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Article

Toward a Feminist Theory of Threat Assessment and Neutralization

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Abstract

This paper presents a theoretical framework distinguishing two archetypal approaches to threat assessment and neutralization: a masculine paradigm based on identification and extermination or expulsion, and a feminine paradigm based on identification, integration and transformation. Drawing on systems theory, evolutionary biology, epidemiology, and cross-disciplinary case studies, I argue that feminine threat assessment—addressing root causes and neutralizing through integration and understanding—produces more sustainable long-term outcomes than pure elimination-based approaches. I examine successful applications across criminal justice, organizational culture, international diplomacy, healthcare, education, environmental management, and family systems, and contrast these with the secondary harms produced by more archetypal masculine approaches. Sweden's pandemic response is analyzed as a contemporary case study of feminine threat assessment and integration. I conclude that a more integrated threat assessment approach may be more effective for modern security challenges.

Keywords: threat assessment; conflict resolution; systems theory; feminist theory; policy analysis; resilience

1. Introduction

Societies face a spectrum in how they assess and respond to threats, from expulsion, extermination or elimination, on one end, to integration and transformation on the other end. This distinction in key ways mirrors archetypal patterns observable across biology, psychology, and human culture. The *masculine* threat paradigm seeks to identify and neutralize threats through confrontation and removal, forcible if required. The *feminine* threat paradigm seeks to understand and neutralize threats through integration and neutralization of root causes. These are, of course simplifications, but are true enough to be useful for present purposes.

While masculine threat response serves essential functions in acute crises, the exclusive reliance on elimination-based approaches creates systemic problems: cycles of retaliation, institutional collapse, trauma amplification, and, often, the generation of new threats through over-reaction and unforeseen consequences. Conversely, purely integrative approaches without boundary-setting risk enabling harm. This paper argues that effective contemporary threat assessment requires understanding both paradigms and knowing when to apply each.

Our analysis spans criminal justice, organizational psychology, diplomatic conflict resolution, public health policy, educational systems, environmental management, and family therapy. In each domain, I find that sustainable and effective threat neutralization requires moving beyond expulsion or extermination toward integration and transformation.

2. Theoretical Foundation

2.1. Two Archetypal Approaches to Threat

The masculine approach to threat assessment follows a linear model: identify the threat, confront it directly, and eliminate or expel it. This paradigm treats threats as external enemies to be vanquished. Its evolutionary logic is sound in acute physical dangers: when facing a predator, expulsion of the threat maximizes survival.

The feminine approach treats threats as signals of system imbalance. Rather than seeking elimination, it seeks to understand what need or condition generated the threat, to neutralize through addressing those root causes. This approach integrates the threat-bearer back into the system through transformation. Its evolutionary logic is equally sound: in social systems dependent on cooperation, integration produces more stable long-term arrangements than expulsion.

Both approaches are valuable and neither is inherently superior. A functioning system requires wisdom about when each applies.

2.2. Systems Theory and Immune Function

The biological immune system illustrates the difference elegantly. The immune response doesn't destroy pathogens through brute force; it neutralizes them through antibodies that either kill the pathogen or mark it for safe removal without harming the host (Janeway et al., 2001). The goal is not enemy destruction but restoration of homeostasis.

Systems ecology demonstrates that resilient ecosystems rely on diversity and adaptation, not homogeneity and elimination. Ecosystems that attempt to eliminate "pest" species often collapse when the eliminated species fulfills an essential ecological function (Holling, 1973). Sustainable systems integrate apparent threats into functioning wholes.

Trauma research reveals that suppressed threats become embedded in nervous systems, generating chronic dysregulation (van der Kolk, 2014). Integration of traumatic threat experience through understanding produces healing; expulsion through avoidance perpetuates pathology.

2.3. The Problem with Pure Elimination

Elimination-based threat approaches generate systemic problems: (1) Blow-back: expelled threats often return in more virulent form (Pape, 2005). (2) Collateral damage: the attempt to eliminate specific threats harms innocent parties, creating new threat-bearers. (3) Institutional decay: cultures of expulsion erode psychological safety and institutional trust (Edmondson, 2018). (4) Threat multiplication: addressing symptoms while ignoring root causes generates new manifestations of the same underlying problems.

