2021) to the possession and threat of use of nuclear weapons (Duncanson and Eschle 2008; Eschle 2012). It goes for police shooting unarmed Black people at traffic stops, and border patrol leaving migrants to die in the desert or at sea. And it goes for the graphically ultraviolent undertakings of gore capitalism.**

A stylized graphic featuring the numbers '08' in a white, rounded, sans-serif font. The numbers are positioned over a solid blue horizontal bar that extends across the width of the graphic.

**THE MILITARISED MASCULINITY OF GORE CAPITALISM**

**Gore capitalism, as described by feminist scholar Sayak Valencia, “refers to the many instances of dismembering and disembowelment, often tied up with organized crime, gender and the predatory uses of bodies” (Valencia 2018, pp19-20).**

It is a form of capital accumulation utilised by non-state actors engaged in “criminal activities” such as drug trafficking, to transform into “economically acceptable subjects”. Gore capitalism also reaffirms “the gendered narratives that position men as *macho providers* and reinforce their virility through the active exercise of violence” (Valencia 2018, p79). The use of this kind of violence is increasingly popular among powerless populations, argues Valencia. “In many cases, it is seen as a response to the fear of demasculinization that haunts many men as a consequence of rising workplace precarity and their own subsequent inability to legitimately take on the role of male provider.” (Valencia 2018, p134)

Héctor Portillo and Sebastián Molano likewise underscore the links between male privilege, power and domination, and expectations for men to be “the provider”. In situations “when men are unable to fill the role of provider (a role they consider quintessential to their identity as men) they are likelier to engage in self-destructive behaviors or to join criminal enterprises or armed groups” (Portillo and Molano 2017). In Brazil, for example, many of the young men who are murdered or who murder are connected to drug trafficking gangs or live near them. “Most of these homicides occur in urban areas, where the drug trade emerged as a response to limited employment and limited presence of the state, and where there is easy access to firearms,” notes a report from Promundo. “For young men who have few things that make them feel that they are socially recognized adult men, this violence is also related to competition for reputation, recognition, honor, and prestige from female partners.” (Heilman and Barker 2018, p53) Other studies have found similar phenomena in other countries from Northern Ireland to the Philippines to South Africa (Bevan and Florquin 2006, p305).

**But just like other forms of gendered violence, gore capitalism is not just about individuals or non-state actors. It also includes the violence utilised by the state, “which, as it becomes increasingly incapable of providing for the welfare of its citizens, concurrently and paradoxically becomes more and more repressive, demanding the creation of categories to justify, legitimate, and absolve it of any responsibility for this repression” (Valencia 2018, p248).**

# In this way, the capitalist system both produces capital and destroys bodies.

For non-state actors, “Murder is now conceived of as a transaction, extreme violence as a legitimate tool, torture as an ultra-profitable exercise and display of power.” (Valencia 2018, p126) For the state, these same forms of ultraviolence have become acceptable practices of the military or other state agencies. Aggression, violence and even war crimes become sanitised under the guise of national security. As scholar Jasbir Puar points out, for example, the Abu Ghraib scandal is not exceptional. It is part of the range of practices of US empire (Puar 2007). It is also part of the masculinist protectorate role, the deployment of extreme violence and humiliation as an assertion of power and dominance.

For the US soldiers torturing detainees at Abu Ghraib, argues historian Joanna Bourke, “creating a spectacle of suffering was part of a bonding ritual. Group identity as victors in an increasingly brutalised Iraq is being cemented: this is an enactment of comradeship between men and women who are set apart from civilian society back home by acts of violence.” (Bourke 2004)

The way the state deals with violent non-state actors exercising their masculinity, is to either enlist them in the service of state violence – by training and employing them as soldiers, police, guards or enforcers– or to incarcerate them as “criminals”, even while exercising the same or greater levels of violence itself. Both options, as argued here, perpetuate violent masculinities.



09

**ABOLISHING STATE VIOLENCE AND DECONSTRUCTING  
MILITARISED MASCULINITIES**

# Structures of state violence do not work alone.

**Patriarchy, capitalism, colonialism, militarism and racism are interlinked systems of oppression that give rise to institutions like militaries, police, prisons, borders and other violent apparatus designed to control, coerce and kill the majority for the benefit of the minority. War, incarceration, torture, surveillance, exclusion and exploitation are just some of the results of this system.**

Militarised masculinities are at the heart of each. Gendered ideals about power, strength, virtue and “rights” are constructed as part of the creation of hierarchy in the world – the splitting of human beings into categories based on race, age, gender, sexuality, (dis)ability, religion and more. The socio-economic effects of capitalism, such as vast inequalities and widespread poverty, lead directly to violence by the “emasculated” masculine protector, a figure set up by the system to fail. The state then exercises violence to contain violence, enacting its own protection racket that seeks fear and submission from the wider population.

