

“The Straight and Strong Man’s Burden”:
An Analysis of Benevolent Sexism
as Misogyny in International Women’s Day
Speeches from Leaders of Belarus,
Russia and Thailand

“แอกภาระแห่งชายแท้ชายแกร่ง :
บทวิเคราะห์การเหยียดเพศแบบอวยในฐานะ
ความกลัวเกลียดเหยียดหญิงจากสุนทรพจน์
เนื่องในวันสตรีสากล จากผู้นำเบลารุส รัสเซีย และไทย

Verita Sriratana
วริตตา ศรีรัตนา

Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University
ภาควิชาภาษาอังกฤษ คณะอักษรศาสตร์ จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย

Received: 19th February 2023

Revised: 31st May 2023

Accepted: 9th June 2023

Abstract

This research paper is an analysis of misogyny implied in selected speeches made by Alexander Lukashenko (President of Belarus), Vladimir Putin (President of Russia) and Prayut Chan-o-cha (Prime Minister of Thailand) on International Women’s Day. It argues that misogyny can manifest in the form of benevolent sexism, where women are put on pedestal, venerated and romanticised as devoted mothers, wives, lovers and daughters – a patriarchal adaptation of Rudyard Kipling’s “burden” (from the renowned poem with jingoist and imperialist euphemism “The White Man’s Burden”) which the cisgender heterosexual males (“straight men”) as well as authoritarian leaders (“strong men”) take up and lovingly uphold. Contrary to the mainstream understanding that physical violence and blatant verbal abuse comprise the only form of misogyny, this research paper argues that misogyny can also be found in beautiful words reflecting chivalric adulation, as they are based on the notion that women (i.e. patriarchally accepted types like doting mothers and submissive wives) are supplementary and complementary to men as well as lacking in agency and, hence, should be adored and protected by men and for men especially in military crisis or in times of political instability. This research paper propounds that differentiating between “(hostile) sexism”, which tends to be allocated to the mainstream concept of misogyny, and “benevolent sexism”, which tends to be perceived as less harmful, may seem useful in terms of strategic essentialism. However, it can further enhance and contribute to the insidious effects ranging from women’s internalisation of patriarchy to rape as a military weapon. Perhaps it is high time we told it like it is; benevolent sexism is misogyny and can be used as a justification of violence and sexual violation.

Keywords: Misogyny, Benevolent Sexism, Sexual Violation, Belarus, Russia, Thailand, International Women’s Day Speech

บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยเรื่องนี้เป็นบทวิเคราะห์ความกลัวเกลียดเหยียดหญิงอันสะท้อนในสุนทรพจน์ของ อาเล็กซานด์ร ลูกาเชงกา (ประธานาธิบดีเบลารุส) วลาดิมีร์ ปูติน (ประธานาธิบดีรัสเซีย) และประยูรท์ จันทรโอชา (นายกรัฐมนตรีไทย) เนื่องในวสันตวิสาขบูชา โดยเสนอว่าความกลัวเกลียดเหยียดหญิงอาจสื่อออกมาในรูปแบบของการเหยียดเพศแบบอวย เนื่องจากการเหยียดในลักษณะดังกล่าวตั้งอยู่บนการยกผู้หญิงขึ้นหิ้งบูชาและสร้างภาพอุดมคติชวนฝันของผู้หญิงในฐานะมารดา ภรรยา คนรัก และบุตรสาว ผู้อุทิศตนต่อชาย การเหยียดเพศแบบอวยนี้เป็นการใช้กรอบความคิดชายเป็นใหญ่ตีความตัดแปลงคำว่า “เอกภาวะ” ในบทกวีของ รัตยาร์ด คิปลิง ที่ชื่อ “เอกภาวะแห่งคนขาว” อันเกิดจากการเคลื่อนคำตามแนวคิดการแสดงความรักชาติแบบรุกรานและแนวคิดจักรวรรดินิยม เป็นเอกภาวะที่ชายผู้มีเพศสถานะสอดคล้อง อีกทั้งมีเพศสำนึกและจิตใจตรงกับเพศกำเนิด (“ชายแท้”) และผู้นำอำนาจนิยม (“ชายแกร่ง”) แบกรับและเชิดชู งานวิจัยเรื่องนี้ท้าทายความคิดความเข้าใจกระแสหลักที่ว่ารูปแบบความกลัวเกลียดเหยียดหญิงหนึ่งเดียวคือการใช้ความรุนแรงทางกายและการทำร้ายทารุณผู้อื่นทางวาจา โดยเสนอว่าความกลัวเกลียดเหยียดหญิงนั้นอาจแสดงออกในรูปมรดกสวาจาที่สะท้อนแนวคิดการให้เกียรติสตรีตาม “วีรคติ” หรือจารีตแห่งอัศวิน เนื่องจากแนวคิดดังกล่าวตั้งอยู่บนฐานที่ว่าผู้หญิง (ตามแบบฉบับที่สังคมปิตาธิปไตยยอมรับ เช่น มารดาผู้อุทิศตนอย่างเหลือล้นและภรรยาผู้อ่อนน้อมยอมตาม) เป็นส่วนเสริมประกอบสำหรับผู้ชาย อีกทั้งไร้อำนาจกระทำกร และควรได้รับความรักและการพิทักษ์อารักขาโดยผู้ชายและเพื่อผู้ชายโดยเฉพาะในช่วงวิกฤตการณ์ทางทหารหรือในช่วงความไร้เสถียรภาพทางการเมือง งานวิจัยเรื่องนี้เสนอว่าแม้การแยกระหว่าง “การเหยียดเพศ (แบบใจแข็ง)” ซึ่งมักได้รับจัดสรรเป็นนิยามหนึ่งเดียวกับความกลัวเกลียดเหยียดหญิง และ “การเหยียดเพศแบบอวย” ซึ่งมักเป็นที่เข้าใจว่าส่งผลร้ายแรงน้อยกว่านั้น จะเป็นประโยชน์ในเชิงการกำหนดสารัตถะเพื่อยุทธวิธีการต่อสู้เรียกร้องสิทธิร่วมกัน แต่การแยกดังกล่าวกลับยกระดับและเกื้อหนุนผลร้ายอันเคลือบแฝงแห่งความกลัวเกลียดเหยียดหญิงในรูปแบบของการเหยียดเพศแบบอวยอันแยบยล ตั้งแต่ในระดับที่ผู้หญิงซึมซับน้อมรับคุณค่าชายเป็นใหญ่จนถึงระดับที่ทหารใช้การข่มขืนเป็นอาวุธสงคราม อาจถึงเวลาแล้วที่เราควรขนานนามการเหยียดเพศแบบอวยว่าไม่ต่างอะไรจากความกลัวเกลียดเหยียดหญิงเสียที

