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# Why the patriarchy is killing men

Gender equality isn't just good for women. It also saves men's lives.



A woman holds a sign reading "Feminism = Equality" as she takes part in a nation-wide women's strike for wage parity outside the federal palace, on June 14 in the Swiss capital Bern. (Stefan Wermuth/AFP/Getty Images)



By **Liz Plank**

Liz Plank, a journalist, is executive producer and host of several digital series at Vox Media. She is the author of the new book, "For the Love of Men: A Vision for Mindful Masculinity."

September 13

When I traveled to Iceland in 2018, the World Economic Forum had [ranked](#) it No. 1 in gender equality for an entire decade. According to the [common](#) way of [discussing](#) that honor, the country must be a [feminist utopia for women](#). What goes underreported is how great it is for men, too. In fact, Icelandic men [enjoy the highest life expectancy](#) in Europe. They live almost as long as women do. If the number of years spent on Earth is one of the strongest predictors of well-being, Icelandic men are doing pretty well.

Is there some unique magic in the Reykjavik air that makes this possible? Not at all. Iceland offers a model that could be widely adopted elsewhere in the world. It helps show that changing men's ideas about what it means to be a man, and lifting up women in the process, doesn't make men worse off — it has far-reaching benefits to their lives.

The health advantages of feminism for men are not evident only in Iceland. In other countries with stronger gender equality, men also tend to fare better. According to research by Norwegian sociologist and men's studies expert Oystein Gullvag Holter, there is a direct [correlation](#) between the state of gender equality in a country and male well-being, as measured by factors such as welfare, mental health, fertility and suicide. Men (and women) in more gender-equal countries in Europe are less likely to get divorced, be depressed or die as a result of violence.



These findings undercut one of the favorite facts of men's rights activists — that men die younger than women do. They use this data point to [argue](#) that [feminism is unwarranted](#)



because women already live fuller (or at least [longer](#)) lives. But a world without feminism would exacerbate this problem, not solve it. Feminism is the *antidote* to shorter male life expectancy. Saying feminism [causes men to decline](#) is like saying firefighters cause fire.

*[America doesn't just have a gender pay gap. It has a gender wealth gap.]*

Women typically live longer than men because of several biological advantages that make them more resilient and give them more stamina (despite the stereotype that [women lack it](#)). But that's only part of the equation. The other component of the life expectancy gap is what scientists literally call [man-made diseases](#). These are cultural: Men are more likely to smoke, abuse alcohol, engage in high-risk behavior and have accidents at work. A report from the [World Health Organization](#) points to three reasons men don't live as long: the way men work (they endure greater "exposure to physical and chemical hazards"), their willingness to take risks (thanks to "male norms of risk-taking and adventure") and their discomfort with doctors (they're "less likely to visit a doctor when they are ill and, when they see a doctor, are less likely to report on the symptoms of disease or illness"). When I became a lifeguard, I was shocked to learn that [80 percent of drowning victims are male](#), even though their aquatic skills are equivalent to those of women, because they're less likely to [wear life jackets](#), more likely to overestimate their swimming abilities and more likely to [take risks](#).



If men's rights activists really want to improve men's lives, then, they should join feminists in dismantling bygone ideals of masculinity. When researchers controlled for unhealthy

behaviors such as smoking or drinking, for instance, they found that men who earned less than their wives for an extended period of time still [experienced](#) poorer health outcomes, shorter life expectancy and increased chances of cardiovascular problems like diabetes, heart disease, high cholesterol, hypertension and stroke. Because of the observable increase in men's anxieties in these familial arrangements (and the lack of measurable change for women), researchers believe that these men lose the only sense of connection to their identity as breadwinners. Violating the code of idealized masculinity can be such a point of stress for men that it strains their overall health.

Men's reluctance to care for themselves is [especially perturbing](#) when it comes to mental health. Unsurprisingly, the more a man associates with traditional and inflexible ideas about masculinity, the less [likely](#) he is to seek counseling. For too many men in America who suffer from mental health issues, it's easier to get a gun [than a therapist](#), especially in rural areas, where [80 percent of counties](#) don't have a single psychiatrist. No wonder suicide rates are rising in rural states with the [highest gun ownership rates](#) and that the vast majority of those deaths are among men. Although women are three times more [likely](#) to *attempt* suicide, the suicide rate for men is four times higher because men tend to use more violent means when choosing to end their lives — the most effective and violent of which is, of course, a firearm. And the connection between gun ownership and traditional masculinity is hard to deny, especially when we see gun manufacturers like Bushmaster instructing men to get their "[man card](#)" reissued by buying a gun.

*[\[When feminism is met with violence\]](#)*



The mass availability of guns in the United States doesn't simply affect men; it disproportionately impacts boys. Of all the youth gun deaths between 2012 and 2014, a staggering [82 percent were boys](#), many of whom had used guns to kill themselves. The more a man identifies with traditional notions of masculinity, the more vulnerable he is. In fact, [research](#) on 2,431 young adults 18 to 19 years old by Daniel Coleman of Fordham University found that men who identified with rigid beliefs — that men must provide at any cost, be invulnerable or be self-sufficient — were more likely to have suicidal thoughts and exhibit signs of depression. Coleman concludes that idealizing “high traditional masculinity” is a “risk factor,” especially for men who aren't able to fulfill that ideal because of life circumstances such as illness, disability or the loss of a job. A more flexible understanding of masculinity wouldn't prevent men from becoming unemployed, but it could help them cope with it better. They'd have a wider set of roles they could fall back on, like being a caregiver or contributing to their family outside of the narrow scope of material or financial resources. Suicide [peaks](#) during financial [crises](#). When Hong Kong experienced economic turmoil in the 1990s, the suicide rate of men ages 30 to 59 [almost doubled](#). After 2007, as [recessions](#) took over Europe, [male suicide rates also spiked](#). While rates of suicide for both women and men [rise](#) in times of economic downturn, the increase tends to be [sharper for men](#).

But data shows that gender equality may dampen rates of male suicide, because women's empowerment may protect men from economic shocks. If women are educated and can work, it lessens the financial responsibility that rests on men's shoulders. [Research](#) by Holter shows that societies with lower levels of gender equality are the ones with the highest rates of male suicide and that the gender gap in suicide is smaller in nations with higher gender equality. One [study](#) by sociologists Aaron Reeves and David Stuckler found that in countries with high levels of gender equality, like Sweden and Austria, “the relationship between rising unemployment rates and suicide in men disappeared altogether.”

It turns out that when women do well, men do, too. Rationally, no man in America should be afraid of feminism, yet many are. Giving up a small slice of privilege in exchange for a longer (and happier) life seems like a pretty sweet deal to me. But guys, if you don't believe me, just

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(and happier) life seems like a pretty sweet deal to me. But guys, if you don't believe me, just ask Icelandic men. They have time — 3.8 more years, to be exact.

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