A Feminist Social Work Perspective on Misogyny and the function of Empathy

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Keywords: social work, empathy, hostile attitudes, misogyny, violence against women and girls, systemic analysis

The social work profession strongly aligns with the concept of human rights being inherent, for all people. This article considers hostile attitudes towards women (misogyny) alongside the function of empathy. When misogyny is normalised in societies, women are more frequently, more severely dehumanised. I argue that the curtailed development of empathy, contributes towards the perception of women as less human, rather than women as inherently holding rights. This is particularly relevant to the social work profession as whilst all women are affected by misogyny, those already in the margins, are most at risk of being treated as sub-human. Although my professional experience is in the UK, concerns regarding the degradation of human rights are international. Many countries deny women the same rights and freedoms as men, leading to acute struggles against human rights violations. These are prevalent in African, Islamic and Western nations. For instance, easy access to abortion in the United States has been removed, whilst in the United Kingdom migrant women and their children are frequently stripped of their humanity by hostile immigration controls. The rise in domestic and extremist violence, runs parallel with a reluctance to understand the links between male violence and control of women. Wherever there are hostile attitudes towards woman, there are increasing restrictions on women's liberty, bodily autonomy, and freedom of expression. These increasingly hostile attitudes influence both political opinion and popular culture. This article comments on the cyclical escalation of harmful narratives that perpetuate misogyny consequently reducing empathy.

Lorde (1984) called for new ways of offering redemptive nurturing to address the harms caused by misogynistic attitudes and behaviours. Key

contributions from interpersonal neurobiology entwinned with knowledge held in the social work profession increases awareness of the pervasive nature of misogyny. Infringements on women's human rights are present in personal and structural relationships, as a direct result of women not being viewed with empathy. This knowledge developed in part, due to relational work with women and girls brave enough to talk with me about the possibility of recovery from trauma. This allowed me to understand the function of mirror neurons and empathy. The women and girls I worked with had experiences of physical, sexual and psychological violence, racism, sex trafficking and everyday misogyny. I maintain that active engagement with empathy could be a method of sharing knowledge and understanding, not only an expression of compassion. There is an interplay between the function of empathy and the sociological backdrop of entrenched hostile attitudes towards women. Whether in a personal or political context, reduced empathy can translate into intentional harm, attitudinally, physically, or otherwise.

As a social work professional with a background in child and adolescent mental health, I understand violence against women and girls (VAWG) as global, rather than a collection of individual incidents. I also understand that children tend to recover emotional wellbeing more robustly alongside healthy relationships, whereas those undermined by misogyny or ongoing violence do not. These insights were consolidated through the systemic analysis of feminist thinkers such as Lorde (1984), Mies and Shiva, (1993) and Herman, (1994). When supporting women and girls to understand the sociological context of VAWG, the phrase *'it was not your fault'* became meaningful, as violence could be located externally from the woman. When offered a systemic perspective, in an accessible way, women better understood that traumatic responses happened *'within'* the body because of what happened *'to'* them rather than because of who they were, Herman (1992).

Locating harm as external to women, helps social workers recognise patterns of patriarchal control in societies, and consequently understand the pervasive nature of VAWG. Higher prevalence of control over women, including within extremist social groups, leads to greater prevalence of violence. This is a consequence of the normalisation of misogynistic attitudes and violent behaviours towards women, (Federici, 2004; Mies and Shiva, 1993; Van Veen et al, 2018). Systemic analysis of VAWG includes the restrictions of women's rights, as a symptom of a broader problem, rather than primarily a domestic issue. Translating this insight into relational work with women and girls alongside active use of empathy, can effectively support trauma recovery. There are many ways to describe the key aspect of relational work, Rogers (1951) defined *'congruent empathy'* as a core condition of therapeutic work; Močnik and

Ghouri, (2024) frames being alongside as *'bearing witness'*; whilst Badenoch (2018) uses the term *'accompaniment'* to describe the process of *being present* in relational work. I assert that accompaniment and systemic analysis are both needed in any form of trauma recovery work.

The research on mirror neurons is a profound finding in neurology, providing insight into the function of empathy for understanding social dynamics. Considering violence, including extremist violence and misogyny, through the lens of interpersonal neurobiology, specifically the function of mirror neurons when hostility is present, deepens existing understanding of the curtailed development of empathy. Badenoch (2018) explains how mirror neurons connect our ability to hold empathy for others. Mirror neurons activate when we observe or listen to an account of a behaviour or experience of another, helping human beings recognise emotions and intent in others. However, the skills developed through the mother and infant relationship (the attachment process) are intricately connected to the culture they are embedded in. When human babies have their physical, emotional and social needs met in a warm, in-tune way they are more capable of and skilled at regulating emotions, thereby increasing their capacity to form and maintain healthy social relationships, (Hrdy 2009; Krznaric, 2014; Jones, 2024). When we consider the development of empathy, during matrescence, mothers have an enhanced ability to recognise and empathise with their baby's emotions. This helps women to react rapidly, to meet baby's needs in a precise manner, especially in threatening situations (Jones, 2024). When human babies develop in a culture steeped in misogyny this can undermine the safety provided within the mother child relationship. Crittenden and Claussen, (2000) asserted that societal culture deeply influences the attachment process and resulting relationship behaviours.

