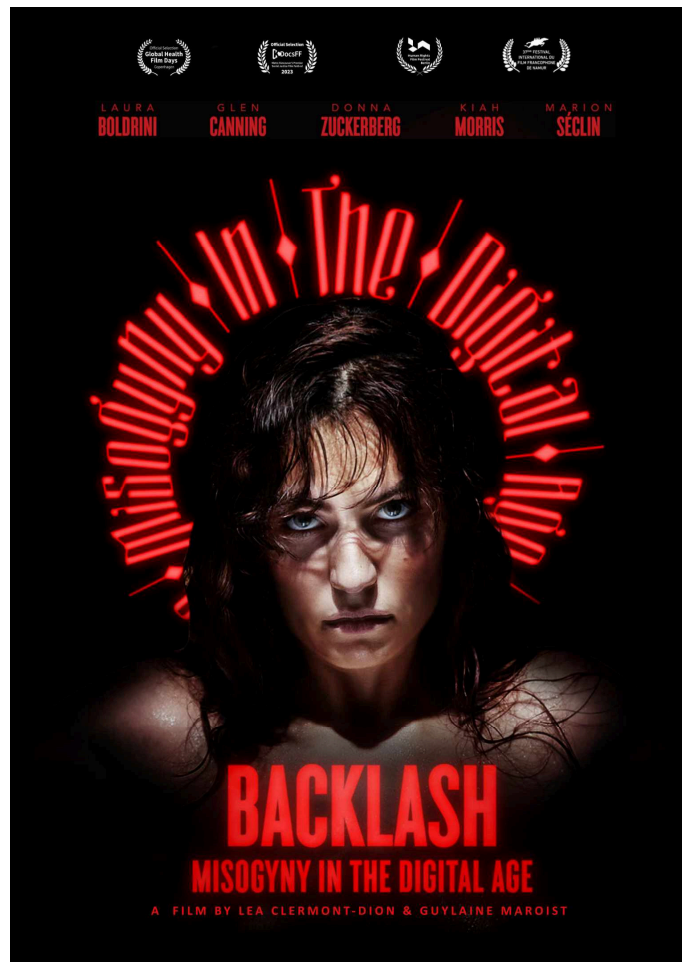




BACKLASH: MISOGYNY IN THE DIGITAL AGE



STUDY GUIDE

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Backlash: Misogyny in the Digital Age

Backlash: Misogyny in the Digital Age profiles four women and one man whose lives have been devastated by online violence. The documentary features Laura Boldrini, former President of the Italian Parliament; Kiah Morris, an African-American politician from Vermont; Marion Séclin, a French YouTuber who received more than 40,000 sexist messages; Laurence Gratton, a young teacher in Quebec harassed for over five years by a former colleague; and Glen Canning, whose daughter took her own life after photos of her rape were spread online. The documentary highlights how they are all fighting the same battle. They share a common cause: refusing to be silent and demanding widespread accountability from tech giants, the state, and perpetrators.

Misogyny

Misogyny is generally defined as a hatred of, or prejudice against, women or girls. The term was coined in the 17th century and comes from the Greek words *misos*, meaning “hatred,” and *gunē*, meaning “woman.” It became popular in the 1970s, when it was widely used by feminists. Definitions vary, but in the past most people distinguished misogyny from sexism—which also involves prejudice against women or girls—by the level of violence involved, with misogyny tending to involve more violence, such as assault or murder. However, in recent years, the definition of misogyny has changed and many people have begun to use the word to cover a wide range of situations, including many that do not involve violence. In its definition of the word, Britannica notes, “Misogyny became almost interchangeable with sexism and could be used to indicate biases against women in addition to acts of violence or hatred that target women. Thus, misogyny acquired multiple meanings that occupy different levels of intensity.”

In addition to acquiring a broader range of meanings, the word “misogyny” has become much more commonplace in society. New York Times writer Nina Renata Aron explains, “Misogyny is everywhere. Or at least ‘misogyny’ is everywhere. The word, which conventionally means hatred of women, was once a radical accusation. But recently, it seems to have eclipsed the gentler ‘sexism’ and ‘chauvinism’ in popular use.” She says, “It’s now unremarkable to find ‘misogyny’ in a headline, much less a tweet.”