These consequences suggest that while elimination-based approaches may succeed in acute crises, they fail as sustainable long-term strategies.

2.4. Comparative Framework

The following tables systematize the distinctions between masculine and feminine approaches to threat assessment, providing a reference framework for the case studies that follow.

Table 1. Core Characteristics of Masculine and Feminine Threat Paradigms.

Dimension	Masculine Paradigm	Feminine Paradigm
Core Logic	Identify → Confront → Eliminate/Expel	Identify → Understand → Integrate/Transform
Threat Conception	External enemy to be vanquished	Signal of system imbalance to be addressed
Primary Goal	Removal of threat-bearer from system	Restoration of homeostasis; reintegration
Causal Focus	Proximate cause (the threat itself)	Root cause (conditions generating threat)

Dimension	Masculine Paradigm	Feminine Paradigm
Evolutionary Logic	Acute physical danger response; predator avoidance	Social system maintenance; cooperation optimization
Temporal Orientation	Immediate resolution; decisive action	Long-term sustainability; systemic stability
Relationship to Threat-Bearer	Adversarial; zero-sum	Relational; potential for transformation
Success Metric	Threat eliminated or expelled	Underlying need addressed; harmony restored

Table 2. Systemic Consequences of Each Approach.

Consequence Type	Masculine Approach	Feminine Approach
Blowback Risk	High; expelled threats often return in more virulent form	Low; transformed threats lose adversarial character
Collateral Damage	Significant; elimination attempts harm innocent parties, creating new threat-bearers	Minimal; integration preserves social fabric
Institutional Effects	Cultures of expulsion erode psychological safety and trust	Cultures of integration foster voice and innovation
Threat Multiplication	Addressing symptoms while ignoring root causes generates new manifestations	Addressing root causes prevents recurrence
Resource Demands	Lower initial investment; higher long-term costs from cycles of conflict	Higher initial investment in understanding; lower long-term maintenance
System Resilience	Brittle; dependent on continuous threat suppression	Robust; adaptive capacity through diversity

Table 3. Domain Applications.

Domain	Masculine Application	Feminine Application
Criminal Justice	Incarceration as warehousing; punitive focus; U.S. model (68% recidivism)	Rehabilitation and reintegration; restorative justice; Norwegian model (20% recidivism)
Organizational Culture	Suppression of dissent; retaliation against whistleblowers; command hierarchy	Psychological safety; integration of employee voice; mission failures caught early
International Conflict	Military victory; Nuremberg-style prosecutions; cycles of revenge	Truth and Reconciliation; dialogue on underlying grievances; conditions for coexistence
Healthcare	Antibiotic warfare; symptom suppression; isolation-only strategies	Vaccination (integrating threat into immune system); trauma-informed care addressing root causes

Domain	Masculine Application	Feminine Application
Education	Suspension/expulsion for misbehavior; emotion suppression; segregation of difference	Restorative discipline; emotional literacy; inclusive education integrating neurodivergence
Environment	Pesticide warfare; monoculture; extraction and control	Regenerative agriculture; indigenous stewardship; integration of human activity into ecological function
Family Systems	Cutting off contact; grief suppression; defensive attack in conflict	Dialogue on unmet needs; grief integration through ritual; de-escalation through curiosity
Pandemic Response	Maximum suppression via lockdowns; border closures; mandate enforcement through exclusion	Targeted protection; trust in citizen agency; tradeoff transparency; social fabric preservation (Sweden)

Table 4. Appropriate Conditions for Each Approach.

Condition	Favors Masculine	Favors Feminine
Threat Immediacy	Acute crisis requiring immediate action	Chronic or recurring pattern
Threat-Bearer Capacity	Incapable of engagement or transformation	Capable of change through relationship and understanding
System Context	Existential threat to group survival	System depends on cooperation and diversity
Time Horizon	Short-term emergency	Long-term sustainability matters
Available Resources	Limited capacity for nuanced response	Sufficient resources for understanding and integration
Boundary Status	Boundaries repeatedly violated despite good-faith integration efforts	Initial response before escalation

Note: Neither paradigm is inherently superior. Effective threat assessment requires wisdom about when each applies. A system with only masculine clarity becomes martial and unsustainable; a system with only feminine integration becomes vulnerable to exploitation. Integration of both paradigms achieves genuine resilience.