Early experiences in primary relationships create the opportunity for infants to internalise their mother's way of responding to threat within the social landscape. Spending time with other people not only increases social bonds but also the awareness of intent, what constitutes friendly, neutral, or hostile behaviours (Hrdy, 2009, Crittenden and Claussen, 2000). This is true for all humans, we understand what is intended, from a smile or a clenched fist, by how our body would feel if we were making the same motion. Healthy infant attachment allows human beings to feel safe and respond reliably with the activation of the neurological protection system if the social context contains threat; the function of mirror neurons helps humans work out if it is safe to show empathy. (Hrdy, 2009; Badenoch, 2018; Jones, 2024, Crittenden and Claussen, 2000). Neither society, nor social work are adequately set up to safeguard and support women and mothers when misogyny and/or

violence is present; at times replicating hostile attitudes of blame and coercion towards women (Fleckinger, 2020).

When we perceive others as similar enough to ourselves to be human, we more easily hold empathy. If we have placed (consciously or unconsciously) another person in a category that is different from us, we hold less empathy. When empathy is present it can prevent people from inflicting harm on others including replicating hostile attitudes, because what we do to others, to a lesser degree, we do to ourselves, neurologically speaking. Observing a person experiencing physical harm generates a neurological response in us unless mirror neurons are not engaged. The less mirror neuron cells one has the less empathy we can generate, (Krznaric, 2014). The absence of empathy facilitates the ability to enact harm precisely because the *'other'* is seen as less than human, the perpetrator being in a position of superiority. Cultural/social contexts that do not regard women's safety, or freedom of expression as essential, do not fully recognise women as human, (MacKinnon 2006; de Beauvoir, 1949). Regardless of the cultural context, Jankowiak-Siuda et al (2011) explain that people generally express less empathy towards women than men.

The ability to locate VAWG as a systemic problem, can generate a profound shift in political awareness enhancing the capacity to recognise misogyny (Lorde, 1984; Herman, 1992). Pervasive misogynistic attitudes in society affirmed in media outputs often undermine concepts of equality, separating people into hierarchies of worth. This removes the notion that all people inherently hold rights, repositioning harmful narratives to indicate traditional values, (Bhatt, 2020). Unless identified, this duplicity increases the risk of social workers inadvertently contributing to misogyny in their communication, decision making and risk analysis. Of course, replicating harmful narratives can be avoided with a willingness to critically reflect, especially when foregrounding human rights legislation and professional values.

Social conditioning around dominant narratives that perpetuate the view of certain groups of people being superior can result in embedded hostility. Unsurprisingly, Ulloa and Hammett, (2016) provide strong evidence that men who hold less empathy for women are more likely to be violent. In these cases, mirror neurons are not engaged in relation to women, resulting in both the inability to generate empathy or consider *their* behaviour as harmful. This is a key point when considering the inability of some world leaders to reflect on their attitudes and conduct, noticeably when their behaviours contribute to harm. Jankowiak-Siuda et al's (2011) findings confirm evidence that adolescent's presenting as aggressive struggle to implement moral reasoning in *relation to their own*

behaviour. The inference here is that an adult inability to self-reflect is an indication of immature psychological development. Social workers understand this as an especially important development in humans. The capacity to see the humanity in others **and** take responsibility to prevent or reflect on harmful actions can act as protective factors against hostile attitudes and behaviours, (Krznaric, 2014).

Political divides of left and right can be problematic as this duality holds the danger of perceiving another group as inferior. This contributes to hostility, as meeting anger or disdain with the same simply generates more conflict. That said, Zebarjadi et. al. (2023) assert that those on the political right have lower levels of empathy than those with left leaning social values. Those with right leaning political values strive towards maintaining hierarchy (superiors versus subordinates) within society. Predictably, these social hierarchies result is higher levels of negative bias towards people outside their group, which result in curtailed empathy and moral reasoning. Those with left leaning political views hold less bias, therefore more empathy towards people outside their group. Those striving towards an egalitarian as opposed to hierarchical social structure, more easily comprehend the notion that women are human, therefore have the same human rights as men; to live free from torture, inhuman, or degrading treatment. Wagaman and Segal, (2014) argue further, that stronger empathic insight motivates people to support egalitarian policies and contribute to improving the welfare of others.

The absence of empathy, towards women affects all parts of society, including the social work profession, particularly the complex ethical space of working with women around safeguarding children. MacKinnon (2006) rightly asserts that hostile attitudes are pervasive because structural inequalities within legal, social, and cultural frameworks consistently undermine women's humanity. Social workers are not immune to this; Fleckinger (2020) provides insight into women's experiences of domestic violence, explaining that their relationships with social workers are more challenging when harmful attitudes are present. The rise in political hostility floods popular culture with negative bias towards women. Without awareness of the need to consciously maintain empathy, barriers to achieving safety are more challenging. An absence of professional empathy can indicate that a person has positioned the *'other'* as inferior, unconsciously positioning the self as superior. It is a very human thing to do, especially in the context of societal pressure. However, with fluctuations in empathy detectable in communication, this increases the possibility of a person feeling the need to defend themselves, as Koprowska (2024) explains. In psychodynamic terms, defensiveness is an unconscious mechanism, designed to protect a

person from perceived threat, or feelings of 'wrongness' (Freud, 2018). With defensiveness or hostility present, addressing misogyny is tricky.