Most people maintain that misogyny is related to the way that society has historically limited the power and freedom of women, treating them as subordinate to men. Britannica explains, “According to feminist thought, misogyny exists both as a result of gender roles and as a means of enforcing them. Women in historically patriarchal societies have been encouraged to occupy roles that support men. Although it is generally agreed that women’s rights improved dramatically in the 20th century, many women in the early 21st century continued to face backlash when taking on roles that challenged men rather than supported them.”

In a research study published in *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* in 2024, researchers present a review of research articles on misogyny that were conducted between 1990 and 2022, with more than 2,800 articles reviewed in total. They found that certain groups of women are more vulnerable to online misogyny. The report states, “Scholars studying online

misogyny have identified various target groups that are particularly vulnerable to misogynistic content. These groups include female politicians, journalists, celebrities, influencers, musicians, gamers and developers, YouTubers, university students, and women who have been sexually assaulted.”

Feminism

Feminism is the belief that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men. There are many different movements and ideologies associated with feminism. While feminism dates back many years, its more recent history is often discussed in terms of waves. The first wave was in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and was focused on women’s right to vote. The second phase, which started in the 1960s, was focused on equal rights such as sexual, financial, and reproductive rights. After critiques that the second wave had been too focused on white women, the third wave was more focused on inclusivity, such as rights for women of color and on gay rights. The fourth wave, which is said to be currently occurring, is heavily influenced by digital technology and is focused on changing the systems that allow powerful men to treat women as inferior.

The “Manosphere”

In recent years there has been growth in online communities for men that promote misogyny and are in opposition to feminism. This is sometimes referred to as the “Manosphere.” The authors of the research study in Humanities and Social Sciences Communications discuss this movement, explaining that it includes the belief that feminism involves a hatred of men and boys. They state, “These networks [within the Manosphere] are not uniform but consist of multiple misogynistic groups with differing perspectives and degrees of violence, which are associated with far-right, homophobic, and racist ideologies.” However, they find, “Despite their variations, all these groups portray feminism as innately discriminatory and threatening to men.” Additionally, the authors explain the way that many followers of this movement see themselves as aware of reality, while they believe that the majority of the population does not understand the way that women are threatening men. They state, “The Manosphere adheres to the beliefs of a ‘gynocentric order’ and the Red Pill ideology, a metaphor derived from the movie The Matrix, in which the protagonist’s eyes are opened to reality upon taking the ‘red pill.’”

Cyberviolence

Cyberviolence is generally defined as the use of technology to cause or threaten violence. It can include stalking or harassment, sharing images or other content without another person’s consent, hate speech, and unwanted messaging. The European Institute for Gender Equality talks about cyberviolence against women and girls (CVAWG). It says, “CVAWG is perpetrated across different cyberspaces, including social media platforms, messaging apps and discussion sites. As the digital environment is constantly evolving, new technologies are bound to give rise to new and diverse manifestations of violence. For example, the Metaverse is emerging as a new space for the perpetration of virtual rape and other forms of CVAWG.”

The United Nations agrees that this is a serious problem. It says, “Cyberviolence against women and girls is a pervasive issue.” It estimates that between 16 and 58 percent of women and girls have been victims of online violence. In addition, it worries that as technology evolves, women and girls will face an increasing number of violent threats online in the future. In addition, it says, “The global nature of the internet enables cyberviolence to transcend national borders, complicating efforts to hold perpetrators accountable. Weak or inconsistent legal frameworks further exacerbate the issue, leaving many victims without adequate recourse.”

The Pew Research Center has conducted a number of surveys about online harassment and reports that women are more likely to be sexually harassed online, and are also more likely than men to feel significantly upset by online harassment. In 2020, it found that 33 percent of women under age 35 say they have been sexually harassed online (compared to 11 percent of men), and 34 percent were extremely or very upset by an online encounter involving harassment (compared to 14 percent of men).

