

Call it the Harvey Weinstein Effect: the wave of white-hot anger about predatory men that's smashing reputations around the globe. How did we get here – and what happens now?



THE GREAT SEXUAL RECKONING

STORY BY *David Leser*

JUST OVER five weeks ago, Oprah Winfrey, arguably the world's most adored African-American woman, delivered a speech for the ages at the 2018 Golden Globes. In accepting the Cecil B. DeMille award for outstanding contribution to entertainment, Winfrey managed to do three things at once. She captured perfectly the deep-rooted inequalities at the heart not just of the entertainment industry, but across all industries, blue-collar and white-. She sparked wild speculation regarding her own presidential ambitions. And, perhaps, most importantly, she delivered a rousing message of hope to young women and girls everywhere in the face of sexual abuse and marauding male power.

"I want all the girls watching here and now to know that a new day is on the horizon," she told her star-studded audience, most of whom were dressed in black to support the Time's Up campaign, aimed at ending sexual harassment and gender disparity.

"And when that new day finally dawns, it will be because of a lot of magnificent women ... and some pretty phenomenal men, fighting hard to make sure that they become the leaders who take us to the time when nobody ever has to say 'me too' again."

She added, "For too long, women have not been heard or believed if they dared to speak their truth to the power of those men. But their time is up. Their time is up."

THIS MOMENT, this great reckoning in history, didn't just happen. It took the elevation of a sexual predator – a self-confessed “pussy” grabber – to the leadership of the free world to galvanise millions of women. It took great reporting, first from *The New York Times* and then *The New Yorker* magazine, to reveal a shocking litany of sexual abuse by movie mogul Harvey Weinstein, one of the giants of Hollywood. And, of course, it took the lightning speed of the information revolution to enable millions of women to finally share their often traumatised sexual histories, creating a deafening roar – and ricocheting effect – around the world. Every day a new name, another industry, another once-darkened corridor of power exposed to the blinding light of disgrace.

After the forensic takedown of Weinstein, it was actor Kevin Spacey's turn to be outed (in his case for alleged sexual misconduct towards boys and young men), then comedian and producer Louis C.K., then television hosts Charlie Rose and Matt Lauer; then dozens of other prominent men in the arts and entertainment: actors, playwrights, producers, editorial directors, chief executives, studio heads, fashion photographers, editors, publishers, journalists.

From the American entertainment industry it tripped the wire into state legislatures; then on to national politics, with congressmen from Arizona, Michigan, Minnesota and, in the case of Alabama, the egregious would-be Republican senator Roy Moore, all caught up in the widening scandal. (And we've only just begun talking properly about restaurant and automotive industry employees, nurses, farm workers, domestic workers and hotel attendants. In Chicago recently, female members of the local union were granted the right to install “panic buttons” on their uniforms because, apparently, bending over to clean a bath, or turn down the sheets, has always been a hazardous occupation.)

From the US, it then crossed the Atlantic to Britain, where a dozen MPs were accused of unwanted sexual behaviour, and the ruling Conservative Party's Defence Secretary Michael Fallon was forced to resign. Then back to the United States and into Silicon Valley and sports, where the long-time women's gymnastics physician, Larry Nassar, was awaiting final sentencing for his sickening behaviour with more than 150 women and girls, all on the pretext of medical treatment. (He would be sent to prison for up to 175 years.)

Millions of women worldwide were sharing stories of mistreatment, via the Twitter hashtag #MeToo, in what was being described as a “watershed”, a “tipping point”, a “karmic earthquake”. Or, as Jacqueline Maley would label the growing list of perpetrators in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, the “Oh god. Not you too?” phenomenon.

In France, where an estimated 225,000 women were victims of violence in 2016, social networks began overflowing with accounts of sexual harassment and assault, often carrying the hashtag #BalanceTonPorc, meaning “Expose Your Pig”. Speaking in late November on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, President Emmanuel Macron described French society as “sick with sexism”, before calling for a minute's silence for the 123 women – one every three days – killed during 2016. (The backlash – and furious counter-backlash – came less than two months later when nearly 100 prominent French women, including actor Catherine Deneuve, denounced the #MeToo



campaign in a letter describing it as a “witch-hunt against men” and a sign that Anglo-American “puritanism” had gone too far. Deneuve later distanced herself from some of her more extreme co-signatories.)

Here, journalist and Fairfax contributor Tracey Spicer sent a tweet to her nearly 50,000 followers asking about sexual harassment in the Australian media and entertainment industries. She was overwhelmed by allegations from more than 500 women, and the names of 65 men. (That figure now stands at 1000 women and 100 men.) As we all know, celebrity gardener Don Burke emerged as undisputed leader of the pack, after which claims against actor Craig McLachlan surfaced.