The perpetuation of an idealised notion of what it is to be a “real man” based on violence and hate masquerading as strength and power, is essential to the survival of these state structures of violence. Without militarised masculinities, these institutions cannot be sustained. If compassion, collectiveness, co-operation and care were idealised; if categories of gender, race and everything else were no longer treated as binaries – not as categories of exclusion and inclusion, but instead as a spectrum of being and experience in the world that were not rewarded or punished; the capacity to oppress would be diminished. While masculinities are performed by individuals, they are sanctioned, even commissioned, by structures: by the state, by the carceral system, by the military-industrial complex.

Militarised masculinities are ultraviolent groupthink.

Alex S Vitale, author of *The End of Policing*, argues that the myth established by the national security state is that “without the constant threat of violent coercive intervention, society will unravel into a war of all against all”. “In this context, “authoritarian solutions are not just necessary, they’re almost preferable” (Devereaux 2020).

The carceral system *facilitates* a culture of violence, glorification of weapons, white supremacy and militarised masculinity – all of which actively facilitate the commission of harms.

Unlearning the necessity of violence is essential to exploring what could be built in its place. This means turning on its head so much of what we are taught about what’s necessary for safety and security in our world.

**It means learning to reject violence as a solution to all problems, interrogating and challenging systems of power that assert they exist to protect, while instead they persecute and oppress. It means deconstructing the gender norms we are trained in from birth, and exploring alternatives of being in the world.**





10

**ABOLISH, CHANGE, BUILD**

**Abolition is the heart of this work. The language and practice of abolition provides context and clarity to our efforts for social transformation.**

WEB. Du Bois' classic analysis of abolition democracy includes "the political struggle led by formerly enslaved people in the wake of the Civil War to construct new institutions while also eradicating violent ones" (Berger and Stein, 2020). The simultaneous pursuit of tearing down violent structures, while building up systems for equality, justice and wellbeing, is the crux of abolitionism. As theory and practice it can help us recognise that the threats to our safety and security "come not primarily from what is defined as 'crime'," explains Angela Davis, but rather from the failure of institutions to address issues of health, issues of violence, education and more (Democracy Now! 2020).

The frame of abolition speaks directly to the need to not just put an end to a particular source of harm, but to fundamentally transform the political, economic and social relations that allowed that source of harm to grow and persist. By dismantling state structures of violence, abolition helps diminish the state's capacity for war, incarceration and other acts of oppression. By disrupting capitalism, abolition impedes extraction, exploitation, inequalities and related harms. All of this reduces the proclaimed "need" for state structures of violence. Abolition is, in this sense, about building a cycle of peace instead of a cycle of violence.

Abolition is about looking at the root causes of harm and violence, and working to build alternatives that prevent this harm, rather than relying on existing structures that only create more harm. Abolition is about more than any one of these systems; it is about dismantling the underlying injustice, inequality, racism, militarism, colonialism, patriarchy, heteronormativity, ableism, etc. People experience oppression based on the intersections of their many identities and experiences (Crenshaw 1989; Coaston 2019). Abolition looks to dismantle the structures that facilitate these myriad forms of oppression.

By doing so, it seeks not the destruction, but the *transformation* of our current world order, including through the disarming, demilitarising, defunding and disbanding of entities of coercive state power that work against peace and freedom. Abolition is not just about tearing down the system, but also about building anew, based on co-operation, equity and justice for all. Abolition is a political project of “promiscuous care” – of living in a more expansive way than our current capitalist, racist, patriarchal society tells us we can (Chatzidakis et al 2020).

This is about rejecting the current structures as a source of, rather than a solution to, violence. It’s about building alternatives. In place of capitalism, we need degrowth economics and ecological sustainability.

In place of police and prisons, we need a system of community-based mechanisms to respond to harms caused and investments in education, jobs, housing, healthcare, mental health, food security and more, to prevent the conditions that lead to this harm. In place of borders, we need freedom of movement and respect for human rights, while also providing reparations for the destruction wrought in so many countries from colonialism, capitalism, conflict and climate change.

