

## Calling a Moratorium on Women's Tears: How Women Use the Accountability Gap to Manipulate Men and Why Men Must Resist It

By Janice Fiamengo

My subject is the problem of women's tears. I argue that the exploitation of female tears creates an accountability gap in our societies; I've decided to use that phrase, accountability gap, rather than my original *damseling*, which describes something more specific. My contention is that most feminist laws, policies, and social movements—whether MeToo, rape shield laws, the biased family court system, sexual harassment policies in the workplace, or the feminization of the professions—all these and more find their roots to some extent or other in women's tears and our difficulty in resisting them. So this is a call to resistance.

I am going to show that the tyranny of women's tears has at least a 200-year history in the Anglophone world—I'm sure it's much older than that, but I don't have the hard evidence—and I'm also going to touch on recent research strongly suggesting that women's tears affect men at a basic bio-chemical level, shutting down some regions of the male brain and activating others, a fact that tells us something about how men evolved historically to respond to women's demands.

Ultimately, I will argue, the solution to the accountability gap must be to restore male authority in the family and in society because women themselves are not, generally speaking, interested in becoming (or perhaps able to become) more accountable by using rational means of argumentation rather than tears.

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I begin in 1885, in a column published in the *Globe* newspaper, in which Canadian journalist Sara Jeannette Duncan criticized women's sentimentality. Duncan was a highly talented young woman who wrote regularly on social issues for various newspapers. Witty, incisive, and self-confident, she disliked the overt displays of emotionality typically adopted by women in their public roles. And anyone who thinks women didn't have significant public roles in the 1880s has been drinking too much feminist Kool-Aid!

Duncan's argument was that women could never obtain the political equality they claimed to want and deserve unless they also adopted the predominantly masculine habits of self-restraint and rational argumentation, an outcome she did not think likely.

"I do not attend a suffrage convention for the exercise of my emotions," Duncan stated, referring to gatherings of women to discuss the right to vote.

Matters of public import required a knowledge and disinterestedness—or rather an interest in the good of society as a whole—that most women were not committed to obtaining, and Duncan feared that nothing good overall could come of extending the right to vote to women until women could act publicly with more responsibility and sobriety than they had yet shown. She acknowledged the power of women's emotionality, but she saw female power as something very different from what was conducive to rational citizenship.

She wrote as follows: "Nothing is more unconsciously dramatic than a woman's outcry against a suffering which is often hers through no fault of her own; nothing more beautiful [...] than the intuitions with which she guards the hearth stone she has made sacred. But if she asks the ballot by virtue of her ability

to sorrow eloquently or to know what is best for the baby, it seems to me that she will be sorely puzzled to know what to do with it [the ballot] when it is hers." In other words, one can achieve a right or privilege by crying for it, but continuing to cry once one has it raises questions about one's fitness to exercise the right.

Duncan also emphasized that there was more to effective public engagement than complaining about what was wrong. Women were good at complaining. But it was necessary also to investigate the efficacy of proposed improvements. She observed that, "Political reform is not a matter of the simple assertion of desire to improve, however baptized with tears and sighs that resolution may be. It is a long drawn battle where every resource of cool-headed intelligence is required." Until women could consistently demonstrate cool-headed intelligence, they had no business demanding the right to public leadership.

Duncan would have been shocked, but probably not surprised, to see the extent to which tears and sighs and the ability to "sorrow eloquently" continue to dominate women's public discourse and behavior, nearly a century and a half after she wrote her anti-feminist warning, and well over a century since women obtained the right to vote. The female realm, as Duncan saw it, was most often the realm of intuition, emotion, and passionate entreaty or exhortation—not generally the realm of cool-headed intelligence, reason, self-discipline, and responsibility.

And that remains true. Examples can be found everywhere, and I will mention only a couple. Recently, we saw female tears in action in Edinburgh at the UK COVID-19 inquiry when former First Minister Nicola Sturgeon was being questioned about her government's decisions and actions during the Covid pandemic. [Sturgeon frequently appeared on the verge of tears, fighting them back or allowing a few to well up](#) as she defended, or rather failed to defend, her record as leader of the government. Instead of presenting an explanation of various policy decisions, or indeed simply owning her failures, Sturgeon used emotionality to deflect criticism: She said, "People will make their own judgements about me, about my government, but for as long as I live, I will carry the impact of these decisions."

This is a standard feminine tactic, not because all women use it—of course not all women do—but because, with one or two exceptions, *only women can*. And when a woman who occupied the most powerful position in her country is using it, it is a notable example of an atavistic female strategy. Former First Minister Sturgeon is asking listeners at the inquiry to forget the thousands of Scottish citizens who had no choice but to suffer or even die as a result of her government's policies: Sturgeon invites us to think instead about her personally, her pain, her suffering, her sincerity of feeling.