At the time of writing, more names were about to be revealed and hundreds of women in the music industry had joined the #MeNoMore movement to highlight direct experiences of rape, harassment and assault. Melbourne's Lord Mayor Robert Doyle had also taken leave of absence following allegations of sexual harassment and indecent assault; while universities across the country were still dealing with a 2016 report from the Australian Human Rights Commission showing 21 per cent of students, the vast majority of them women, had experienced some form of sexual harassment in a university setting.

“Do you hear the rumble?” asked Wendy Squires in a *Sydney Morning Herald* column crackling with fury, shortly after the Weinstein allegations lit a global bonfire. “Can you smell the fear?” And then, “It's time for men in media to know what it feels like to be watched and judged and to have their careers put in jeopardy as a result. It's time they are afraid, just like we women have been our entire careers ... This avalanche has not reached a stop yet. Nope, it's going to continue to roll and gather momentum and I predict many will be caught in its destructive wake. Good luck [men] – you'll need it.”

Oprah Winfrey's barnstorming speech at the 2018 Golden Globes featured a signal to marauding males: “Their time is up.”

THIS IS a treacherous path for any writer to try to navigate, especially a straight, middle-aged male in a gender-fraught – and gender-fluid – world. Every brief utterance is – how shall I put this – cocked and loaded; every assertion open to furious rebuttal. I remember at a party two years ago meeting a lesbian couple who happened to be midstream talking about ... cunts. I introduced myself and offered the view that I was struck by how the worst word in the English language was a reference to the most sacred part of a woman's body.

“Listen mate,” one of them retorted. “I've been with hundreds of cunts in my life and none of them was sacred.”

So it's complicated, right? Yet I continue to grapple with the way language often denigrates women. A “cunt” – when uttered by a heterosexual male – is typically the most contemptible person one can meet. The pudendum – or woman's vulva – originates from the Latin word *pudere*, meaning “to be ashamed”. Vagina derives from the 17th century, and is a Latin word meaning “sheath” or “scabbard”. (Presumably where a man puts his sword.) Older women are often dubbed “hags”, “cronies” and “witches”. “*Schamlippen*” is a common German slang word for the vulva, translating to “lips of shame”.

This shame is real and ever-present, according to Tony Award-winning American playwright Eve Ensler, author of *The Vagina Monologues*, a global phenomenon of the late 1990s.

“Twenty years ago, no one said the word ‘vagina,’” she tells *Good Weekend*. “You couldn't say it anywhere. I always make a joke that you can put plutonium on the front pages of newspapers, or Scud missiles, or radiation, or death, but if you say vagina everyone goes into hysterics.

“That tells us everything we need to know about the world. The place where most of us come from ... the majority of human beings on the planet have passed through the vagina.”

Ensler's journey across the global landscape of female suffering and indignity is highly instructive in trying to grasp what is happening today. In 1996, *The Vagina Monologues* – a 90-minute distillation of more than 200 women exploring their femininity – was performed for the first time, and by 1998 had been showcased from Islamabad to London, Oklahoma to Jerusalem. In 2001, in New York's Madison Square Garden, actor Jane Fonda simulated giving birth on stage, while fellow actor Glenn Close repeatedly shouted the word “cunt” to 18,000 women, followed by the collective orgasmic moaning of the Vulva Choir.

Ensler's “monologues” captured stories of menstruation, menopause and mutilation; of date rape, gang rape, incest and shame; of women with black eyes and broken bones; of women humiliated and violated and left mute and homeless in their own bodies.

In the US-Mexican border city of Ciudad Juarez, Ensler later learnt of 400 women who had disappeared over the previous decade, 370 of them murdered, ravaged and disfigured. “These women,” she wrote, “had become as disposable as empty Coca-Cola cans. Sometimes their bones turned up next to old bottles in parking lots. Sometimes they were blamed for being mutilated and tortured because of what they'd been wearing. They were rapidly becoming an endangered species.”

During the Bosnian war of the early 1990s, “rape camps” were set up by Serbian paramilitary units where up to 50,000 mostly Muslim

women were herded into enclosures and preyed on around the clock, week in, week out. Often they were only released when they were pregnant, or their bellies had been torn open first. Gang rapes. Public rapes. Rape as an instrument of terror. Rape in the service of ethnic cleansing. Rape of mothers, daughters, sisters, aunts, girls as young as 12. Women with their vaginas destroyed, as Ensler so chillingly captured in one of her monologues, *My Vagina Was My Village*:

My vagina. A live wet water village. They invaded it. Butchered it and burned it down. I do not touch now. Do not visit. I live someplace else now. I don't know where that is.

IT MIGHT be tempting to see this brutality as a malignancy that only obliterates women and girls far from our privileged shores. The sex trafficking of young girls in South-East Asia has nothing to do with us, nor bride and widow burning in India, nor the dousing of women and girls with kerosene and being set alight in Pakistan. In their international bestselling book, *Half the Sky: How to Change the World*, published in 2009, *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof and his wife Sheryl WuDunn described how a beautiful 17-year-old Kurdish girl in northern Iraq, Du'a Aswad, was accused – without proof – of sleeping with a Sunni Arab boy with whom she'd fallen in love. The young woman was dragged into the street by eight men, as a large crowd gathered around her.

