

Understanding Misogyny

A Short Research-Based Brief for Child Advocacy, Organizational Accountability, and Public Education

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- **Evidence and limitations.** This brief synthesizes selected scholarly, governmental, and public-interest sources. It is not a complete literature review. Statistics vary by country, survey design, definitions, reporting rates, and time period. Underreporting is a major limitation in violence and harassment data.
- **No accusation by category.** Discussing misogyny as a social and organizational pattern does not mean every disagreement, criticism, faith belief, employment decision, or interpersonal conflict is misogynistic. Context, evidence, pattern, impact, and power dynamics matter.
- **Child safety emphasis.** Oklahoma Child Wellbeing approaches this topic through a child-protection and institutional-accountability lens: how harmful beliefs, unsafe cultures, retaliation, silencing, or unequal power can increase risk and reduce help-seeking.
- **Corrections and updates.** This publication may be revised as additional evidence, research, or public data becomes available.

Executive Summary

Misogyny is more than individual rudeness toward women. It is a pattern of prejudice, hostility, contempt, control, or punishment directed toward women and girls, especially when they challenge male dominance, speak publicly, report harm, or refuse expected gender roles. Sexism supplies the belief system that ranks maleness or masculinity as superior; misogyny often functions as the enforcement mechanism that disciplines women and girls who step outside that hierarchy. This distinction matters for child advocacy because children learn norms from families, schools, churches, peer groups, media, and institutions. When misogyny is normalized, children may absorb distorted ideas about power, consent, credibility, leadership, reporting, and worth.

The research base connects gender inequality, sexual harassment, intimate partner violence, and harmful organizational climates to serious consequences for women, children, families, and institutions. Global public-health and child-protection data show that violence against women and girls remains widespread; one in three women worldwide has experienced physical and/or sexual violence, and UNICEF estimates that more than 370 million girls and women alive today experienced rape or sexual assault before age 18. These statistics do not prove misogyny in every individual case, but they show why cultures that minimize, excuse, silence, or retaliate against women and girls who report harm must be taken seriously.

For organizations, misogyny can show up as overt hostility, sexual harassment, credibility attacks, unequal discipline, minimization of reports, protection of high-status offenders, retaliation, spiritual or professional silencing, and policies that look neutral but function unequally in practice. A child-protection response requires more than slogans about respect. It requires clear reporting pathways, trauma-informed response, impartial documentation, protection from retaliation, transparent accountability, and leadership willing to examine culture - not only isolated incidents.

1. Working Definitions

The UN Girls Education Initiative defines misogyny as prejudice, hatred, and hostility toward women, especially directed toward girls and women who challenge male dominance; it describes misogyny as a force that aims to control women into reinforcing sexist ideas and patriarchy (UNGEI, 2024). UNGEI defines sexism as beliefs that promote male superiority and dominance over women, along with rigid expectations about men and women (UNGEI, 2024).

In plain language: **sexism is the ranking system; misogyny is often the punishment system.** Sexism says women and girls are less credible, less capable, less authoritative, or less deserving. Misogyny punishes women and girls when they speak, lead, refuse, report, expose harm, or require accountability.

Examples of misogyny may include: degrading women as a group; sexualized insults; credibility attacks when women report abuse; treating anger from men as leadership but anger from women as instability; using faith, family, reputation, employment, or institutional loyalty to silence women; punishing girls for being targeted; and protecting powerful men while scrutinizing victims or whistleblowers. Not every conflict involving a woman is misogyny. The question is whether there is a gendered pattern of contempt, control, unequal credibility, unequal protection, or retaliation.

2. Historical and Social Context

Misogyny has appeared across history in legal, religious, political, economic, educational, and family systems. Its form changes by culture and time period, but the underlying pattern is consistent: women and girls are assigned lesser authority or are expected to remain within roles that serve male power, family reputation, institutional image, or social order. Contemporary misogyny may be explicit, such as threats, harassment, and sexualized contempt, or subtle, such as dismissing female leadership as emotional, punishing women who document harm, or framing accountability as disloyalty.