A Worldwide Challenge

There are many challenges involved in addressing cyberviolence. Worldwide, it is common for the extent and harm of cyberviolence to be misunderstood and underestimated. There is also disagreement over the role of social media companies in stopping cyberviolence, and the degree to which free speech should be limited. The Council of Europe explains that there are also many regulatory challenges when it comes to stopping this type of crime or prosecuting perpetrators. It details some of these, stating, “In some countries, only certain police forces have authority to investigate such crimes. It may be difficult for victims to learn which unit to turn to or, as a practical matter, it may be difficult to work with the unit (if the unit is in the capital and the victim is hundreds of kilometres away). Victims may also encounter law enforcement or officials who are unacquainted with the phenomenon and do not understand the potential gravity. Finally, local law may not address certain types of attack under criminal law (possibly for valid reasons), so there is simply no legal basis for prosecution.”

As society struggles to address online violence against women, millions of women around the world continue to suffer from this type of violence. UN Women stresses that the harms associated with online violence go beyond the online world. It says, “What starts as online abuse can swiftly spiral into danger that extends beyond screens and borders, making it impossible for many women to feel safe at home, work, or in public spaces.” It insists that this needs to change, stating, “No one should have to live in fear just for existing online. The digital world should be a safe space for everyone.”

Study Questions

1. In your opinion, how does intimidation online differ from intimidation in person?
2. How does online harassment and hate affect women's free speech, as shown in the film?
3. Why was online harassment worse than rape, as explained by Seclín?
4. Why do you think some people who do not express hate in person feel like they can do so online?
5. As shown in the film, hateful messages are sometimes taken less seriously when they are expressed online rather than in person. Why do you think this is the case?
6. What do you think are some of the reasons that women are targeted by online intimidation and hate?
7. Do you agree with the statement from the film that what happens online finds its way into the real world? Why or why not?
8. What happens if women keep silent about hate, as argued in the film?
9. What are some of the ways that women can fight back against online misogyny, as shown in the film?

Further Study Prompts

- Following are quotes from the people featured in the film, which can be used to initiate additional discussion on the topic of cyberviolence against women.
- Laura Boldrini: "So what is a crime at a national level, like promoting hate speech, it is not a crime for Facebook... So, if the platform in which this occurs doesn't take any measures to stop it, then you are part of the problem, not part of the solution."
- Kiah Morris: "There have been postings talking about the necessity of having me being raped, because it's a corrective action, right? It's a corrective action meant to silence and meant to dehumanize and meant to make someone live in terror. It's all absolutely part of this intense game that these people are playing with our lives, and our humanity and our civil rights."
- Marion Séclin: "I quickly stopped counting the number of messages I received. I stopped at 40,000. 40,000 insults, death threats, and rape threats. They acted like wolves in a pack. They thought, since everyone else is doing it, I can do it and I won't be noticed any more than the others. And it doesn't matter since everyone else is doing it."
- Laurence Gratton: "He threatens to beat us, rape us, kill us, and you're telling us you can't protect us? 'Unfortunately, there's nothing we can do for you... There's no way.' He told us, 'It's simple, you don't want him to harass you anymore, you don't want to be in contact with him anymore? Delete your online identity.'"
- Glen Canning: "It allowed the worst of our community to have a voice, and that's the biggest downfall of it at all. People who before kept to themselves now feel brave enough to say anything they want to and some of them take pleasure in being as ignorant as they can."

Additional Resources

Books

- Laura Bates, *Men Who Hate Women: From Incels to Pickup Artists: the Truth About Extreme Misogyny and How It Affects Us All*. Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, 2023.
- Sarah Sobieraj, *Credible Threat: Attacks Against Women Online and the Future of Democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Julie Chi-hye Suk, *After Misogyny: How the Law Fails Women and What to Do About It*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2024.

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- Lara Fontanella et al. "How Do We Study Misogyny in the Digital Age? A Systematic Literature Review Using a Computational Linguistic Approach," *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 11, 478 2024.
<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-024-02978-7>
- Steve McCullough, "Online Misogyny: The 'Manosphere,'" *Canadian Museum for Human Rights*, September 12, 2023.
<https://humanrights.ca/story/online-misogyny-manosphere>
- United Nations, "Cyberviolence Against Women and Girls: The Growing Threat of the Digital Age," May 12, 2024.
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