"At least 1000 men joined in the assault," they wrote. "So many men in the crowd shot video clips with their cell phones that on the web you can find a half-dozen versions of what happened next.

"Du'a was thrown to the ground, and her black skirt was ripped off to humiliate her. She tried to get up, but they kicked her around as if she were a soccer ball. Frantic, she tried to fend off the blows, to get up, to cover herself, to find a sympathetic face in the crowd. Then the men gathered rocks and concrete blocks and dropped them on her. It took 30 minutes for Du'a to die."

It's tempting to see this and other "honour" killings, as well as the genital mutilation of girls in Africa and the Middle East, as peripheral to what has erupted since Harvey Weinstein's monstrous behaviour was exposed. Or to view as unrelated to the post-Weinstein world, female feticide in India; the hurling of sulphuric acid into the faces of women and girls in Asia – usually by men who've been spurned; or the fact that, in Kenya, female political candidates are known to have carried knives and wear several layers of clothing to deter attempted rape.

But this violence against women – in all its myriad forms – is the most persistent, widespread form of violence on the planet today, with the United Nations and the World Health Organisation estimating that one billion women have been raped or beaten. Australia is not exempt from this epic horror story. In 2001,

"PERHAPS IT TAKES A MOMENT LIKE THIS IN HISTORY FOR MEN TO TRULY WAKE UP."

the Australian Institute of Criminology reported that more than 1.2 million adult women had experienced an incident of sexual violence since the age of 15. Every week almost two Australian women will be killed by a current or former partner.

To pick just one of infinite examples, in 2012, Rachele Yeo was stabbed to death in her home on Sydney's northern beaches by her former partner. Today, her father Roger Yeo is an ambassador for White Ribbon Australia, the organisation committed to engaging men in ending violence against women and girls.

"Kathy [Rachele's mother] and I, and many others, have experienced the grief and impact of losing a daughter, a wife, a sister or niece to men's violence," he explained recently through the White Ribbon website. "That impact reaches far beyond the direct impact on the victim and their immediate family. We understand now that for every tragedy affecting one victim, there are thousands of other lives affected."

PERHAPS, THEN, it takes a moment like this in history for men to truly wake up. Until now, I thought I was awake. For 23 years, I'd been married to a woman of strong feminist principles. I'd read the works of numerous feminist authors, and profiled women like Helen Garner, Germaine Greer, former New Zealand PM Helen Clark; the feminist warriors of Northern Ireland, the McCartney sisters, even Xena, the warrior princess (with whom I had a mock arm wrestle and ... lost!) I'd worked for brilliant female editors and come to see how my own entrenched biases, assumptions and sense of entitlement had been shaped by the mere fact of being a privileged, straight, white male.

In 1987, early in my journalistic career, I'd reported on the Anita Cobby murder trial, where I heard evidence so shocking – about the rape, torture and slaying of that young Sydney nurse – that it would take me years to erase from my mind. Fifteen years later, I'd also sat in court and stared into the merciless, coal-black eyes of Bilal Skaf, the 21-year-old who had led the gang rapes of Sydney women and girls in the lead-up to the 2000 Olympics. As one of his young victims told me two years after the attack, the men had dragged her by her hair into Gosling Park in south-west Sydney's Greenacre where they'd repeatedly raped her, while pointing a gun at her head.

"I tried to kill myself [afterwards]," she said. "I kept cutting myself ... anything just to see blood. I would just get so worked up I would cut myself with a razor or a piece of glass. On one occasion I swallowed nearly a packet of Panadol. I just felt worthless. I felt dirty. I thought, 'Who is going to want me now?' I was in year 10 at the time and I was going extremely well, and then everything fell apart.

"You could never imagine that one event could change your life so dramatically. I used to just sit in my room and cry and cry and cry, and not come out."

So, yes, I thought I was awake to this ram-

pageing male aggression, but the truth is I had absolutely no idea what women faced. No idea what it was like to feel afraid walking to my car, or jogging at night; to be pressed against on a crowded train; to be ignored or talked over repeatedly; to know that my value at work was often predicated on my sexual attractiveness to my boss. No idea what it was like to have someone indecently expose themselves to me; to have to devise strategies each day, often unconsciously, to just feel safe. No idea what it was like to be shamed, or reduced to the parts of me that could be breached.

During the course of researching this article, I was horrified to hear that in the northern NSW town where my former wife and I raised our two daughters during the first decade of the noughties, the rape and abuse of teenage girls was purportedly not uncommon. Verbal and physical assault – young men urinating on girls, calling them "whores", "fat cunts", "bitches" and "sluts" – was also reputedly prevalent.