In place of war and militarism, we need non-violent conflict resolution, co-operation-based international relations, and disarmament.

**A divest-invest approach is essential abolition. This means divesting money and support from institutions that cause harm – prisons, fossil fuels, nuclear weapons, militaries, etc – and investing instead in care – in education, housing, jobs, food security, ecological sustainability, etc. Abolition can be read as having three main components: dismantling structures of harm, providing support to people targeted by the current system, and building the new systems we need to live in a world without police, prisons, borders, war and other institutions of violence (Spade and Belkin 2021).**

A stylized graphic consisting of two white vertical bars, each with a diagonal cut at the top, forming the number '11'. A solid red horizontal bar is positioned behind the two vertical bars, extending from the left edge of the frame to the right edge of the second vertical bar.

11

**DIVESTING FROM MILITARISED MASCULINITIES,  
INVESTING IN NON-BINARY CARE**

**This abolitionist divest-invest approach is also central to dealing with militarised masculinities. We need to divest from violent, hierarchal forms of masculinity.**

We need to deconstruct gender altogether, getting away from a binary of men/women, straight/gay, trans/cis. Binaries enable hierarchies. Gender binaries are accompanied by racial, religious and other hierarchies. Binaries put people in boxes. They constrain how we can be, look, act and feel when we are contained within certain bodies. Undoing gender helps us undo militarised masculinities.

This, in turn, can help the broader project of abolition. Deconstructing gender and dismantling militarised masculinities in particular cuts away the foundations of state violence.

It undermines the idea that “security” achieved through violence and control is necessary or desirable. Divesting from militarised masculinities means refusing to buy into idealised notions of strong men and passive women, of men needing to be providers and protectors and women needing protection. Rejecting the gender binary is essential to this work.

To undo rigid norms and expectations, we need to start questioning the foundations on which they are built.

This work against the gender binary also helps illuminate non-binary approaches to social ills – ie to “crime” and insecurity.

It opens minds to alternative possibilities. It helps us to see the connections between the underlying cause of harms – including those things the state currently categories as crime, as well as the things it refuses to acknowledge as such.

Non-binary approaches also help reveal solutions to harms that are committed by the state and by individuals, solutions that will prevent future harms other than just incarceration or acquittal. Rather than looking at “crime” as something that requires punishment, non-binary thinking can help us explore options of transformative justice, new kinds of accountability, and address structural harms caused by capitalism, racism and sexism.

**Deconstructing gender norms also helps expand the scope for queer approaches to care and kinship, moving us away from the “male provider” and “masculine protector” tropes within the concept of “nuclear families”, to think about care, obligation and solidarity on the level of communities, societies, the world, and even beyond humans to the land, water, air, plants and animals.**



12

**ABOLISHING VIOLENCE**

**All of this requires active refusal to perpetuate violence and harm. As Sayak Valencia argues, to build real resistance to the system in which we live, a system that bases its power on extreme violence, we must confront masculinity.**

We need to use our pain to identify with others' suffering; we need to stop seeking "security" at the expense of all else; we need to stop envisioning our wellbeing as being dependent on harming others. We need to confront "the economy's dystopian consequences that position our bodies as targets" (Valencia 2018, p290).

We need to stop both romanticising and ignoring violence. Violence must not be made into a spectacle, but nor must it be shrugged off. "No more admiration for super-specialized violence and no more collectively idolizing hired killers, psychopaths, tyrannical rulers, or mafiosos who get rich by destroying bodies," urges Valencia (Valencia 2018, pp290-91). In this vein, we also need to challenge the cultural celebration of war, the unreflective treating of soldiers as heroes, the entertainment industry's portrayal of police as upholders of justice. We need to hold friends, family and colleagues to account for sexist, homophobic, racist and ableist behaviour; hold ourselves to account for our tacit or explicit support for security through surveillance, detention or death. We need to start thinking beyond binaries, in our own lives and in how we relate to others.

The work for abolition is ongoing, and in many cases is surging. In the wake of increasing global inequalities, continued colonial and imperial extractivism and destruction of the planet, more visible police brutality and impacts of war, more people are turning to abolitionist work. Divestment campaigns against apartheid, fossil fuels and weapons have shown success in affecting political economy and social awareness. More cities are examining their police budgets, and more communities are looking for alternative responses to harm that don't involve institutionalised violence. Movements working on different abolitionist projects – against war, police, prisons, migration detention and more – are working in solidarity with one another.



