MP-IDSA
Issue Brief

Misogyny, Violent Extremism and National Security

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Summary

Acceptance of misogynistic violence as a form of violent extremism (VE) is central to understanding VE groups. Misogyny can be deemed a point of intersection between right wing extremism, Islamic extremism and racism. Gender and cultural sensitivities are an essential element of successful counter-terror measures.

Introduction

Across the political spectrum, violent extremists (VE) have demonstrated a reluctance to afford women bodily autonomy and equality. These attitudes stem from gender-based violence (GBV), a precursor to VE, occurring in various communities. Girls exposed to gendered violence are more likely to become victims of domestic abuse, and boys are more likely to become perpetrators. As a result, violence against women has an intergenerational impact whereby it 'trickles down'.[1] At the same time, the normalisation of violence against women desensitises men to violence as a language for any perceived threat to society and their masculinity. Therefore, misogynistic violence acts as a stepping stone for other forms of extremism.

Notably, intergenerational violence trickles down and spreads horizontally, normalising its occurrence throughout society.[2] This desensitises individuals to aggression's consequences and reinforces the idea that power and control are established through force. Consequently, societies marked by widespread domestic violence are more susceptible to engaging in intra-state violence against minority groups. They may resort to interstate violence when confronted with perceived external threats.[3] Therefore, the behaviour of a state 'can be strongly gendered', and its propensity for violence can best be indicated by the treatment of women.

Islamic extremists and right-wing extremists (RWE) each share in their 'heroic masculine world views'[4] in which they are saving their societies from falling prey to the other, and both are equally as dependent on the women in their society for the completion of their socio-political goals. When applying a Foucauldian analytical lens to the ideology of Islamic extremists and RWEs, the two appear highly similar in their overlap of the use of women's childbearing 'as a bio-political instrument to regulate the populace' in accordance with their specific conception of what the perfect society ought to be.[5] Therefore, misogyny can be deemed a point of intersection between RWE, Islamic extremism, racism and the 'opposition narrative'.[6]

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[1] C.L. Whitfield, R.F. Anda, S.R. Dube and V.J. Felitti, **"Violent Childhood Experiences and the Risk of Intimate Partner Violence in Adults: Assessment in a Large Health Maintenance Organization"**, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, Vol. 18, No. 2, 2003, pp. 166–185.

[2] L. Baron, M.A. Straus and D. Jaffee, **"Legitimate Violence, Violent Attitudes and Rape: A Test of a Cultural Spillover Theory"**, Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, Vol. 528, No. 1, pp. 79–110.

[3] Pablo Castillo Díaz and Nahla Valji, **"Symbiosis of Misogyny and Violent Extremism: New Understandings and Policy Implications"**, *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 2, 2019, pp. 37–56.

[4] Volker Weiß, **"The Authoritarian Revolt. The New Right and the Fall of the West"**, Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2017.

[5] David Meiering, Aziz Dziri and Naika Foroutan, **"Connecting Structures: Resistance, Heroic Masculinity and Anti-Feminism as Bridging Narratives within Group Radicalisation"**, *International Journal of Conflict and Violence*, Vol. 14, No. 2, 2020.

[6] Ibid.

Despite the growth of Women, Peace and Security, and counter-terrorism research, male violence is analysed from the position of 'aggrieved masculinity' as opposed to misogyny.[7] Studies have focused on, for example, sexual violence against women in refugee camps as a result of men struggling to cope with their setting. Consequently, gender-based violence is contextualised as being the outcome of socioeconomic and political issues and not entrenched misogyny. This creates a misinformed framework.[8]

Weaponisation of Gender by VE Groups

Although gender is not explicitly stated as a factor that influences the actions of VE groups, the eventual suppression 'of women and girls [which follows] is central to both [their] ideology and tactics'.[9] As gender remains central to many power dynamics,[10] the pervasiveness of attitude and treatment of women in a state is likely destined to determine 'the broad societal forces in a state such as their national identity and ideology'.[11] Enloe acknowledges how 'the indivisible link between gender and statehood' is elucidated in the manifestation of extreme nationalist movements that are 'predicated upon the relationship between men and women'.[12]

ISIS

VE groups exploit the disenfranchisement of men in their recruitment, linked to their inability to fulfil their gender role.[13] According to Wegner, the phenomenon of 'militarised masculinities'[14] often weaponised by VE groups is a manipulation of violence, gender, and a 'saviour complex'.[15] This is prevalent in the use of ISIS recruitment under which the glorification of violence in the pursuit of a utopian state was coupled with the advertisement of sex slaves for the fighters as 'spoils of war'.[16] Yet, through the misuse of women and children as victims of foreign threats in their

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[7] Ibid.