"I don't think what happens [there] is unique," says Ivy D'Orsogna, who grew up in the same town and is making a web series on the subject. "There is definitely a feeling of xenophobia among a lot of the young guys – *this is our town* – and this sense of entitlement extends to the bodies of young women. There were prosecuted cases, but there were so many things that happened where boys were never charged or held accountable."

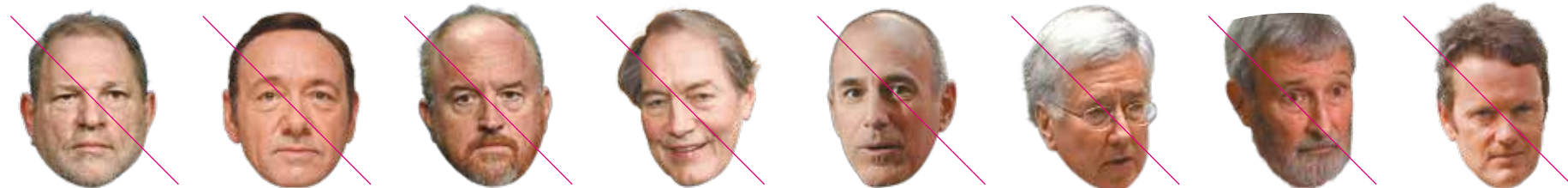
Now Sydney-based, the 24-year-old daughter of award-winning screenwriter and producer Deb Cox (*SeaChange*, *Miss Fisher's Murder Mysteries* and others) tells *Good Weekend* that in one incident, an underage girl was put "on the spit" by five teenage boys and penetrated with penises and other objects, while they filmed it on their iPhones.

"Many [teenage] girls I know who grew up there experienced sexual assault in one form or another," she says. "For a while guys were also pissing on girls, or pissing into cups and throwing them on girls. They were just like dogs pissing on their territory. 'You're ours and we can do what we like with you.'"

The #MeToo tidal wave that has crashed over the world has obviously empowered women to revisit their sexual histories, often in graphic detail. True, there has been a conflating of mild transgressions with the worst kinds of abuse; not to mention an abandonment of due process in some cases – a fact that should concern us all. But the common denominator here is a deeply embedded misogyny that expresses itself across the spectrum: stories of rape, abuse, harassment, belittlement, groping, stalking, accosting, grooming, intimidating, demeaning, pouncing, hurting, patronising (mansplaining), fat-shaming, objectifying. Stories of invitations where none existed. Stories of workplace gender pay gaps – which TV presenter Lisa Wilkinson had the courage and self-possession to expose last October at the Nine Network.

Stories of institutionalised enabling, where confidentiality clauses have been designed to shut victims up. (Did you note that, Channel

Publicly shamed: (from left) Harvey Weinstein; Kevin Spacey; Louis C.K.; Charlie Rose; Matt Lauer; Michael Fallon; Don Burke; Craig McLachlan.



Seven?) Stories of men refusing to take no for an answer; of women being pressured into having sex and/or being made to feel guilty if they didn't. Stories of horrifying emotional and psychological violence, where men use their children as weapons of punishment. Stories of shame and sadness and crippling loss of confidence; of the light inside a precious human heart being extinguished.

As Australian feminist writer Clementine Ford put it in her impassioned 2016 book *Fight Like a Girl*: "A lot of the time, being a girl in this world hurts ... to feel subjugated and alone, to know that the words you say, the ideas you have and the gifts you can contribute are all considered null and void, unless you offer them in a way that maintains the status quo."

AND SO the question we come to is: why? Why is it that men have killed, enslaved, scarred, diminished and silenced women of every age, race and class, on every continent, for so long? Yes, we know it's about the aphrodisiac of power and male privilege, and the way a woman's worth is so often seen as less consequential than a man's. But what lies at the rotting heart of all this?

The answer is an old one, and surely springs from patriarchy and its relentless war on the feminine. Since the beginning of recorded time, most cultures worshipped some version of the goddess. In ancient Mesopotamia, the vulva of Inanna, the Sumerian goddess, was a sacred site and Sumerians sang hymns to her "lap of honey". Agrarian societies honoured their female deities, as menstrual cycles were interconnected with the lunar-based agricultural cycles. The earth was Gaia, the ancestral Mother of life. She was inherent to all of Nature. She *was* nature, until the rise of patriarchal religions began declaring goddess worship and female sexuality the devil's work. Nature and woman needed to be tamed.

At the 2016 Toronto International Film Festival, writer and director Jill Soloway (*Transparent*) offered an intriguing insight into this when they (Soloway prefers "they" to the gender-specific he or she) said: "Five thousand years ago cavemen saw women getting their periods and bleeding, and they bled in time with the moon, and they didn't die when they bled. And so prehistoric man thought that women were magic and they got scared. So they created language to just fuck with us."