3. Case Studies: Feminine Threat Assessment in Practice

3.1. Criminal Justice and Rehabilitation

Norway's approach to criminal justice represents a systematic implementation of feminine threat assessment. Rather than treating incarcerated individuals as permanent threats to be warehoused, Norway focuses on understanding what social, economic, or psychological factors generated criminal behavior, and creating conditions for transformation and reintegration (Pratt & Eriksson, 2013). The result: recidivism rates of 20%, compared to 68% in the United States, where elimination-based approaches dominate (Fazel & Wolf, 2015).

Restorative justice programs bring victims and offenders into dialogue to understand harm and create repair (Umbreit et al., 2003). Rather than purely punitive approaches that leave victims unsatisfied and offenders hardened, restorative processes neutralize threat through mutual understanding. Studies show reduced recidivism and increased victim satisfaction (Sherman & Strang, 2007).

De-escalation training for law enforcement teaches officers to neutralize threats through verbal and relational skills rather than force, with documented reductions in use-of-force incidents and improved community trust (Campbell et al., 2016).

3.2. *Organizational Culture*

Organizations that integrate employee voice and dissent outperform those that suppress it. Google's practice of allocating time for employee-driven projects, and Patagonia's integration of environmental activism into corporate mission, both institutionalize feminine threat assessment: treating employee concerns and alternative viewpoints not as threats but as sources of innovation (Edmondson & Lei, 2014).

Psychological safety—the belief that one can speak up about problems without fear of punishment—is a stronger predictor of team performance and organizational learning than individual talent (Edmondson, 2018). Teams that suppress concerns experience mission failures; teams that integrate them catch problems early.

The integration of whistleblower concerns, rather than their suppression through retaliation, prevents catastrophic institutional failures. Organizations that create channels to hear and address internal warnings avoid scandals that eliminate-based cultures cannot prevent (Near & Miceli, 2016).

3.3. *International Conflict and Diplomacy*

South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission exemplifies feminine threat assessment at the highest political level. Rather than following the elimination model of Nuremberg prosecutions (which left desire for revenge unaddressed), the TRC created space for perpetrators and victims to meet, for truth to be acknowledged, and for transformation to begin (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2003). Studies show this approach reduced cycles of revenge and created conditions for coexistence, though at the cost of incomplete justice (Wilson, 2001).

The Northern Ireland peace process similarly prioritized understanding and integration over elimination of opposing groups. Rather than pursuing military victory, all parties committed to dialogue about underlying economic, religious, and political grievances (Tonge, 2002). This approach neutralized the threat of sectarian violence by addressing its roots.

The Camp David Accords and subsequent Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, while incomplete, demonstrated the capacity for understanding Israeli security concerns and Palestinian self-determination simultaneously. When dialogue broke down in favor of elimination-based approaches, violence escalated (Spiegel, 2012).

3.4. *Healthcare and Disease Management*

Vaccination represents the immune system's feminine approach: rather than eliminating pathogens through antibiotics or isolation alone, vaccination integrates pathogenic threat into the immune system by exposing it to safe versions of the threat, allowing the body to develop adaptive response (Plotkin et al., 2008).

Trauma-informed mental healthcare approaches addiction and mental health as threats generated by unmet needs and past harm. Treatment addresses root causes—attachment trauma, economic desperation, neurochemical imbalance—rather than eliminating symptoms through medication alone or punishment (van der Kolk, 2014). Outcomes show that integration-based approaches produce better long-term recovery than suppression-based models.

Public health responses to pandemics demonstrate both paradigms. Elimination-based approaches seek maximum suppression of disease through lockdowns and border closures. Integration-based approaches seek to understand disease dynamics and neutralize through selective protection while maintaining social functioning. Section 3.6 addresses this in detail.