Scholarship on ambivalent sexism helps explain why misogyny is not always openly hateful. Glick and Fiske (1996) described hostile sexism and benevolent sexism as related forms. Hostile sexism is openly negative toward women who are viewed as challenging male power. Benevolent sexism can appear protective or flattering, but still positions women as weak, dependent, pure, or in need of male control. Both can preserve inequality. In organizations, this matters because a culture may publicly praise women while privately limiting their authority, discrediting their reports, or punishing them for stepping outside acceptable roles.

3. Psychological Research and Impacts

Misogyny affects mental health and behavior through fear, humiliation, exclusion, trauma, and chronic stress. Women and girls exposed to gendered hostility may learn to self-silence, avoid leadership, underreport harm, or accept unequal treatment as normal. Research on sexual harassment and organizational climate shows that harassment is not only an individual misconduct problem; it is strongly shaped by culture, power, leadership tolerance, reporting safety, and accountability systems. The National Academies report on sexual harassment in academic sciences, engineering, and medicine concluded that system-wide culture and climate changes are needed, including transparency, accountability, support for targets, and movement beyond minimal legal compliance (National Academies, 2018).

Psychologically, misogyny often operates through credibility damage. A woman who reports harm may be labeled bitter, unstable, rebellious, divisive, promiscuous, angry, or attention-seeking. These labels can shift focus away from the reported conduct and onto the character of the reporter. In child advocacy, this pattern is dangerous because children and protective adults may already fear not being believed. A culture that reflexively attacks reporters can create a chilling effect that protects systems instead of people.

The health implications overlap with trauma research. The CDC defines adverse childhood experiences as potentially traumatic events occurring from ages 0-17, including experiencing violence, abuse, or neglect, witnessing violence, or living in environments that undermine safety, stability, and bonding (CDC, 2026). If children witness misogynistic control, domestic violence, sexual harassment, retaliation against reporters, or institutional minimization, they may learn that power matters more than truth and that reporting harm is unsafe.

4. Government and Global Statistics: Why This Is a Protection Issue

Statistics on violence and harassment do not measure every form of misogyny, and they do not show motive in individual cases. They do, however, establish the seriousness of the environment in which misogyny operates. UN Women reports that almost one in three women globally has experienced physical and/or sexual violence at least once in her life, often by a current or former intimate partner (UN Women Data Hub, 2026). WHO reports that violence against women remains a major public-health and human-rights issue, including intimate-partner violence and non-partner sexual violence (WHO, 2026).

For children, UNICEF estimates that more than 370 million girls and women alive today - about one in eight - experienced rape or sexual assault before age 18; when non-contact forms of sexual violence are included, the estimate rises to 650 million, or one in five (UNICEF, 2024). UNICEF also emphasizes that sexual violence against children can include contact and non-contact acts, including online abuse, and may result in injury, pain, or psychological suffering (UNICEF Data, 2026). These realities demand cultures that increase reporting safety rather than silence.

5. Child Welfare Implications

Misogyny becomes a child welfare concern when it shapes what children are taught, what victims are believed, what behavior is excused, and how institutions respond to reports. Children are not only harmed by direct abuse; they are also harmed by unsafe norms. A child who sees women degraded may learn that girls are less worthy of respect. A boy who sees male misconduct excused may learn entitlement without accountability. A girl who sees reporters punished may learn silence as survival.

From a child-protection standpoint, the most urgent issue is not whether an organization can write a statement against abuse. The issue is whether the organization can demonstrate: clear reporting pathways; timely documentation; separation of investigation from conflicts of interest; protection against retaliation; trauma-informed communication; mandated reporting compliance where applicable; and measurable follow-up. Misogynistic cultures often fail at these points because they prioritize reputation, hierarchy, or male authority over child safety and victim credibility.

The child welfare lens also requires attention to mothers, grandmothers, teachers, advocates, and other protective adults. When women who raise concerns are dismissed as dramatic, bitter, divisive, or disloyal, the system may lose critical early-warning information. No child safety system can function when the people closest to warning signs are punished for naming them.

6. Organizational Implications

Organizations can become unsafe not only because of one harmful person, but because of repeated institutional choices. Misogyny can be embedded in who is believed, who is promoted, who is protected, who is disciplined, whose anger is tolerated, whose boundaries are mocked, and whose reports are documented. A culture can claim to honor women while still operating with gendered double standards.