Patterns of behaviours from politicians in the current political atmosphere, are a strong indication of a profound lack of empathy and a significant inability to recognise the humanity in others. These maladaptive behaviours, alongside the arrogance of superiority signifies that a person has not progressed past puberty developmentally. Coupled with the profound influence of growing up in a culture that maintains hostility towards women, it is unsurprising that political leaders gravitate towards those who agree with them, it is less threatening to their underdeveloped ability to critically reflect.

Lavenne-Collot et al (2022) make the distinction that those with extremist views may have heightened empathy due to the strength of social identification with their group, rather than a prominence of poor empathy for the out-group. Whilst empathy for the in-group may well exist, those perpetrating violence against others must, given all we know, have less empathy for those being harmed. On a societal level, we see these behaviours manifest in groups that defend their political and religious views as absolute with any perceived difference or open challenge experienced as an attack. Stronger perceptions of superiority in social groups, result in a reduced ability to comprehend or empathise with the 'other's' pain. This results in a pernicious, interactive cycle of social conditioning and mirror neurons not activating empathy. Perceiving hostility whilst feeling empathy debilitates the ability to defend, avoid or de-escalate in response to threat (Badenoch, 2018). Empathy switches off to enable a quick and effective response to hostility, perceived or otherwise (Porges, 2011). Knowledge of these processes deepens understanding of how tyranny replicates itself in the social context of domesticity, politics and extremism.

Foregrounding the human rights act (HRA) in direct practice enables social workers to consider all people, including women, as inherently holding rights. The HRA is non-discriminatory (it applies to all) and protects people from misuse of power from the state, (Dennler, 2018). Knowledge of how mirror neurons' function to enhance or curtail empathy could contribute towards personal and political change, a redemptive tool if you will, that increases the ability to see woman and girls as inherently human. Those in social work education continue to share knowledge, that enhances the application of empathy and solidarity into practice, thereby supporting women and girls to simultaneously understand ongoing trauma and consider their own right to live free from harm as a human being (Graham, 1995). Whilst many are clear about the importance of generating empathy within therapeutic

relationships (Hanmer and Statham, 1999; Koprowska, 2024; Badenoch, 2018), it is to Lorde's concept of redemptive nurturing that I return. Whilst the underlying causes of conflict are many, I seek to demonstrate possibilities for ameliorating if not resolving complex social problems. As Fleckinger's (2020) work demonstrates, seeing women as inherently worthy of value, not only allows us to demonstrate the need for empathy but creates a pathway for others to do the same. In this way, when social workers foreground the HRA in relation to women we not only generate empathy we nurture empathy in others. This, alongside understanding how empathy functions in the context of personal, social and structural relationships could generate opportunities needed for redemptive nurturing.

Akomolafe's (2020) articulation regarding the need to recognise urgency and slow down to meet it, shows insight into a strategy that could avoid professionals replicating harmful narratives and behaviours. The ability to slow down in relational work help social workers consciously consider the perspective of the 'other,' without asserting superiority, because the aim is to generate understanding, not achieve dominance, (Badenoch, 2018). This article did not have the scope to address how the commodification of women is dehumanising. Suffice to say that the human neurological processes occurring in relation to VAWG, in domestic settings and from those who hold extremist views is present and functions in the same way. The consequences of these socialised norms result in 'others' being seen (consciously or otherwise) as less human. Combining these dominant views, with a sense of correctness or an assumption of entitlement in the social or religious contexts of misogyny leads, as de Beauvoir (1949) and Mackinnon (2006) explained, to an encumbered ability to recognise women's humanity.

Human rights legislation provides a layer of protection to those whose humanity is at risk of annihilation. Although it may feel insubstantial as strategy, I maintain that demonstrating empathy and solidarity with women in the face of rising authoritarianism, provides a pathway for others to do the same. To summarise, the normalisation of misogynistic conduct and attitudes can be challenged using knowledge of interpersonal neurobiology and a feminist, systemic analysis. The social work profession, interact with people situated in the most complex of circumstances. For this reason, understanding human rights whilst actively holding women's humanity in mind is vital, especially with hostile attitudes and curtailments of woman's liberties being normalised in the mainstream.

Aimee Georgeson is a feminist activist whose career spans 30 years working in therapeutic services with children, young people, and their families. Aimee's current areas of interest are the structural harms of poverty, harm to the natural world and trauma recovery. Aimee currently works as a senior social work lecturer at the University of Gloucestershire where she is completing doctoral studies on women, poverty and social work.

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To cite this article:

Georgeson, A. (2025). A Feminist Social Work Perspective on Misogyny and the function of Empathy. *Feminist Dissent,* No.8., pp. 103-112 Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.31273/fd.n8.2025.1985