คำสำคัญ : ความกลัวเกลียดเหยียดหญิง การเหยียดเพศแบบอวย การล่องละเมิดทางเพศ เบลารุส รัสเซีย ประเทศไทย สุนทรพจน์วันวิสาขบูชา

Introduction: An Overview of Misogyny and Benevolent Sexism

Women may not be simply human *beings* but positioned as human *givers* when it comes to the dominant men who look to them for various kinds of moral support, admiration, attention, and so on. She is not allowed to *be* in the same ways as he is. She will tend to be in trouble when she does not give enough, or to the right people, in the right way, or in the right spirit. And, if she errs on this score, or asks for something of the same support or attention on her own behalf, there is a risk of misogynist resentment, punishment, and indignation.

(Manne, 2019: xix)

The word “misogyny” tends to conjure in our mind the image of physical violence and tends to evoke in our ears verbal assault against women. Many assume that misogyny can be detected in boisterous insults, found in open wounds and resounded in cyberbullying – all of which are driven by contempt for and hatred of women. Many tend to classify misogyny and label it as “hostile sexism”, a term which Peter Glick and Susan T. Fiske (2001) define in “An Ambivalent Alliance: Hostile and Benevolent Sexism as Complementary Justifications for Gender Inequality” as “antipathy toward women who are viewed as usurping men’s power” (p. 109). Glick and Fiske further explain and analyse that “[h]ostile sexism is an adversarial view of gender relations in which women are perceived as seeking to control men, whether through sexuality or feminist ideology” (p. 109). The words “hostility” and “adversary”, particularly against transgressive women whom society deems “manipulative” towards men, tend to be perceived as the implications of misogyny. Glick and Fiske differentiate between *hostile sexism*, which is inherently misogynistic, from *benevolent sexism*, which many may understand

to comprise words and implications such as “congeniality” and “supportive ally” – the total opposite to “hostility” and “adversary” thus:

Hostile sexism is elicited by women who are viewed as directly challenging or surreptitiously stealing men’s power (e.g., feminists, career women, or seductresses), whereas benevolent sexism is directed toward women who reinforce conventional gender relations and serve men as wives, mothers, and romantic objects (e.g. homemakers). (p. 113)

The binary opposition of “hostile sexism” and “benevolent sexism” can be analysed as solidly based on the binary opposition of women as “bitches” and women as “angels in the house”—the latter phrase taken from Coventry Patmore’s renowned long narrative poem entitled “The Angel in the House” (1854-1862), which was inspired by his wife and has traditionally been read as an idealisation of women as docile wives and mothers. “Bitches”, or women who rebel against patriarchal norms, tend to be punished while “angels in the house”, or women who conform to the patriarchal norms, tend to be rewarded. Such reward and punishment system can be seen as part of the “policing” mechanism meant to keep women in their place. Misogyny as hostile sexism tends to be conceived as the aggressive and militant method of policing.

