

Man or Bear? A Reflection on Women's Safety and Society's Blind Spots

A deep dive into the viral 'man or bear' question, revealing how women's lives are shaped by constant vigilance and the harsh realities of male violence. If the president can be found liable for sexual assault and still hold power, what else are we tolerating?

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"Would you rather be alone in the woods with a man or a bear?"

A strange question has been circulating on social media: "Would you rather encounter a man or a bear alone in the woods?" For many women, the answer comes faster than expected—the bear. Unlike a man, the bear's actions are predictable. It isn't influenced by social expectations, entitlement, or power dynamics. It's a raw, terrifying presence—but a knowable one.

The seriousness behind this question exploded into public view when a TikTok video went viral. A creator (@screensothq)¹¹ asked eight women the same question, "Would you rather be stuck in a forest with a man or a bear?", and seven chose the bear. The video racked up over 17 million views, with women in the comments sharing their own stories and explaining why male violence often feels more erratic—and more inevitable—than an encounter with wildlife. Many said that while a bear attack might be terrifying, at least they wouldn't be blamed for it, questioned about it, or told they were "asking for it" afterward.

The viral conversation highlights the truth that shapes women's lives every day, the endless, invisible calculations about safety that women constantly make. This conversation isn't about misandry or sensationalism. It's about lived experience, backed by statistics, cultural patterns, and a long history of male aggression being ignored, excused, or minimized. The "man or bear" question isn't just a meme—it's a mirror.

A Fear That's Taught and Justified

For many women, vigilance isn't a choice—it's a reflex. It happens without thinking. Pepper spray hidden in a jacket pocket, sending your live location to a friend before you go out, sticking to well-lit streets. The smallest, most routine parts of life come with a mental checklist: *How well-lit is the parking lot? Are there people around? Does that car look suspiciously parked?*

Even seemingly safe spaces aren't always comforting. Women are three times as likely as men to feel unsafe in parks, leading many to avoid these areas, especially after dark (Phys)⁸. In rideshares, women memorize exit routes. On public transportation, they pick seats where they can easily be seen—but not trapped. Headphones go in, but often without music playing, in case they need to stay alert.

The fear that fuels the "man or bear" question isn't just theoretical—it impacts women's daily lives in countless, invisible ways. Studies show that over 1 in 3 women in the U.S. have experienced rape, physical violence, or stalking by an intimate partner at some point in their lives (The Hotline)⁵.

These choices aren't about paranoia. They are survival instincts, practiced over years of subtle warnings, scary stories, and personal experiences. Like muscle memory, women's brains assess risk while doing everyday tasks most men don't think twice about.

Real-Life Impacts

In 2025, the tragic death of 19-year-old Audrey Griffin in Gosford, Australia, sparked national protests against gendered violence. Audrey was killed while simply walking home after a night out, a reminder that even mundane activities carry risk for women (Daily Telegraph)⁷.

In April 2025, 16-year-old Ariana MacMillan from Ridley Park, Pennsylvania, was followed by a man making inappropriate comments. Recognizing the danger, she sought refuge in a nearby store, pretending the shop owner was her aunt. The store owners played along, protected her, and called the police. The man was subsequently arrested and charged with stalking and harassment (People)⁹.

In New York, a private equity executive was indicted on over 100 counts of rape and torture after allegedly luring multiple women into his apartment under false pretenses. Ryan Hemphill, a licensed attorney, is accused of turning his Midtown apartment into a "torture chamber," where he drugged, restrained, and violently assaulted women he met online.

Prosecutors say he waterboarded, electrocuted, and beat his victims, recording the attacks as trophies (AP News)⁶.

These stories are not rare exceptions—they are reminders of the everyday risks women navigate simply by existing in public spaces. Each story illustrates why, when faced with the question of a man or a bear, so many women instinctively choose the bear. In a world where danger too often wears a familiar face, trusting nature feels less terrifying than trusting a stranger.

Power, Politics, and a Culture That Excuses Violence

The fear of male violence doesn't exist in a vacuum, it's upheld and reinforced by power structures that enable and excuse harmful behavior. When men in powerful positions are allowed to act without consequence, it sends a clear message of whose safety matters, and whose doesn't. A man can harm women and still be handed a microphone, a promotion, or the presidency.