3.5. *Education*

Emotional literacy programs teach children to understand and integrate emotions rather than suppress them, resulting in reduced behavioral threats and improved academic outcomes (Brackett et al., 2011). Treating anger or fear as enemies to be expelled leads to dysregulation; treating them as signals to be understood leads to development.

Restorative discipline approaches address why a child misbehaves rather than simply removing them through suspension or expulsion. Research shows that integrating misbehaving students into understanding their behavior and making amends produces better behavioral change than elimination-based disciplinary approaches (Fronius et al., 2016).

Inclusive education for neurodivergent students strengthens all students' learning. Rather than segregating students with learning differences as threats to classroom order, inclusive models integrate them, forcing pedagogical innovation that benefits everyone (Lombardi et al., 2011).

3.6. Public Health: Sweden's COVID-19 Response

Sweden's approach to the COVID-19 pandemic represents a systematized feminine threat assessment in public health policy. Rather than treating the pandemic as an enemy to be eliminated through maximum suppression, Sweden assessed it as a serious but manageable threat requiring integration into ongoing society.

Core elements of the Swedish approach: (1) Transparency about tradeoffs—acknowledging that both pandemic spread and lockdown harms were real; (2) Trust in citizen agency rather than top-down mandates; (3) Targeted protection of vulnerable populations rather than universal suppression; (4) Maintenance of schools, workplaces, and cultural institutions to preserve social fabric and psychological health; (5) Communication emphasizing individual responsibility rather than fear (Johansson et al., 2021; Ludvigsson, 2020).

In contrast, the elimination paradigm dominated most nations: treating COVID-19 as an enemy to be defeated through maximum suppression via lockdowns, border closures, and vaccine mandates enforced through social exclusion.

Outcomes: After three years of data, both approaches resulted in comparable mortality rates (Goldstein & Lee, 2020; Axfors & Ioannidis, 2021). However, secondary outcomes diverged significantly. The integration approach (Sweden) maintained open schools with continued childhood development, workforce continuity with sustained economic activity, high social trust with preserved institutional legitimacy, and higher initial case rates that built natural immunity. The elimination approach (most nations) produced school closures with learning loss and mental health decline in youth, economic disruption with unemployment and debt accumulation, trust erosion with damaged institutional legitimacy and increased vaccine hesitancy, and lower initial case rates but delayed natural immunity leaving vulnerable populations unprepared.

The Swedish approach did not eliminate COVID-19; it integrated the threat into ongoing society. The elimination approach did not eliminate COVID-19 either; it merely delayed initial spread while creating secondary harms. Neither approach "won" in a conventional sense, but the integration approach preserved more aspects of functioning society.

This represents a contemporary, large-scale demonstration of feminine threat assessment: treating an unavoidable threat not as an enemy to be defeated but as a reality to be navigated with wisdom about tradeoffs.

4. Additional Applications Across Domains

4.1. Environmental and Resource Management

Indigenous land stewardship practices demonstrate feminine threat assessment toward environmental threats. Rather than treating ecosystems as enemies to be conquered through extraction and control, these systems integrate human activity into ecological functioning, creating sustainable abundance over centuries (Kimmerer, 2013). Monoculture agriculture and pesticide

warfare represent elimination paradigms; regenerative and permaculture approaches represent integration paradigms (Altieri & Koohafkan, 2008).

Climate adaptation requires understanding root economic inequities that drive both consumption and environmental destruction, rather than attempting purely technological elimination of emissions. Addressing why communities depend on extractive industries is more sustainable than regulation-based suppression (Roberts, 2009).

4.2. Family Systems

Family therapy demonstrates that integrating estranged family members through understanding unmet needs and addressing communication patterns heals more than cutting off contact. Families that suppress conflict become rigid and brittle; families that integrate conflict through dialogue become resilient (Bowen, 1978).

Grief work illustrates the difference: suppression of grief perpetuates trauma and complicated mourning, while integration of loss through rituals, dialogue, and community support enables healing (Stroebe & Stroebe, 1991). The threat of loss doesn't disappear; it is integrated into ongoing life.

De-escalation in intimate relationships through curiosity about a partner's fears and needs produces reconciliation; defensive attack produces relationship dissolution. The threat doesn't disappear; it is understood and neutralized through connection (Gottman, 1994).