The Abolitionist Platform Toward Healthy Communities, established by various groups in the United States, calls for “the intersectional efforts of anti-imprisonment, anti-policing and anti-imperialist struggles to coalesce concretely as a response to the COVID-crisis” and beyond (Critical Resistance 2020). The Abolish the War on Terror agenda asserts that the call to dismantle the military and the war on terror complex should be part of a broader discussion and organising for global justice and transformation to provide care, protection and repair for communities affected by the war on terror in the United States and abroad (Justice for Muslims Collective). In response to the promotion of the Green New Deal by environmental and economic justice activists, Indigenous activists have proposed a Red Deal (The Red Nation 2021) to ensure this kind of work also leads to decolonisation, anti-imperialism and an end to settler colonialism. Anti-war activists have also noted that the Green New Deal must have antimilitarism at its core, since war and the US military in particular “render impossible the aspirations contained in the Green New Deal” (Bennis 2019).

These are just a few of many examples of cross-cutting and collaborative projects for abolition. Globally, there are many more. There are also many efforts to demasculinise “security” and demilitarise “justice”. For example, those working for abolition of the carceral system focus on prevention of harm, which means investing in care, not police.<sup>6</sup>

This means putting resources towards equal opportunities for education, jobs, housing, healthcare, food security, youth services, recreation programmes. It means providing more opportunities for people to live well, to live equitably with one another, to build safe communities for all. It means allocating municipal funding towards healthcare infrastructure, including wellness resources, neighbourhood-based trauma centres, non-coercive drug and alcohol treatment programming, peer support networks, and training for healthcare professionals; investing in teachers and counsellors, universal childcare, and support for all family structures; free and accessible public transit; ensuring investments in community-based food banks, grocery co-operatives, gardens and farms; and investing in youth programmes that promote learning, safety and community care.

All of these are the exact opposite of the masculine protection racket. In addition to preventing the commission of harm by building a culture of care, those working to abolish the carceral system, and to abolish war and militarism, are also working to change expectations and understandings of concepts such as accountability, justice and safety. To this end, we need what Angela Davis describes as “a justice system based on reparation and reconciliation rather than retribution and vengeance” (Davis 2003, p107). Restorative and transformative justice programmes and mechanisms are critical for dealing with harms that are committed.

The carceral system, as survivors well know, is stacked against survivors of gender-based violence, including sexual and domestic violence. This system does not create accountability or lasting change; it does not deal with patriarchy, misogyny and structural sexism. It focuses on individual behaviour, rather than the cultures of toxic masculinity that lead to the systemic and structural nature of gender-based violence. The act of punishment, of “inflicting suffering on others in response to an experience of harm/violence/wrongdoing”, is harmful and counterproductive, attests prison abolitionist Mariame Kaba.

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<sup>6</sup> Care Not Cops, [carenotcops.org](http://carenotcops.org)

**“We cannot effectively teach people not to harm others by harming them.” (Kaba 2020, p3)**

Whether at the domestic level in terms of police and prisons, or at the international level in terms of war and occupation, those working for abolition of these structures of violence are promoting and developing alternatives that don't rely on militarised masculinities to solve the problems that militarised masculinities create. These alternatives include transformative justice initiatives that are survivor-led and that hold the perpetrator of harm responsible and accountable, but without "punishment" at the centre of that accountability (Kaba 2018;

Kaba and Herzing 2021). By getting away from retribution and vengeance as the response to harm, these abolitionist projects are rejecting militarised masculinities.

For all work, investment and long-term commitments are essential. Abolition is a daily practice, not an overnight sensation. The world has been controlled and directed to serve the capitalist elite for centuries; undoing this system and repairing the harms it has caused will not happen immediately.

Abolition is thus iterative, complicated and nuanced. "An abolitionist vision means that we must build models today that can represent how we want to live in the future," explains Critical Resistance, one of the leading anti-carceral organisations. "It means developing practical strategies for taking small steps that move us towards making our dreams real and that lead us all to believe that things really could be different. It means living this vision in our daily lives." (Critical Resistance 2020)

**Militarised masculinities must have no place in our daily lives,  
to ensure they have no place in our future.**



13

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# Abolishing militarised masculinities