In 2016, a tape surfaced in which Donald Trump, a current presidential candidate, was bragging about grabbing women without their consent, specifically “I don't even wait. And when you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything. ... Grab 'em by the pussy. You can do anything” (Wikipedia)². He dismissed it as “locker room talk” and was elected president anyway—after the tape had been made public. That moment wasn't just a scandal but a signal. A man can openly admit to sexual assault and still be rewarded with the highest office in the country. His rise to power wasn't in spite of that moment, but rather alongside it, normalized and brushed aside by millions of voters and political leaders.

In the 2024 election, we saw this same pattern repeating. Despite years of public reckoning with sexual violence, from the #MeToo movement to nationwide conversations about consent and accountability, powerful men accused of misconduct continued to be propped up by political machines.

Trump was found liable for sexual abuse and defamation in E. Jean Carroll's civil suit (Wikipedia)³. He has also been accused by multiple other women for sexual harassment or assault, including allegations from figures like Jessica Leeds, Summer Zervos, and others. These accusations span decades. Despite this, he ran again for president. And once again, he secured the Republican nomination, maintaining massive support among his political base and key party leaders.

This was not a fringe candidate with a scandalous past, it was a former president, now a convicted abuser in civil court, still considered a viable and even preferable option by

millions of Americans. That's not just a personal failure of morality; it's a systemic failure of accountability.

The failure to stand behind women like E. Jean Carroll exposes something deeply rooted in our political culture; the prioritization of power and control over justice and safety. When men in positions of power are not held accountable, it reinforces a broader cultural narrative that male violence is tolerable, forgivable, or even irrelevant, as long as the man in question holds high enough status.

Politics are not the only place where these realities are true. From college campuses where athletes are protected from sexual assault allegations, to workplaces where harassment is ignored to protect the company's image, institutions consistently shield men from consequences. Women, meanwhile, are left to bear the burden. Of proof, of recovery, and of silence.

Why It Matters

At first glance, the "man or bear" question feels like dark humor—a viral meme born out of social media's love for the absurd. But the reality it points to is anything but funny.

The fact that so many women would rather face a wild animal than an unknown man reveals how deeply distrust and fear are woven into everyday life. It's not about hating men. It's about living in a world where male violence is common enough, and the consequences for it rare enough, that a bear feels like the safer gamble.

What's even more revealing is how often the burden of safety falls squarely on women's shoulders. From a young age, girls are taught how to stay safe—don't walk alone, don't drink too much, don't park too far from the entrance—while boys are rarely taught with equal urgency not to harm.

Women aren't just taught to survive potential violence; they are taught that if they fail to avoid it, they might be blamed for it. *Was she drinking? Was she flirting? What was she wearing?* These questions still echo in courtrooms, newsrooms, and everyday conversations.

A bear is not going to push the blame, not going to care if her skirt was 'too short', not going to care what kind of underwear she was wearing (Sunday Times)⁴. Choosing the bear over the man isn't about trusting animals over humans—it's about trusting that nature will not hold them responsible for their own suffering.

Changing that culture requires more than individual good intentions. It requires reshaping the stories we tell about violence, responsibility, and blame. It means believing survivors without requiring them to "prove" their worthiness. It means teaching boys, early

and often, that respect is non-negotiable—and that boundaries exist whether someone is watching or not.

“Not All Men,” But Enough

It’s true that not all men are violent, but women can’t know which ones are. That uncertainty means they have no choice but to act as though every man *might* be a threat. That uncertainty is part of the danger. When a woman crosses the street to avoid walking near a man at night, it’s not because she thinks he is violent—it’s because she knows he *could* be, and she can’t afford to be wrong.

For many women, being alone with a man feels more dangerous than being alone with a predator in the woods. Not because men are inherently violent, but because enough of them have been—and because society has done far too little to stop it.

The everyday choices women make—holding their keys between their fingers, sharing their location with friends, pretending to be on a call—aren’t overreactions but survival tactics in a society that hasn’t earned their trust. This isn’t fear for fear’s sake. It’s a rational response to a society where the consequences of misjudging a man’s intentions can be life-altering, or life-ending.

Why More Women Keep Choosing the Bear

The "man or bear" question may have started as a social media fad, but its resonance reveals something far deeper and more painful. It is not absurd that so many women would choose a wild animal over a man—it is a reflection of a world that has not earned their trust.

Every story of violence, every safety calculation, every small freedom given up in the name of caution points back to the same reality: women are taught to fear, to prepare, and to blame themselves for surviving or failing to survive.

Until we live in a world where women can walk home without fear, choose a seat on a train without strategy, or encounter a stranger without having to weigh their odds of survival, the question will remain devastatingly relevant.

And heartbreakingly, many women will still choose the bear.

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