Kate Manne (2019), in *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*, similarly allocates a more belligerent type of policing of women to the realm of misogyny: “Misogyny serves to enact or bring about patriarchal social relations in ways that may be direct, and more or less coercive” (p. 79). She distinguishes misogyny from sexism thus:

Misogyny will typically differentiate between good women and bad ones, and punishes the latter. Overall, sexism and misogyny share a common purpose—to maintain or restore a patriarchal social order. But sexism purports to merely be being reasonable, misogyny gets nasty and tries to force the issue. Sexism is hence to bad science as misogyny is to moralism. Sexism wears a lab coat; misogyny goes on witch hunts. (p. 80)

By describing sexism as potentially “reasonable” (however bad the science is) and misogyny as predominantly “nasty”, Manne’s effort to contrast sexism with misogyny can yield risky results as it implies that sexism can be associated with reason or even (pseudo)science while misogyny is based on force or aggression. Policing is still policing, no matter its manifestation.

This research paper argues that Glick and Fiske’s differentiation between “(hostile) sexism” and “benevolent sexism”, as well as Manne’s differentiation between “witch-hunting” misogyny and “lab-coat wearing” sexism—while useful in terms of strategic essentialism—can nevertheless further enhance and contribute to the insidious effects of misogyny in the more subtle form of benevolent sexism. By offering an analysis of misogyny in selected speeches made by Alexander Lukashenko (President of Belarus), Vladimir Putin (President of Russia) and Prayut Chan-o-cha (Prime Minister of Thailand) on International Women’s Day, this research paper argues that misogyny can manifest in the form of benevolent sexism, where women are put on pedestal, venerated and romanticised as devoted mothers, wives, lovers and daughters – a patriarchal interpretation and appropriation of Rudyard Kipling’s “burden” from the (in)famous poem known by its jingoist and imperialist euphemism “The White Man’s Burden” which the cisgender heterosexual males (“straight men”) as well as authoritarian leaders (“strong men”) take up and lovingly uphold.

“Take up the Straight and Strong Man’s Burden”:

Benevolent Sexism as Misogyny

*Take up the White Man’s burden—
Send forth the best ye breed—
Go bind your sons to exile
To serve your captives’ need;
To wait in heavy harness,
On fluttered folk and wild—
Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
Half-devil and half-child.*

(Kipling, 1899: 290)

On 8 March 2022, to mark the occasion of International Women’s Day, Thailand’s Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha gave the following speech at the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security:

I, as a man, and the Minister [of Social Development and Human Security] is also a man, [I can say that] outside the house men are so capable but in the house we're at women's mercy. They said men are like the forelegs of an elephant and women the hind legs but don't forget that when elephants fall and get stuck in mudhole, they all reverse on hind legs. I believe that women are meticulous in their work, and they possess the awareness.

Men and women tugging at each other would bring the kind of balance which prevents the elephant from falling. Forelegs and hind legs stepping forward together. Sometimes men wander past where they need to go because they're so hot-headed. Women are there to make our society safe just like cold water which cools down water from boiling hot to lukewarm. After all, whether you are forelegs or hind legs, you are equally important. I want everyone here to be proud of yourselves because we are important to our families [Translation from Thai to English is mine].

[ผมในฐานะที่เป็นผู้ชาย รัฐมนตรีก็เป็นผู้ชาย นอกบ้านผู้ชายจะเก่ง แต่ในบ้านเสร็จผู้หญิงหมด เขาบอกว่าผู้ชายเปรียบเสมือนช้างเท้าหน้า ผู้หญิงเป็นช้างเท้าหลัง แต่อย่าลืมนะว่าเมื่อช้างตกหลุม ช้างก็ต้องถอยหลังขึ้นด้วยขาหลังทั้งนั้น ผมเชื่อมั่นว่า ผู้หญิงมีความละเอียดอ่อนในการทำงาน มีสติ ดึงกันไปดึงกันมา ก็ทำให้พอดีไม่ทำให้ช้างหกล้ม เดินไปข้างหน้าด้วยกัน บางทีผู้ชายก็ชอบเดินเลย เพราะใจร้อน ซึ่งผู้หญิงจะช่วยทำให้สังคมสงบปลอดภัย เปรียบเสมือนน้ำเย็นที่ทำให้น้ำร้อนกลายเป็นน้ำอุ่น ทั้งนี้ ไม่ว่าใครจะอยู่หน้าหรืออยู่หลังสำคัญทั้งนั้น ขอให้ทุกคนได้ภูมิใจ เพราะเราเป็นบุคคลสำคัญในครอบครัวของเรา]

From the speech, the dichotomy of “separate spheres”, or the outdated separation between private sphere (women’s place in the kitchen and bedroom) and public sphere (men’s place in the professional world outside the house) prevails even in the year 2022. Women, the paragon of virtue and domestication, are here described—drawing on the Thai proverb—by Prayut as an elephant’s hind legs. In this speech, women are glorified as the calming key element and safe refuge for men, who are portrayed as fierier and more impulsive. The magical power to sustain men and the society is here depicted as belonging to women alone. An elephant’s hind legs can even be more important than an elephant’s forelegs because they help to check and maintain the balance in men’s lives. These words may read like sweet honey and may look like ornate laurel of homage to the “fairer sex”. These words may seem so far removed from our understanding of sexism, particularly the outwardly violent hostile sexism. However, they can be read as benevolent sexism and, as this paper argues, also as misogyny. Prayut’s adulation of women, which by no means seeks to question or subvert the Thai phrase which assigns to women the role of highly capable yet submissive wives, chimes in with Russian President Vladimir Putin’s speech on International Women’s Day in 2019 thus:

Reaching success is the nature of our women. You manage to do everything, both at work and at home. And you remain beautiful, brilliant, charming, the centre of gravity inside the family that knows how to inspire and support, warm and comfort. It is your fate to walk the whole path of creating a new life – giving birth to a child. This great happiness of motherhood, raising children transforms the world, fills it with kindness, tenderness, and mercy, reaffirms the traditional values that have always been Russia’s strength.

Apart from the above extract, Putin’s 2016 International Women’s Day speech also addresses the mystical powers of women: “Dear women, you possess a mysterious power: you keep up with everything, juggle a myriad of tasks, and yet remain tender, unforgettable and full of charm”. In Putin’s speeches, motherhood and women’s superpower to multitask and manage both their professional and domestic lives are put on pedestal. Alexander Lukashenko, President of Belarus, correspondingly expresses his gratitude to wives and mothers in his speech on International Women’s Day in 2022: “Thanks to your responsive hearts and tender care, you preserve the belief in the sanctity of maternity and the strength of the family hearth”. Also, on International Women’s Day in 2013, Lukashenko celebrates women as symbol of not only life, but also the nation:

You are the spring of life and the beginning of all beginnings. A woman with all her wisdom and strength symbolizes the core foundation on which the world is built. You inspire us to be heroes and discoverers, you make us happy with just one glance, you can stop a battle with just one word and it is your gift of kids which makes the mankind last forever. It is not coincidence that some of the most cherished by every Belarusian word such as Earth, Motherland and Belarus – they all are of feminine gender.

Today you represent one of the most powerful forces behind the social and economic development and political stability in Belarus, its scientific and cultural progress. Your knowledge, talent and extraordinary diligence bring about fantastic results in various aspects of our life. And yet, you are so incredibly compassionate, gentle, and beautiful and you continue to be good mothers and wives, dedicated and reliable partners.

Lukashenko glorifies women by evoking the gender register of words like Earth, Motherland and Belarus, equating women to nature and the Belarusian nation by default. Misogyny is, indeed, “grounded on gender stereotypes” (Phinship, 2022: 21) constructed on and drawn upon language. In a similar manner, Vladimir Putin, in his International Women’s Day speech in 2015, also refers to words and expression which feature women as mothers:

A well-known expression says, “to drink it in with your mother’s milk.” The sense of individual self-awareness and first skills in interacting with the world around us are things we learn from women. We have many fine words about mothers, and it is not by chance that we say that “nothing is more sacred than a mother”, and that we compare our mothers to our homeland. These are very close concepts.

We now have stable natural population growth for the first time in 20 years. We know too that no matter how much men help in the home, the main burden still falls on the woman. This includes the sleepless nights, the housework, and at the same time thinking about one's own future professional activity.

Contrary to the mainstream understanding that blatant verbal abuse is the only form of misogyny, this research paper argues that misogyny can also be found in these beautiful words reflecting chivalric adulation, as they are based on the notion that women, i.e. patriarchally accepted (stereo)types of women like doting mothers and submissive wives, are supplementary and complementary to men as well as lacking in agency and, hence, should be adored and protected by men and for men, especially in military crisis or in times of political instability:

Benevolent sexism is disarming. Not only is it subjectively favorable in its characterization of women, but it promises that men's power will be used to women's advantage, if only they can secure a high-status male protector. To the extent that women depend on men to be their protectors and providers, they are less likely to protest men's power or to seek their own independent status. (Glick & Fiske, 2001: 111)

In the case of the speeches which have been selected as examples, policing also takes place in the form of pigeonholing women into the kinds and types deemed acceptable in their respective societies. Thai women are expected to be elephant's hind legs, the pulling force which divinely keeps men, stereotypically the more impulsive sex, in check. Russian women are

expected to magically “do everything” including achieving success in the workplace while fulfilling their patriotic duty as mothers nurturing the future of their nation. Belarusian women are expected to be good mothers, wives, and girlfriends while inspiring men to strive outside their homes as “heroes and discoverers”. Women who do not fall under the category propagated and mythologised in these public speeches are inevitably deemed “bitches” or less than women, a misogynist interpretation and adaptation of the monstrous “[h]alf-devil and half-child” in Kipling’s poem. While the burden of unconditional maternal affection imposed upon “good women” is laden with the threat of punishment if they should decide to defect, the “burden” of benevolent sexism which the “straight and strong men” euphorically take up is enshrined by the euphemism not dissimilar to that found in the title of Kipling’s poem published with the subtitle “The United States and The Philippine Islands”, reflecting the obvious intent on the poet’s part to urge the United States to take up the burden of colonising the Philippines in the advent of the Philippine-American War and ratification by the United States Senate of the treaty which placed Puerto Rico, Guam, Cuba and the Philippines under American control. The misogynist endeavour to police and control women is sugar-coated with sweet words of benevolent sexism in the same way that jingoism and imperialism are sugar-coated with Kipling’s usage of the euphemism “The White Man’s Burden”:

[B]enevolent sexism is a particularly insidious form of prejudice for two reasons: (a) It does not seem like a prejudice to male perpetrators (because it is not experienced as an antipathy), and (b) women may find its sweet allure difficult to resist. Benevolent sexism, after all, has its rewards; chivalrous men are willing to sacrifice their own well-being to provide for and to protect women. (Glick & Fiske, 2001: 114-115)

Prayut, Putin and Lukashenko's speeches are also examples of the attempt to depoliticise International Women's Day, of which original purpose—initiated by the Socialist Party of America and enhanced by the Social Democratic Party in Germany famously led by Clara Zetkin (1857-1933)—was to press demands regarding women's working condition and rights to vote:

On March 8, 1857, hundreds of women working in textile factories in New York went on strike to protests [sic] inhumane working conditions, twelve-hour workdays, as well as to demand higher wages and the right to vote. On the last weekend of February in 1908, women took the streets of New York once again with practically unchanged demands: better work condition and the rights to vote. In 1909 the strikes grew and by 1910 at the International Socialist Woman's Conference in Copenhagen, the Socialist Party of America suggested Women's Day become an annual and international holiday. (Goz)

In the contexts of Russia and Belarus, the irony of International Women's Day is augmented in the following fact:

In 1917 in Russia, International Women's Day acquired great significance – it was the flashpoint for the Russian Revolution. On March 8th (Western calendar) women workers in Petrograd held a mass strike and demonstration demanding Peace and Bread. The strike movement spread from factory to factory and effectively became an insurrection. In 1922, in honour of the women's role on IWD in 1917, Lenin declared that March 8th should be designated officially as women's day. (Davis)

In the present day, however, International Women's Day has been reduced to occasions similar to Valentine's Day, where women are given flowers and men are commended for making use of such rare occasion in attempting—for a brief period of time—to take up or imagine taking up the thankless and far from glorious “good woman's burden” of household chores. International Women's Day is also the day where public speeches are given to delineate the borders and boundaries of what good and desirable women should behave according to the codes and values of patriarchy, militarism, authoritarianism and heteronormativity. This, particularly in former Soviet Union spaces, is the living legacy of how International Women's Day was utilised as propaganda instrument in the early twentieth century. Choi Chatterjee, in *Celebrating Women: Gender, Festival Culture, and Bolshevik Ideology, 1910-1939*, recounts:

Women's Day was a day of reviewing the ranks of female fighters in the Soviet state, to use a military metaphor that was dear to the Bolsheviks. It was also a day in which the Soviet government advertised to its own population, and to communists abroad, the paternal care that the state lavished on its women... Through these acts, the Soviet state publicly affirmed its obligations to Soviet women while simultaneously garnering free publicity for its self-proclaimed paternalism. (p. 71)

Benevolent sexism is misogyny as it evolves around the process of “de-agentification” of women, or “how sexist ideologies and practices reify the association between women and passivity by encouraging men to assume agency on their behalf” (Fraser, 2015: 145). From its socialist origin, International Women's Day and its political significance have been hijacked

by strongmen leaders to justify their regimes, particularly their penchant for war and authoritarian power: “Benevolent sexism, though a kinder and gentler form of prejudice, is pernicious in that it is more likely to be accepted by women, as well as men, especially in cultures in which women experience a high degree of threat from men” (Glick & Fiske, 2001: 116-117).

Rape as military weapon, the most gruesome effect of such appropriation of International Women’s Day and of benevolent sexism as one of the driving forces of patriarchy and ultranationalism, will be analysed in the next section’s case study of the discourses of misogyny in contemporary Russia.

Benevolent Sexism in Its Most Malevolent Form: A Discursive Case Study of Rape as Military Weapon in the Case of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

Today I would like to recall the words written by a woman who has compatriots described as great and whom people called Mother – Empress Catherine II, whose sculpture stands here, in the Kremlin. She was not a Russian by birth, but she was proud of becoming Russian. Here is what she wrote: “I will defend my homeland with my tongue, with a pen and with a sword for as long as I live.” Today we regard the words “homeland,” “mother” and “beloved” to be of the same magnitude to us. And it will always be so.