The National Academies report is useful beyond academia because it frames harassment as a culture-and-climate problem. It emphasizes transparency, accountability, support for targets, and cultural change rather than relying only on legal compliance or one-time training (National Academies, 2018). In child-serving, faith-based, educational, advocacy, and nonprofit settings, this translates into practical questions: Are complaints documented? Are leaders accountable? Is retaliation prohibited and enforced? Are women safe to disagree? Are girls safe to report? Are powerful people investigated independently?

Organizational warning signs include: repeated attacks on women who report; spiritualizing silence or loyalty; minimizing sexualized conduct as private sin or misunderstanding; using lawyers or reputation pressure to suppress lawful reporting; protecting donors, leaders, clergy, coaches, or high-status men; failing to keep records; informal handling of serious complaints; and retaliating against whistleblowers or advocates.

7. Legal Considerations in the United States

This brief is not legal advice, but several legal frameworks are relevant. In employment settings, the EEOC states that sexual harassment can include unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical harassment of a sexual nature. The EEOC also explains that harassment does not have to be sexual in nature; offensive remarks about a person's sex, including comments about women in general, may be unlawful when the conduct is sufficiently severe or pervasive or results in an adverse employment consequence (EEOC, 2026). EEOC harassment materials also identify harassment as a form of employment discrimination under Title VII and other federal laws (EEOC, 2026).

Legal analysis depends on facts, jurisdiction, setting, role, and applicable statutes. Child-serving organizations may also have duties related to mandatory reporting, safeguarding, supervision, recordkeeping, retaliation, fiduciary responsibility, nonprofit governance, and negligence. Faith-based organizations may raise additional constitutional and statutory issues, but religious identity does not erase the need for child safety, truthfulness, and responsible governance. Public advocacy should therefore avoid declaring legal conclusions without evidence while still asking clear accountability questions.

A strong public-interest approach separates three things: documented fact, reasonable concern, and legal conclusion. Documented fact describes what happened. Reasonable concern explains why the pattern matters. Legal conclusion should be left to courts, agencies, investigators, or qualified legal counsel unless the matter has already been adjudicated.

8. Practical Accountability Framework

Organizations that want to reduce misogyny and protect children should move from image management to measurable safeguards. The following framework can be used by boards, ministries, schools, nonprofits, agencies, and advocacy groups:

Area	Accountability Question
Reporting	Can a woman, girl, child, employee, volunteer, or parent report harm without retaliation?
Documentation	Are reports recorded with dates, actions, responsible persons, and follow-up?
Independence	Are conflicts of interest removed from investigations and decision-making?
Culture	Do leaders challenge gendered insults, victim-blaming, and credibility attacks?

Safety	Are children and vulnerable people protected first, before reputation concerns?
Transparency	Can the organization explain its process without exposing victims or private data?
Repair	Does the organization correct harm, update policies, and measure whether safety improved?

9. Discussion Questions

- Where do women and girls have voice, authority, and safety in this organization - and where are they expected to remain quiet?
- When a woman or girl reports harm, what is the first institutional response: curiosity, protection, documentation, defensiveness, or retaliation?
- Are male leaders, donors, clergy, coaches, executives, or high-status members held to the same standard as everyone else?
- Does the organization treat sexualized conduct, coercive control, harassment, or credibility attacks as private conflict, or as safety and ethics issues?
- What would a child learn about truth, power, consent, and reporting by watching how this organization handles women who speak up?
- Are policies merely written, or are they practiced, measured, and enforced?
- Who owns follow-up after a concern is raised, and how does the organization prove that safety improved?

Conclusion

Misogyny is not only a women's issue. It is a public safety, child development, family wellbeing, organizational integrity, and institutional trust issue. When women and girls are degraded, silenced, disbelieved, or punished for challenging harmful power, children learn unsafe lessons and institutions lose access to critical truth. A serious child-protection culture does not require perfection, but it does require honesty, documentation, transparency, accountability, and courage. The standard is not whether an institution can defend its image. The standard is whether people - especially children and those reporting harm - are safer because the truth was heard and acted upon.

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