Man has been fucking with Woman for a long time ... and not just through language. In ancient Greece the great lawmaker Solon decreed that a free woman could be sold into slavery for losing her virginity prior to marriage. The Hebrew Bible (Deuteronomy 22: 13-21) allowed for a father to stone his daughter to death if her wedding sheets were not bloodied. (Little wonder, then, that one of the morning Jewish prayers says: "Blessed are you, Lord, our God, ruler of the universe who has not created me a woman.")

The Church Fathers cast women as seductresses who lured men towards the abyss. Tertullian, the Latin Christian author, regarded as the founder of Western theology, described the vagina as a "temple built over a sewer", and "the Devil's gateway".

We had the chastity belts of the Middle Ages, where a husband could literally secure his wife's vagina with a series of iron metal body locks, before taking the keys as he travelled, or sallied forth to war. Across Europe, between the 14th and 17th centuries, tens of thousands of women – healers, priestesses, poetesses,

midwives or, merely, women displaying signs of sexual independence – were tortured and murdered as "witches". As Naomi Wolf pointed out in her celebrated 2012 book, *Vagina: A New Biography*, one of the torture devices was known as "the Pear of Anguish" – a pear-shaped iron object that expanded inside the victim as the torturer turned the screws. Women's vaginas were often the target of searches for the "witches" or "devil's" mark.

"I cannot stress enough how many of our current anxieties about the vagina and about female sexual pleasure were introduced to society at this time and descend to us even now in forms recognisably dating to this period," she wrote.

Then it was the clitoris – the rapturous pleasure centre of a woman's birthright and freedom – that came to be seen as the cause of "moral turpitude"; a view that reached its apogee in Britain in the 1860s when Dr Isaac Baker Brown introduced cliterodectomies as a way of returning women to their required docility. (This practice is still widely employed across broad swathes of Africa and, to a lesser extent, the Middle East.)

Who was it who decided a menstruating woman could not enter a "House of God", lest she defile it? Or that a woman's sexual agency and desire was such a heresy that it required her being put under control? The men who hungered for her, that's who.

And now we see a rampaging male hunger, which has so ignited – as Australian writer Charlotte Wood put it recently – the global "force of dark and furious energy inside women".

It is no accident that it comes at a time when the most powerful man in the world stands accused of sexually assaulting or harassing at least 19 women, not to mention having been caught boasting on the infamous 2005 *Access Hollywood* tape of moving on a woman "like a bitch".

"I'm automatically attracted to beautiful," Donald Trump said. "I just start kissing them. It's like a magnet. Just kiss. I don't even wait. And when you're a star, they let you do it ... Grab 'em by the pussy. You can do anything."

For all Trump's grotesqueries, it's his contempt for women – and his at-the-ready unzipped fly – that has helped shine a light on the persistent brutality of the male libido. American Buddhist teacher John Bell put it eloquently in a lengthy online post for *Yes* magazine when he asked: "What happened to boys that they grew up to feel they need sex so badly that this behaviour is so pervasive?"

"What happened to men that they support a \$US97 billion porn industry that produces 13,000 porn films a year (compared to Hollywood's 600 films), has 420 million porn web pages, and 68 million search engine re-

“HOW MANY OF US PARENTS HAVE WATCHED OUR SWEET TODDLER BOYS SLOWLY LOSE THEIR CAPACITY TO CRY?”

quests for porn every day? No one is born a rapist, a sexual abuser or a porn addict; even the creepiest, sleaziest and most dangerous of these men began as sweet little boys. Something had to happen to make them into abusers."

WHAT HAPPENED, according to northern NSW-based Dr Arne Rubinstein, founding chief executive of *The Making of Men* (both an organisation and bestselling book), was that so many boys never actually grew up. Their bodies did, but their minds didn't.

"After puberty," Rubinstein says, "they can become angry and lost because they're still operating from boy psychology. And to understand this boy psychology, you only need to picture the typical behaviour of a seven-year-old in the playground. He wants to be acknowledged all the time. He sees himself as the centre of the universe. He takes no responsibility for his actions. He finds it difficult to deal with his emotions. And he wants his mother.

"Whereas in the healthy man's psychology, a man sees himself as part of the universe, not the centre of it; he takes full responsibility for his actions, he deals with his emotions and he looks for a healthy relationship with the feminine. If you ask a lot of women if they know any men who are still doing the boy psychology stuff, the majority will actually say, 'Yeah, I married him.'

"The role modelling and mentoring for boys and teenagers is very poor, and the messaging is terrible. So that's what our organisation does – it gets men to help the next generation think about what it means to have a healthy relationship – with both the masculine and the feminine."