Vladimir Putin’s speech on International Women’s Day,
8 March 2022

“Russia celebrates this holiday [International Women’s Day] with particular love, probably more so than any other country”, said Vladimir Putin in his speech on International Women’s Day in 2016. “It is women, with their dignity and compassion, who incarnate Russia’s true soul”, he continued:

I want to say particular words of gratitude today to the women of the wartime generation. Your strength of spirit and your feats taught us to be real men and reach victory in spite of all the obstacles. Today's women follow in your footsteps, succeeding in every field, in professional and creative careers and public work, and create a happy and comfortable environment for founding families and raising children.

Russian women are portrayed as the soul of the Russian nation, especially during wartime. The blandishments in the above passage can be seen as a predictable foreshadowing of how Russian army celebrated International Women's Day in 2019:

In the Siberian city of Ekaterinburg, an army recruitment office held a photoshoot in which heavily armed, masked special forces soldiers posed with ballerinas in an empty metro station. The photo, posted on the office's social media page, was accompanied with the caption: "The strength of a man is in his tenderness and his love of a woman". (Reevell, 2019)

Women are hijacked here to justify jingoism, violence, and atrocity of war. The author of this research article has chosen contemporary Russia as case study and specific example of benevolent sexism as misogyny precisely because of the jarring contrast between the International Women's Day speech's colourful expression of love towards women and the grim reality of gender violence. Violation of women's rights in all aspects can be understood as part of the dire and malignant repercussions of benevolent sexism under Putin's regime which, according to Valerie Sperling, constantly

draws its political legitimacy from the intertwined connection between militarism and pro-natalism:

Support for military services and support for pro-natalism are both aspects of a particular expression of patriotism. That expression of patriotism is also gendered: if it is the ideal patriotic male citizen's duty to protect Russia's internal and external sovereignty (i.e., to protect the Putin regime from left-wing or liberal ideological opponents at home and to protect Russia from external threats), it is the ideal patriotic female citizen's duty to encourage military service among men (by linking women's admiration and sexual availability to men's military service) and to do her part to reproduce—and increase—the Russian state's population and, by association, its might. (pp. 149-150)

Since the Annexation of Crimea in 2014 to the present-day invasion of Ukraine, women, the heart and soul of the nation, is described as the element which makes men “whole” and “wholesome”: “even though benevolent sexism presumes women's inferiority, it is subjectively positive (from the perspective of the sexist perceiver) characterizing (at least some) women as wonderful, pure creatures whose love is required to make a man whole” (Glick and Fiske, 2001: 112). This discourse of women as mother of the nation, the muse of war, is resounded in Putin's speech on International Women's Day in 2022: “But nothing could stop our men, not even during the ordeals of the Great Patriotic War, from saying words of love to their women, and that love was their pillar of support and inspiration”.

Benevolent sexism in these selected examples may seem harmless. However, since the glorification of women is based on chivalry, there is a

strong implication that women, like the nation, are to be protected at all cost. Susan Griffin (1986) has put on centre stage the dangers of chivalry in her work: “In the system of chivalry, men protect women against men... Indeed, chivalry is an age-old protection racket which depends for its existence on rape” (p. 11) and, hence, as this research paper posits, there is a danger in undermining the violence which benevolent sexism entails. The sugar-coated layers of chivalry, which itself is part and parcel of benevolent sexism, reveals the deeply ingrained misogynist notion of women as inferior and lacking in agency. It is not too far-fetched to assert that the misogynistic discourse propagated as/by benevolent sexism can lead to rape culture. In the case of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, particularly, it can lead to the use of rape as military weapon: “rape culture, or the complex of images and ideologies in society that normalize sexual violence, depends on chivalry for its existence. More precisely, it depends on the attendance ideologies that place women on a pedestal and strip them of agency in the process” (Fraser, 2015: 143).

The harrowing accounts of rape during late February and March 2022 in the four provinces of Kyiv, Chernihiv, Kharkiv and Sumy can be found in the report submitted upon the request of the Human Rights Council by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine:

88. The Commission investigated cases of rape committed by some soldiers of the Russian armed forces during the period under review in localities that came under their control, which are war crimes. Victims ranged from 4 to over 80 years old. Perpetrators raped the women and girls in their homes or took them and raped them in unoccupied dwellings. In most cases, these acts also amount to torture and cruel or inhumane treatment for the victims and for relatives who were forced to watch. Other incidents of sexual violence were also documented against women, men, and girls. The Commission continues to investigate the extent to which sexual and gender-based violence constituted a widespread pattern.

89. Cases relating to sexual and gender-based violence are challenging to investigate. Victims face obstacles in reporting such violations. Because of the current security situation and forced displacement, victims have difficulties accessing appropriate health care, psychological support services and law enforcement offices in a timely fashion. Furthermore, it is not always possible to document forensically the existence of rape and the full extent of the victims' trauma. Autopsy reports often focus on the immediate cause of death rather than the entirety of the trauma sustained by the victims because of a lack of resources, families' requests that the post-mortem examination not be carried out or the condition of the remains.