4.3. Spiritual and Religious Traditions

Buddhist psychology treats anger not as an enemy to be suppressed but as a signal of unmet needs to be understood (Bhikkhu & Bodhi, 1999). Sufi mysticism emphasizes transformation of ego rather than destruction of the self (Chittick, 1989). Christian theology emphasizes redemption and forgiveness of sinners rather than their permanent expulsion (for most denominations). These traditions represent integrated threat assessment at the spiritual level.

Indigenous circle practices honor all voices and integrate dissent rather than establishing hierarchies that suppress opposition. These governance approaches demonstrate feminine threat assessment in collective decision-making (DeLucia, 2019).

5. Limitations and Counterarguments

Feminine threat assessment has limitations that must be acknowledged. First, some threats may not be neutralizable through understanding and integration. Individuals with severe personality disorders characterized by inability to empathize or engage with others may resist transformation. Existential threats to group survival may require expulsion or defensive action (Breivik, 2020).

Second, integration approaches risk passivity and enabling harm if applied without boundaries. A framework emphasizing integration without the capacity for boundaries becomes vulnerable to exploitation. Organizations that integrate every voice without hierarchical decision-making become paralyzed. Families that never enforce consequences enable abuse.

Third, feminine threat assessment requires more psychological sophistication, time, and resources than simple elimination. Restorative justice programs require trained facilitators; trauma-informed care requires skilled clinicians; integration in organizations requires emotional intelligence from leadership. Elimination-based approaches, while harmful long-term, are simpler to implement.

Fourth, context dependency is crucial. What works in intimate family relationships or organizational settings may not translate directly to international geopolitics. Feminine threat assessment assumes the threat-bearer is capable of change and integration; this assumption may fail in some cases.

6. Toward Integrated Threat Assessment

The most effective threat assessment integrates both paradigms. Masculine clarity—the ability to identify real threats and act decisively—remains essential. Feminine integration—the capacity to address root causes and transform situations—becomes the primary strategy. The question is not which to choose but when to apply each.

A practical framework for integrated threat assessment: (1) Identification: Use masculine clarity to assess whether a genuine threat exists. What is the actual danger? (2) Assessment: Determine whether the threat is neutralizable through integration or requires boundaries. Is the threat-bearer capable of engagement or transformation? (3) Strategy: Employ feminine integration as primary approach—understand root causes, address underlying needs, create conditions for transformation. (4) Boundaries: Maintain clear consequences for boundary violations. Integration without boundaries enables harm. (5) Evaluation: Monitor whether integration-based approaches are producing results. If genuine threat persists despite good-faith integration efforts, shift to boundaries or separation.

This framework applies across contexts: in personal security (assess threat, build relationship skills, maintain boundaries), organizational management (foster voice while maintaining clear expectations), diplomacy (pursue dialogue while maintaining defensive capacity), and public health (understand disease dynamics while protecting vulnerable populations).

7. Conclusions

This paper has argued that feminine threat assessment—understanding root causes and neutralizing through transformation—produces more sustainable outcomes than masculine elimination-based approaches, across criminal justice, organizational culture, international diplomacy, healthcare, education, environmental management, and family systems.

The evidence suggests a fundamental principle: systems that survive and thrive over time do so by integrating apparent threats rather than by eliminating them. Immune systems neutralize pathogens through antibodies, not destruction. Ecosystems maintain resilience through diversity and adaptation. Organizations innovate through integrating dissent. Societies coexist through dialogue and understanding of underlying needs.

I do not propose that feminine threat assessment completely replace masculine approaches. I propose instead that contemporary threat assessment frameworks recognize both paradigms, understand their respective strengths and limitations, and develop wisdom about when each applies. A society that has only masculine clarity becomes martial and unsustainable. A society that has only feminine integration becomes vulnerable. A society that integrates both achieves genuine resilience.

The implications extend from personal security to organizational management to geopolitics: understanding threats as signals of system imbalance, addressing root causes rather than merely eliminating symptoms, and creating conditions for transformation rather than permanent expulsion, produces more humane, more effective, and more durable solutions to the perpetual challenge of living in systems where not all members are aligned.

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