We've all grown up with the clichés that boys don't cry. They don't show fear. They keep a stiff upper lip. They suck it up, lest they be labelled a "girl" or a "pussy". All these stock phrases that shame the idea of being soft, compassionate or kind-hearted. And what replaces this, as John Bell observed, is "a strutting of male power" – perhaps the perfect image for the caricature of machismo currently on display in the White House. And yes, perhaps, the perfect image of what men do, not just to women, but to gays, queers, transgenders, bisexuals and, of course, other straight men – anyone considered different or a threat.

"For many men," Bell wrote, "the huge, beaming archway of healthy human need for closeness and love gradually gets bricked up, brick by hurtful brick, until the only available opening for all those real needs has been narrowed to a small keyhole called sex.

"Add extra testosterone, unrelenting sexual advertising and media images, and boyhood training to be aggressive to get what you want,

Below, from left: Access Hollywood host Billy Bush, Donald Trump and actor Arianne Zucker in 2005, on the day of the infamous tape recording; a female circumcision ceremony in Uganda, a tradition in some parts of the continent.



and we can start to understand how sex for men has become so fraught, so distorted, so unhealthy, so compulsive, so desperate.

“Men are [taught] to be in charge, to hold all reins of power, to feel superior to women, to expect women to serve men in exchange for protection and security. The conditioning includes learning to not show feelings other than anger or toughness ... How many of us parents have watched our sweet toddler boys slowly lose their capacity to cry, or hide their tenderness to fit into the harsh teenage-boy culture? So as men, most of us grow up being cut off from our feelings, from our true loving nature, from our natural compassion, from easy relationships with most other men. We feel isolated, competitive, insecure, lonely and fake – though we can rarely admit it, and usually only in the safe embrace of a lover, if we’re lucky. The reality is that men have a huge, lifelong reservoir of tears and fears to shed about all this trauma.”

I CAN hear voices being raised against these reflections: that they represent a derailment of the conversation we need to be having right now; that this moment calls for nothing less than listening to women, believing women, defending women, standing alongside women. In other words, this is not the time for men to play victim. This is the time to allow the flood of women’s pain and profound outrage to wash over us.

Eve Ensler has every reason to fear and despise men, and to not want to hear what ails them. From a young age, she was beaten, bruised, choked, nearly murdered by her father, and yet her journey to the source of female suffering ultimately took her into the heart of male darkness. In her 2006 book, *Insecure At Last*, she described meeting a soldier in Kosovo in the late 1990s. His name was Agrim, and he seemed paralysed, both physically and mentally.

“For some reason,” she wrote, “he looked at me, threw his arms around my neck, and started weeping. No, it was more like wailing. I have never heard a sound like that. He would not let go. Then his weeping wailing began to build and release. It could not be controlled or stopped. It resounded through the neighbourhood. People from the village began to gather around.

“I held on to Agrim but, honestly, I wanted him to stop. All these years I had told myself I wanted men to be vulnerable, to have their feelings, to cry. All of a sudden it felt like a lie. I did not want this man to be so destroyed, so out of control. I wanted him to have answers and be tough and know the way and make everything work out.

“I understood how part of me was afraid of men being lost, how I needed them to be tough and sure. I understood how many years I had carried their invisible pain so I wouldn’t have to see them weak or ashamed. This weeping liquid man in my arms was my undoing, pulling me out to sea in the wild waves of his crying.

“It was as if I were holding the secret story of men in my lap. Centuries of male sorrow and loss, centuries of unexpressed worry and doubt, centuries of pain. I suddenly understood violence and war. I understood retaliation and revenge. I understood how deep the agony is and how its suppression has made men into other things. I understood that these tears falling down Agrim’s face would have become bullets in any other case, hardened drops of grief and rage directed toward a needed enemy. I saw how in fighting to live up to the tyranny of masculinity, men become driven to do anything to prove they are neither tender,



Above, from left: Jane Fonda, Eve Ensler and Glenn Close on stage during a performance of *The Vagina Monologues* in New York.

nor weak, nor insecure. They are forced to cage and kill the feminine within their own beings and consequently the world.”

Talking to *Good Weekend* now, Ensler believes it is imperative that we work out how to overhaul patriarchal thinking once and for all. “Are we going to fire every man?” she asks. “Are we going to put every man in prison? Are we going to punish every man? What is going to be the process by which we transform patriarchy?”

“I’ve always said that men are... equally tyrannised by the patriarchy, sometimes more damaged by it, because at least women got to keep their hearts intact. Men have been removed from their tenderness, their tears; the centre of their own beings. So this is a really critical question for men. What are men going to do to help themselves break out of patriarchy and come into a new system where they get to be free to be tender, loving, caring, heart-opened, feeling beings?”