In case we missed the point, she continued with that theme: "I will carry regret at the decisions and judgements I got wrong, but I will always know in my heart and in my soul that my instincts and my motivation was [sic] nothing other than trying to do the best in the face of this pandemic."

Notice how quickly she moved from words denoting concrete actions, *decisions* and *judgements*—that which can be evaluated with evidence and reasoning—to unknowable abstractions such as heart, soul, instincts, and motivations, none of which can ever be fully known or evaluated. Notice how she sets up the contrast: the decisions may have been wrong, but her heart was pure. The tears validate her self-presentation as an authentic, sincere woman whom we are to empathize with rather than hold responsible for malfeasance.

The message of women's tears is often some version of Sturgeon's Poor Me pageantry: I am suffering, I am a victim, I should not be condemned.

Even when women commit heinous crimes, they often deny responsibility in a similar manner. Recently, an [Ohio woman named Kristel Candelario was sentenced to life in prison for deliberately causing the death of her 16-month-old daughter](#), whom she left to die of starvation and dehydration while Candelario went on vacation for ten days in the summer of 2023. The 32-year-old woman told no one that she had left her baby girl at home in her crib to die while Candelario took a beach holiday in Puerto Rico, which included selfies showing her smiling for the camera.

At her sentencing hearing, Candelario was unable to express remorse without also highlighting her own alleged suffering as she wiped away tears. Notice her use of the passive voice, the vagueness about her criminal act, and the quick pivot to her own victimization by forces allegedly beyond her control:

“I’m extremely hurt about everything that happened. I am not trying to justify my actions, but nobody knows how much I was suffering and what I was going through.”

How extraordinary to hear her say in one breath that she is not justifying and then, in the same breath, to justify. Here again is a woman’s capacity to model helplessness, need, and pitifulness despite having been responsible, not in a moment of ill-judged fury but over many days, of causing lethal suffering to a being far more helpless, in need, and pitiful than herself.

This is the female strategy, magnified though certainly not created by the feminist movement, to appeal for compassion while denying responsibility. In a book called *When She Was Bad*, which is an extensive study of female violence first published in 1997, journalist Patricia Pearson analyzed Anglophone culture’s general refusal to recognize women’s aggression and their eager excuse-making:

“Women have reached a dangerous crossroads,” Pearson argued near the end of the book. “On the one hand, we are discovering our capacity for explicit masculine-style aggression. On the other hand, even as we commit traditionally male acts of violence, a chorus of voices rises to proclaim our innocence. We assert our victimhood. We champion our righteous rage. We are acquitted in the courts and by the community for lashing out at our husbands and lovers, at strangers, at men as symbols of our oppression” (p. 232). She quoted a female police officer who said of female inmates at Chowchilla Penitentiary, now Valley State Prison in California, that “A lot of women do not act accountable. They’re all saying they’re battered women. It’s a hell of a stretch” (qtd in Pearson, p. 239).

Pearson assumed, writing in the late 1990s, that both women’s bad deeds and the excuse-making were new phenomena, outgrowths of changing social conditions. But such an assumption is contradicted by all the available evidence. Women have historically claimed victimhood and suffering in order to excuse their bad actions, and they have been remarkably successful for at least the past 200 years—probably much longer—in convincing their mostly male peers not to punish them.

In his 1913 book *The Fraud of Feminism*, British barrister Ernest Belfort Bax wrote about the double standards for female and male lawbreakers within the British legal system, and how women exploited the sympathy of male judges and all-male juries to escape punishment for their crimes. Bax was shocked by the extent not only to which men were willing to look away from women’s lawbreaking, but also at the self-confidence and conviction with which women denied their culpability. He wrote, “Female criminals are surrounded by a halo of injured innocence,” “convinced of the maliciousness of [their]

accusers" and of their own lack of responsibility (p. 51-52). In other words, these women were often *genuinely without remorse*.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, evidence of a woman's guilt needed to be much stronger than a man's for her to be convicted of murder—and even with overwhelming evidence, she was liable to be convicted of manslaughter instead, and given a light or nominal sentence (*The Fraud of Feminism*, p. 37). Studies of 19<sup>th</sup> century crime and punishment bear out Bax's observations. 19<sup>th</sup> century society, not unlike our own, simply had trouble conceiving of and punishing female violence. Where there was any doubt as to a woman's guilt, juries were reluctant to convict; and even where there was *no* reasonable doubt, juries were eager to find mitigating circumstances such as temporary insanity, abuse, or male coercion to justify lightened sentences or acquittal.

