

Misogyny, #yesallwomen, and the role of the church

by [Bromleigh McCleneghan](#)

May 29, 2014

The shooting that rocked California last week raised questions about treating the mentally ill and why there are [so many semi-automatic weapons on our streets](#). But what caught the nation's eye this time around was that the shooter made clear his motives: Twenty-two-year-old Elliot Rodger hated women. He wrote a manifesto announcing his intention to reap vengeance on women for denying him the sexual attention he believed was his entitlement.

Each mass killing scares me. But my response to each of those killings was to shake my fist and write to my representatives pleading for sensible gun laws. This one is harder, because, as [Victoria Weinstein points out](#), Rodger's actions bring to the forefront the pervasiveness of "rape culture and the myth of the 'random psycho,'" a climate in this country that consistently devalues women: their lives, their agency, their worth.

Following the killings, a hashtag spread on Twitter: #notallmen. *Not all men are misogynists. Not all men are bad.* In response, another arose, and spread: #yesallwomen. With more than 1 million tweets and growing, [#yesallwomen](#) gathers the testimonies of women who have experienced harassment, abuse, rape or other sexual assault, or simply the burden of living in "a rape culture."

Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite [argues](#) that the trending theme is further evidence of a "war on women," a war complicated by class, race, and sexuality, but a war nonetheless waged on the bodies and souls of women. It's a war waged politically and economically, but also verbally and physically. And the power of #yesallwomen lies in how it exposes how real the climate of fear and violence is for American women.

Christians have offered a variety of responses to this climate. Some deny that anything is amiss: these women are simply complaining of trivial things, trumping up charges against the male sex. Some ([echoing the words of the leader of Iran!](#))

suggest that women's problems are the fruit of reckless and rampant feminism. Others grant that the world is dangerous for women and girls, and they shore up their commitments to protect them with purity balls and strong male partners. Still others establish safe sanctuary policies and do background checks, and put windows in the pastor's office door. And some start teaching their girls from an early age about consent and how to distinguish between a good touch and a bad touch.

What's astounding is how much of this effort across the board is aimed at girls and women. *Here is how you protect yourself; here is how you find a man to protect you.* There is very little said about what is wrong with a culture or a theology that confirms or otherwise fails to denounce the notion that women are made to be used and are not people of sacred worth in their own right.

As part of research for a book, I posted an online survey that generated more than 330 responses, and 99 of those reported that they had been molested, assaulted, raped, or otherwise abused. Almost a third. And not all of my survey respondents were women, suggesting that the percentage of women affected was even higher. While it was far from a scientific survey, the results are reasonably similar to available data from [awareness-raising organizations](#) and [government agencies](#).

Almost a third. While it's not surprising, it has been devastating to read these stories. I reworded my survey after a comment from a colleague, who had been raped as a child: Many women describe themselves not as victims of sexual violence, but survivors.

The #yesallwomen trend is not a call for hand-wringing or a claiming of victim status, but a call to action. In the church, we can focus our attention on a few things:

- Listen deeply and take seriously the stories shared by those who have suffered abuse. Don't blame the victim or try to explain the abuse away.
- Examine carefully the way we speak about gender and sexuality, especially for pastors and those who work with youth. Look closely at any sexuality curriculum being used. Are men "naturally" aggressive and meant to be "possessive" or "protective" of women? Do women, by being attractive or embracing their sexuality, invite attention and violence?
- Remember sensitively that there are women, lots of women, who have suffered abuse or harassment. In your pews. On your staff. Consider creating intentional safe spaces for sharing stories.
- Preach courageously. Preach Ascension: *You will be my witnesses*. And Maya Angelou: *And still I rise*. Preach the gospel and condemn a culture of misogyny.

Arthur Chu, of *Jeopardy!* fame, penned [an essay](#) naming how our cultural narratives contribute to misogyny. As Christians, how do the stories we tell measure up to the promise and ethical call of Genesis? *God created humanity in God's own image, in the divine image God created them, male and female God created them.* (CEB)