I KNOW many men like this, as you no doubt do, too. Men who would never dream of making unwanted comments to a woman, touching her inappropriately, let alone trying to force her into non-consensual sex. I also know men who champion women’s rights: like my friend, Melbourne-based social entrepreneur Jeremy Meltzer, who delivered a TEDx talk on this subject called *Where is Men’s Roar?*

“Can I ask you to raise your hands if you have a sister?” he asked his live audience at the outset. “Now leave your hand up and raise the other hand if you also have a daughter. Great, keep both of them up, and if you have a mum raise your knee.” The audience was a sea of upstretched hands and knees. Meltzer then went on to cite UN statistics on the global pandemic of violence against women, calling it “the most systematic and pervasive human rights abuse in the world”.

“What the hell is going on?” he asked. “Any one of these women could be our sister, mother or daughter. So where are the men? Where is men’s roar? Not for the football, but for what really matters? [Because] this is the greatest moral challenge of our times.”

Born and raised in Melbourne, Meltzer, 42, first witnessed violence against women in the late 1990s, while living in Latin America, Cuba, and Miami. “I had a Cuban girlfriend at the time and met a lot of her community and heard so many stories of violence,” he tells *Good Weekend*. “At one point we almost became victims of her ex-boyfriend and had to leave town, and I became really angry at how normalised all this violence was.”

In 2013 Meltzer established a social enterprise tech start-up called i=Change (The ‘i’ in

i=Change denotes personal responsibility for change) whereby retailers commit a dollar of every online sale to causes such as helping non-government organisations end sex trafficking in Asia and pioneer new technologies in Uganda so that premature babies survive. While the customers choose where the dollar goes, the brands make the donation and, in the past five years, i=Change has raised \$500,000 through partnerships with 40 retailers, both in Australia and internationally, that have directly impacted the lives of more than 115,000 women and girls.

“From what I’ve learnt and seen,” says Meltzer, “I believe men’s violence against women to be the most pressing human rights issue of our time. Most ideologies, belief systems, institutions and religions that fundamentally minimise the feminine, control women and girls, ensure they don’t realise their potential and, in many respects, denigrate them, hide them away from public life and ensure they’re not educated, could only have been created by men, enforced by men, interpreted and implemented by men. To allow ourselves the illusion this is in any way preordained is beyond primitive, and a tragic outsourcing of responsibility.”

For Meltzer, this is overwhelmingly a men’s issue, for the simple reason that it is men who are wreaking the destruction. “We pander to political correctness here because we don’t call this what it is. We call it family violence, as if it’s a toddler throwing a toy at his mum or a dog biting someone on the ankle.

“Family violence is mostly a man choosing to use violence against his partner. Violence is almost exclusively the domain of men. Who’s doing the vast amount of killing? It’s men. Who picks up the pieces, and fights to hold families together? It’s women.

“Women build life, while we are adept at destroying it. Unless, as men, we begin to look at what it is in the male psyche, in the versions of masculinity we’re born into and enforce upon each other, and begin actively engaging each other to become the solution to this issue, we’ll be having the same conversation 500 years from now.

“We have to listen to women deeply – because too often we don’t – but we have to cross the line to find the courage to confront and question what in the masculine psychology has normalised the profound desecration of the feminine? And we must create deep accountability, as men, for ourselves and with each other. What is it within our conditioning? What is it we have so deeply normalised that we are blind to? Nothing short of a revolution in the masculine is required, one which calls us to return to a healthy masculinity, that in our quietest moments, we are longing to inhabit.

“To achieve this is to aspire to an exquisite integrity, to a level of self-awareness where such violence – in our public or private lives – becomes impossible.”

EVERYTHING IS now up for grabs, and the questions keep coming. How do we examine the mechanisms – and insistent call – of human desire, and the way this informs our behaviour? How does evolutionary psychology play into the differences between men and women, if at all? To what extent does the masculine libido, and its various pathologies, drive our culture, politics and economy?

Most heterosexual men dream of the temptress, the endless wonder and diversity of the



female form; after all, she's been inhabiting our imagination – our films, songs, literature and conversations – from the time our balls began heading south.

When does a lumpen-footed move become a form of harassment? What does harassment actually mean? Is it a wolf whistle, a fondle, a lewd comment? What about a pass at a colleague after work – is that just poor training, or bad intentions? Or is this how couples so often come together, through some combination of risk taking and bumbling awkwardness?

And come to think of it, when the sun goes down, how do we corral our nocturnal sexual appetites, our private kinks and chinks? Do we follow Sweden's recent proposed changes to the law, so that victims only need to prove that an explicit consent was not granted in order to prosecute? What will happen to gender diversity in organisational culture if men run scared from working closely with women, especially if the allegations are at the more superficial end of the spectrum?

Do we have, as Bret Stephens wondered aloud in *The New York Times* recently, “the moral capacity to distinguish between aggressive sexual predation and run-of-the-mill romantic bungling – between a pattern of abusive behaviour and a good man's uncharacteristic bad moments?”