Professor of Social Policy Pauline Prior published a [study](#) in 2005 on insanity defences for women in Ireland between 1850 and 1900, and found that a high number of women who killed their children claimed temporary insanity and were acquitted. She notes, by the way, that infanticide was a common crime, saying that experts estimate that up to "61 percent of all homicide victims in England in the mid-nineteenth century were under the age of one year" (Prior, p. 5), almost all of them killed by women. Most juries did not want to see the reality.

When women killed adults, particularly adult men, they frequently escaped capital punishment by claiming that they acted in self defence or had been provoked to their murderousness by their victim's prior abusiveness. E. Belfort Bax found it a startling fact that "Women when most patently and obviously guilty of vile and criminal actions will, with the most complete nonchalance, insist that they are in the right" (*The Fraud of Feminism*, p. 52), and he mentioned with disgust that "We hear and read, *ad nauseum*, of excuses [...] for every crime committed by a woman" (*The Fraud of Feminism*, p. 54).

This is the accountability gap most of us will recognize. To call it a mere cultural prejudice, though that is correct in one sense, is to under-estimate how deep-seated it is. I am not an evolutionary biologist, but I believe I am on fairly firm ground in seeing women's tearfulness and appeals for sympathy as a well-developed survival strategy, honed over the centuries and not likely to go away any time soon. It works because everyone, male and female, tends to respond with sympathy when women cry or declare their suffering. Women have always, throughout history and today, been far more reliant on others for their survival and the survival of their children—due to their vulnerability and dependency during pregnancy and following childbirth. Our female ancestors who most successfully passed on their genes were the ones who were adept at eliciting empathetic attention from those around them: they were the ones whose looks, manners, voices, and behaviors prompted people—perhaps especially men but women as well—to respond to their declared needs, offer them protection, and assist them.

Men, of course, developed an entirely different strategy for reproductive success. Men have traditionally gained opportunities to produce offspring through risk-taking, through establishing their usefulness to society and their ability to help others because of their courage, strength, ingenuity, resourcefulness, intellectual capacity, and responsibility. Excess emotion, tears shed in public, pleas for help, claims of powerlessness or need—none of these are of any use to men—quite the opposite—while they have always been of great use to women.

Recent studies suggest that the efficacy of women's tears has a [bio-chemical basis in male responses even to smelling the tears](#), even when the men don't know that what they're smelling is tears, in other

words that the response is quite unconscious. This is according to a study reported in the Smithsonian magazine. The study found that when 25 male volunteers sniffed a vial of women's tears, as opposed to a vial of regular saline solution, their aggression while playing video games was lowered by as much as 43.7 percent. Even more interesting, perhaps, for our purposes, the study found through brain imaging that two brain regions related to aggression and decision-making showed significantly less activity after men smelled the tears. On the other hand, activity in the part of the brain responsible for emotions increased. In sum, the study suggested that smelling women's tears made men less aggressive, less decisive, and more emotional.

While it is an overstatement to say that men cannot resist women's tears, it certainly appears to be the case that processes within men's brains are triggered by women's tears to make men less inclined to resist. One can only imagine how vastly such a response is increased when the male subject also sees the tears, hears the trembling voice, imagines the woman's unjust suffering.

From the beginning of the feminist movement in the earlier 19<sup>th</sup> century, as per Sara Jeannette Duncan's observations, a majority of men have responded with empathy to women's claims of suffering and their oft-tearful demands for redress, even when the claims of suffering were exaggerated and the demands unfair. As Brian Harrison notes in his history of anti-suffrage activism in nineteenth-century Britain, all-male parliaments passed a great deal of legislation to secure women's property, education, health, and civil rights long before women were enfranchised; these men created a legal system that was, according to E. Belfort Bax, overtly skewed in women's favor (*Separate Spheres: The Opposition to Women's Suffrage in Britain*, p. 73). Anti-feminists, both male and female, warned that political equality for women would be disastrous because it would do away with the traditions of chivalry and deference that historically had advantaged women, but interestingly, it never did so. No matter how laws and society changed to make women equal, their tears continued to work their influence.

Male guilt and empathy with women often compelled men to take women's side against their own sex even when women's statements were outrageously exaggerated. 32 men signed the [Declaration of Sentiments at Seneca Falls in 1848](#), in which it was stated that the entire history of man's conduct was "a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her."