90. In Kyiv Province, in March 2022, two Russian soldiers entered a home, raped a 22-year-old woman several times, committed acts of sexual violence on her husband and forced the couple to have sexual intercourse in their presence. Then one of the soldiers forced their 4-year-old daughter to perform oral sex on him, which is rape. The Commission is currently investigating three other credible allegations of Russian armed forces raping women and teenage girls in the same village. In another village, Russian armed forces took a woman out of her house and forced her to go to a neighbouring house, where one of the soldiers of the Russian armed forces had shot dead a man who had tried to defend his wife. Two soldiers took both women to another house that served as their base. The soldiers proceeded to different rooms to rape and sexually assault the two women.

91. In another village in Kyiv Province, at the beginning of March 2022, a soldier of the Russian armed forces entered the house of a 50-year-old woman. After shooting her husband, who tried to interfere, he took the woman to a nearby empty house where he raped her until another Russian armed forces military unit arrived and took him away. Her husband died of his injuries two days later, as he could not be taken to the hospital. The Commission is investigating another case of alleged sexual violence in the same time period in the same neighbourhood.

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92. In a nearby village, at the beginning of March 2022, two Russian armed forces servicemen repeatedly raped a 33-year-old woman after killing her husband. One of the alleged perpetrators has been identified, and criminal proceedings have been initiated in absentia against him. The Commission is investigating another incident that occurred later that month in the same village. A 56-year-old woman explained how two of the three Russian armed forces servicemen who broke into her home gang-raped her as the third one watched while masturbating. They stole food and money from her. She learned a couple of weeks later that, in a separate incident, her husband had been tortured and executed.

93. In Chernihiv Province and another province, the Commission has been investigating two cases of rape of women over 80 years old. An 83-year-old woman described how, while her village was occupied by Russian armed forces, she was raped by a Russian armed forces serviceman in her house, where her physically disabled husband was also present. In another instance, neighbours found the body of an older woman, partially undressed and with blood around her vagina. At the request of the family, the authorities did not perform a full autopsy.

94. Also in Chernihiv Province, in March 2022, Russian armed forces occupied a home for more than a week. The unit commander repeatedly sexually abused a 16-year-old girl during that time and threatened to kill other family members who tried to protect her. Two of the Russian armed forces servicemen were subsequently identified.

95. There was also an instance in Chernihiv Province, in March 2022, in which a Russian armed forces serviceman broke into a house, threatened the inhabitants with his weapon and attempted to rape a woman in front of her 3-year-old son. The neighbours, alerted by the noise, ran to the house, while others went to alert his commander.

96. In Kharkiv Province, the Commission is investigating two cases of repeated rape of an adolescent girl over a three-month period, allegedly by a soldier of the Russian armed forces, and repeated rape, reportedly by a Russian armed forces serviceman, of a 31-year-old woman who was taking shelter in a school basement. (pp. 16-17)

While it may seem far-fetched for many people to link misogyny as benevolent sexism with rape as military weapon, both of them share the cynical concomitant premise which comes with adulation of women as wives and mothers of the nation that women are portrayed as men's territory to be invaded and occupied (as inevitable flipside of women as "country to be defended and liberated") as well as men's tokens to be bartered and accumulated among them (as inevitable flipside of women as the inspiration as well as heart and soul of soldiers):

Sexual violence can be used against all members of a community as a tactic of war, torture, terrorism, reprisal, and political repression. Today, it is used in at least 18 conflicts around the world, including in Afghanistan, Syria and South Sudan.

It intends to humiliate and destroy families. It can propel forced displacement, punish and persecute targeted populations, and serve as an instrument of "ethnic cleansing" and social control. It also condemns survivors to a lifetime of trauma (Barber, 2022).

Victim blaming and internalised victim blaming, where women blame themselves for the perpetrators' actions, can also be seen as the insidious consequence of misogyny in the form of benevolent sexism. The unbearable

stigma of rape is dire in a society where women are strictly classified into idolised “good women” and punishable “bad women” depending on their roles of wives and mothers, forming not only the heart of the family but also the soul of the nation. An example of victim blaming and internalised victim blaming, which haunt and ostracise the rape victims, can be found in the following news report:

“Even in Bosnia we still get women stepping into support services saying they were raped 30 years ago. It has taken 30 years to feel confident to disclose this. We anticipate a similar situation may happen in Ukraine,” said Jaime Nadal, the Ukraine representative for UNFPA, the UN’s sexual and reproductive health agency.

One Ukrainian victim told the UN Commission: “This experience is very shameful for me and I am extremely scared and intimidated”.

It has taken years for sexual assault survivors of Russia’s earlier invasion of eastern Ukraine, in 2014, to speak out.

Alisa Kovalenko, a Ukrainian film director aged 34, was interrogated, forced to strip naked and bathe in front of a Russian commander in 2014. The commander later tried to rape her.

“It took more than a year for me to say anything about the sexual violence,” she told the Telegraph. “I gave all the other details [about the captivity] except this. It was very painful. I didn’t want to traumatise my family.”