Does it matter if the guiltless go down because, in any war, there's going to be blood? Emily Lindin, an occasional columnist for *American Teen Vogue*, thinks not. In a series of tweets late last year, she wrote: “I'm actually not at all concerned about innocent men losing their jobs over false sexual assault/harassment allegations” and “If some innocent men's reputations have to take a hit in the process of undoing the patriarchy, that is a price I am absolutely willing to pay.”

At least she was being honest, although the implications of this are truly alarming. What happens when a touch on the arm of a colleague at work, or a friendly “x” on the end of a text message, is misinterpreted for something more than it is? How do we steer a course

through this war zone so that normal displays of affection aren't mistaken for something far more sinister? How do men find the courage to challenge other men – sometimes our close friends – when the conversations cross the line? Where exactly is that line, given that so often men's talk is shrouded in humour?

What do we do now with some of our favourite creative works? If you're middle aged like me, do we reassess the pleasure we once derived from Woody Allen and Roman Polanski films because we know now all about their youthful obsessions or, as the case may be, their perversions? Do we return to those sex-soaked Philip Roth novels where there's a boundless phallus parading through nearly everyone of them?

How do we feel, for instance, about the late Helmut Newton's photography, and all the taboos he broke as the fashion world's most infamous provocateur: women wearing chains and dog collars, models in wheelchairs and neck braces, women with saddles on their backs, their buttocks up against washing machines, or the back seat of a car. (Newton actually carried a lot of the accessories in his own car: false nipples, handcuffs, whips, leg irons.)

Should we now retrain our ears to old hits, such as Rod Stewart's *Tonight's the Night*, because we've re-listened to the lyrics and realise it could be about grooming an underage girl?

*Don't say a word my virgin child
Just let your inhibitions run wild
The secret is about to unfold
Upstairs before the night's too old.*

THEN THERE'S pornography. How do we hold back the tide of teenage boys and their use of smartphones, with its unlimited access to the objectification of women? Do we get Google to examine its own gender biases because, when you look up a word like “hysterical”, the first example of its usage is “Janet became hysterical and began screaming”?

How do we challenge teenage boys not to think of themselves as “heroes”, “legends” and

Millions took to the streets in women's marches across the US in January this year, showing the anger and energy unleashed by Donald Trump and the #MeToo campaign.

“top dogs” when they've had numerous sexual partners, while girls doing the same thing are called “sluts”, “hos”, “whores” and “bitches”?

And here's another thorny one. How do we stop mothers from internalising – and thereby perpetuating – the patriarchy by the way they raise, and talk to, their sons and daughters? Or the way they bury themselves in work, just as absentee fathers have done for so long? Or, far more subtly, the way they often protect the core fragility of a man's ego, because they know only too well what could happen if he collapses into shame. He could hurt himself, or someone else.

“As men are falling, women are rising,” wrote Maureen Dowd in *The New York Times* recently, and that is both a terrifying and electrifying thing to witness. Terrifying because there is nothing good about a broken man – not for himself, his children, his partner, his friends or his community.

Terrifying also, because – as we have seen with Brexit and the election of Donald Trump – millions of working-class men (and women, too) will blow up a system when they feel disempowered by forces beyond their control. Brokenness begets brokenness.

But it is also beyond thrilling to imagine a world where the potential of female power, passion and ingenuity might be unleashed, as it has been to varying degrees in China, Rwanda, Botswana and Morocco over recent times. In 1994, Rwanda lost nearly one million people during the genocide, yet, a decade later, was one of the fastest growing economies in the world – thanks in large part to female participation in the workforce and gender equality in political life. (Women today hold 61 per cent of seats in the lower house of Rwanda's national legislature, compared to 29 per cent in Australia.)

Muhammad Yunus, the Bangladeshi Nobel Peace prize-winner, and father of microcredit, lends almost solely to impoverished women in the developing world, because he knows their families and communities will benefit more than if he extends loans to men.

Across the globe, the mighty force of female power is asserting itself; at the same time as women are continuing to be abused, commodified and dehumanised. The very week that Trump was heard bragging on the *Access Hollywood* tapes about grabbing “pussy”, a new book called *Pussy: A Reclamation*, by Regina Thomashauer, was hitting *The New York Times* bestseller list with its exhortation to the reclaiming of true feminine power.

“Most women in the world are operating from a huge amount of scarcity and ignorance in our sensual lives – and our lives overall,” Thomashauer wrote. “Women have been ignored for centuries. We were never the priority. Our hunger was never met.”

The #MeToo campaign is a symptom of this furious hunger, both ancient and contemporary. Ever since the second wave of feminism in the 1960s, women have been sharing their stories, setting up hotlines, helping each other, writing books, songs, plays, films; marching, agitating, dancing for their right not to be abused or silenced.

Now, it's different. Now, we're all joined to the information superhighway, and the exemplar of patriarchal aggression and arrogance sits in the White House, bestriding the world. Something extraordinary has been triggered within the collective psyche and we're only beginning to sense what's still to come. ■