The Declaration contained multiple demonstrably untrue statements, such as that all colleges were closed to women (which was not true), yet well-educated men affixed their names to the calumnious document. Later, a majority of men voted to enfranchise women after the First World War despite the fact that the war had proved that men paid by the hundreds of thousands with their lives and health when regular politics failed in a way that women were not expected to and would never be expected to do. Even today, more than a century later, most politicians, whether on the left or right, cannot stomach the idea of extending conscription to women in case of war.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, male deference to women's tears continued despite the increasingly strident and ludicrous nature of women's complaints and proposed solutions. Feminist leader Betty Friedan claimed that men had put suburban women into "comfortable concentration camps." Gloria Steinem said that men made all women into Playboy Bunnies. Kate Millett said that men had conducted a successful "interior colonization" of women's minds and bodies through a system of ruthless domination. Susan Brownmiller claimed that rape was not an aberrant crime but a "conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear" (p. 15). Sally Miller Gearhart

said that a better world could only be achieved when the number of men was reduced to 10% of the human population; Mary Daly called for a decontamination of the earth through a reduction in male numbers. Recently, Mona Eltahawy fantasized about a system of worldwide vigilantism by which a certain number of men would be killed every week until the patriarchy was compelled to negotiate a peace treaty. Statements like these and hundreds of others have been promoted not by insignificant figures on the margins of the feminist movement but by its revered thought leaders, many of them academics, journalists, and heads of organizations. They are always dismissed by individual feminists as of no account—and have not discernibly caused men and women to fall away from the movement or to listen any less respectfully to women’s claims of harm. And so we continue to allow ideologues to spread lies about men and about women’s right to hate them.

Thus in the past 50 years, and accelerating since the 1990s, marriage has been essentially destroyed, the social and domestic contract between men and women shattered, millions of unborn children aborted, male suicide shockingly high—especially amongst youth and middle-aged men—women themselves reporting reduced levels of happiness and life satisfaction in every decade since the 1970s, the trans phenomenon affecting children at an ever-younger age, and the workplace transformed by accusations of male privilege, sexual harassment, and the need for mandated diversity. Yet received wisdom tells us that these are not because of feminism, but because feminist policies and solutions have not been adequately attempted, and not enough feminist leaders have been brought to power.

The inability of women generally to own their statements and actions has now reached a point where it cannot be ignored. We even have women arguing that feminism hasn’t been good for women and that a new form of feminism is therefore required—one that will be better for women, often with the implication that earlier forms of feminism were not really feminist, or not feminist enough, or didn’t take into account the reality of women’s lives and desires, or ended up benefiting men rather than women. Men are simply expected to follow the bouncing ball wherever it leads, never to articulate their needs and desires, and to take up whatever role or position the latest cohort of women demands.

The claim that feminism hasn’t been good for women and must change to accommodate women’s, but not men’s, latest demands is revealing in a number of ways, not least in affirming that anyone expecting a *mea culpa* from any woman leader had better not hold their breath. Women’s claims of powerlessness—even as they repeatedly demonstrate their power—are a never-ceasing feature of women’s public endeavors as well as their private ones. Why are we still allowing ideologues to monopolize the conversation? It is well past time to start insisting that no successful society has ever been structured solely around the question of what women want and what is allegedly good for women (which feminist have never been able to agree on or get right). Successful societies need to be structured around the question of what is good for society, and particularly what is good for families and children.

Men in general care deeply about women and don’t want them to suffer—and that is not going to change, nor should it. But caring about women and not wanting to see them suffer must co-exist with the recognition that women have frequently not been able to know or say what women want and need. Moreover, caring about women’s suffering must also co-exist with a recognition that a focus on female happiness as a primary goal is not feasible or useful in any well functioning society. Happiness is not a gift that can be provided on demand, no matter how often it is called for. Happiness may or may not be achieved as a side effect of other pursuits such as having a worthy purpose, cultivating virtue, defending

justice, aiding the weak, and nurturing the helpless. Men, for the most part, live this out in their lives, and it is something that women need to understand.

The likelihood that women are going to become more accountable—more able to take responsibility for their mistakes, more able to control their emotions and to take on the types of leadership roles that men evolved for—seems highly doubtful. What is good for women, families and children, as well as men, is a well-ordered, flourishing society in which the male propensity to compete, to invent, to produce, to provide for and to protect is affirmed and supported. At the heads of families and societies, we need those who are fully accountable to others. This is why I agree with Dr. Stephen Baskerville that the restoration of male authority in the family is a primary first step in the rebalancing of our societies. Only by diminishing the accountability gap can we hope to tackle the range of pressing issues that this conference regularly highlights.