“I hid deep inside myself,” she added. (Barber, 2022)

Misogyny in the form of benevolent sexism not only harms women, but also harms men who are victims of sexual assault. While it is traumatising for women to talk about rape in conflict zones, it is almost unimaginable for men, whom benevolent sexism has long idealised as the beacon of masculinity and has long established as the protector of women and country, to talk about how they have been subjected to sexual violence, particularly that which is perpetrated by male soldiers. These selected International Women’s Day speeches by authoritarian leaders from Belarus, Russia and Thailand are examples of how the artificially constructed and solidly enshrined ideals of femininity as well as those of masculinity, especially chivalry, yield insidious results which cause long-term damage to individuals of all sexes. The selected speeches also show how benevolent sexism is indeed misogyny as it is built upon de-agentification of women and, hence, can be said to form the building blocks which sustain and justify rape as weapon of war. In the case of rape during the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the courageous revelation amidst the vast sea of silent sufferings experienced by Ukrainian men, women and children is mere tip of the iceberg.

Conclusion: Calling Benevolent Sexism by Its Name

Most importantly, we love and treasure you. No wonder men have been celebrating women in music and poetry for centuries.

Konstantin Balmont, a Russian Silver Age poet, described women in vivid and precise manner:

A woman – with us when we are born,
A woman – with us in our last hour,
A woman – our standard during battle,
A woman – the joy of open eyes.

Vladimir Putin’s speech on International Women’s Day,
8 March 2017

One of the most subtle and ironic effects of benevolent sexism is internalised sexism by women, or how women unquestioningly embrace and adopt misogyny, policing other women, sustaining patriarchy and propagating sexism in the process. In a news article entitled “Russian Soldier And Wife Discussing Rape Of Ukrainian Women Identified”, the conversation during an intercepted phone call between Roman Bykovsky, a Russian soldier, and Olga Bykovskaya, his wife, reveals internalised sexism in its extreme form:

During the call, which Ukrainian law enforcement bodies in the Kherson region in the country’s south said they intercepted before publishing it earlier this month, a woman can be heard giving permission to a man to rape Ukrainian women.

“Yes, I allow it. Just wear protection,” the woman says
between laughs.

Olga Bykovskaya’s words and behaviour here, whether or not a personal joke between husband and wife, unsurprisingly reflect the permanent and irreparable injury on humanity inflicted by benevolent sexism, especially that which is relentlessly instigated in times of war and conflict: “women who endorse benevolent sexism are more likely to tolerate, rather than challenge, sexist behaviour when the sexist’s motivation can be interpreted as being protective” (Glick & Fiske, 2001: 111). This example illustrates the ugly face of chivalry and of the policing of women into one which should be rewarded and the other which should be punished for failing to conform or deliberately choosing not to conform to the mainstream values of femininity in the ultranationalist context.

The author of this research paper believes that the first step to the solution to pernicious problems of gender-based violence, (internalised) victim blaming, and (internalised) sexism, may lie in identifying and deconstructing the “straight and strong man’s burden”, of which the fulfilment is far from gallant or humbling. She also believes that one must be conscious of the normalisation of misogyny which, according to Jack Holland, can be seen as the world’s oldest prejudice:

What history teaches us about misogyny can be summed up in four words: pervasive, persistent, pernicious and protean. Long before men invented the wheel, they invented misogyny, and today, as our wheels roll over the plains of Mars, that earlier invention still blights lives. No other prejudice has proved so durable, or shares those other characteristics to anything like the same extent. No race has suffered such prejudicial treatment over so long a period of time; no group of individuals, however they might be characterized, has been discriminated against on such a global scale. Nor has any prejudice manifested itself under so many different guises, appearing sometimes with the sanction of society at the level of social and political discrimination, and at other times emerging in the tormented mind of a psychopath with no sanction other than that of his own hate-filled fantasies. And very few have been as destructive. Yet, these very features that should have made misogyny stand out have rendered it in a strange way inconspicuous. In the case of misogyny, we have too often relinquished the struggle to see what is in front of our noses. (pp. 270-271)

Now, in 2023 and thereafter, is the time to call benevolent sexism (out) by its real name: Misogyny.

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นายกฯ เปิดงานวันสตรีสากล ชี้ ช่างเท้าหน้า-หลัง ไปด้วยกัน ปิดโกรจโคร เชื่อทำดีได้ดี ไม่เจ้ายศเจ้าอย่าง. (8 มีนาคม 2565). *Manager Online*. สืบค้น 13 มิถุนายน 2566 จาก <https://mgronline.com/politics/detail/965000023106>

Acknowledgement

This research paper is supported by the Translation, Interpreting and Intercultural Communication Research Unit, Chulalongkorn University, as well as the Slovak National Scholarship, which has allowed the author to work as Teaching and Research Fellow at the University of Prešov, Slovak Republic, for the duration of three months. The author would like to thank Marina Zaitseva for her kind assistance in cross-checking a number of Russian and Belarusian sources and their English translation. Lastly, the author would like to extend her gratitude to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive suggestions.