[8] Cynthia Enloe, **"*Bananas, Beaches, and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*"**, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 1989.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Kyle Kattelman and Courtney Burns, **"Unpacking the Concepts: Examining the Link Between Women's Status and Terrorism"**, *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 60, No. 5, 2023, pp. 792–806.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Cynthia Enloe, **"*Bananas, Beaches, and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*"**, no. 8.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Nicole Wegner, **"Helpful Heroes and the Political Utility of Militarised Masculinities"**, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, Vol. 23, No. 1, 2021.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Mara Redlich Revkin and Elisabeth Jean Wood, **"The Islamic State's Pattern of Sexual Violence: Ideology and Institutions, Policies and Practices"**, *Journal of Global Security Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2021.

propaganda, it fed a narrative that their survival remains subject to saving by the fighters.[17]

This seeming contradiction in extremist propaganda taps into a uniquely misogynistic mindset under which male disenfranchisement is radicalised through their feeling of innate entitlement over women. The representation of culturally stigmatised girls (Yazidi) as sex slaves for the fighters alongside the ethnically accepted women and children as those suffering demonstrates the nexus between sexism, racism, and the normalised language of violence. Lastly, the role of women that are not turned into sex slaves hinges upon their adherence to 'the gendered division of women as mothers, nurturers and those that need protection by men'.[18]

Boko Haram

Boko Haram's VE is particularly relevant due to its targeted GBV against Christian Nigerian women. The intersection between greater hostility towards minority groups and misogyny is demonstrated in Boko Haram's Salafi-Jihadism. This combined jihad-sanctioned violence and Salafi conservatism in producing their ideology that promoted the rejection of anything deemed 'Western' and perceived women as 'lesser beings that require male guardianship'.[19] Therefore, although all women were deemed inferior, Christian women were put at greater risk by being the 'weakest members of an infidel outcast'.[20]

Women in North-East Africa have confronted rampant GBV before, during, and after the disintegration of Boko Haram. Nevertheless, during their active presence, Christian communities were mainly targeted with tactics such as kidnapping, rape, and forced marriage to an older Muslim man; forced conversion to Islam; deprivation from schooling for girls; and heightened domestic abuse if the Islamic convert exercised any 'non-Islamic' practices.[21]

Women and girls have previously addressed in interviews that domestic abuse and marital rape was either 'directly committed by Boko Haram members or indirectly

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[17] Alejandro Beutel and Krystina Perez, **"From WWI to ISIS, Using Shame and Masculinity in Recruitment Narratives"**, National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), 2016.

[18] Michael S. Kimmel and Abby L. Ferber, **"'White Men Are This Nation': Right-Wing Militias and the Restoration of Rural American Masculinity"**, *Rural Sociology*, Vol. 65, No. 4, 2009.

[19] Lela Gilbert, **"Gender-Based Violence as an Expression of Christian Persecution in Muslim Lands"**, World Watch Research Unit of Open Doors International, pp. 1–5.

[20] Atta Barkindo, Caroline K. Wesley and Benjamin Tyavkase Gudaku, **"Our Bodies, Their Battleground Boko Haram and Gender-Based Violence against Christian Women and Children in North-Eastern Nigeria since 1999"**, World Watch Research Unit of Open Doors International, the Netherlands, November 2013.

[21] Charles Bremmer, **"Kidnapped French Family Freed by Boko Haram in Cameroon"**, *The Times Africa*, 19 April 2013.

due to their ideology that had been propagated'.[22] The inherent patriarchal society existed prior to the rise of Boko Haram. After the terrorist organisation's emergence, GBV became more prevalent in the Nigerian society. Women interviewed further expressed concerns regarding the village government's complicity in Boko Haram's aims of expelling all Christians and a genuine fear of speaking too freely during the interview process. This demonstrated the fundamental depth of the issue.

Collectively, this demonstrates how a particular society breeds VE and how it is one that first must cater to gender inequality, GBV, and sexist practices. Although, in this case, there may have been direct involvement by members of the state, that level of involvement is not necessary. The failure to prioritise female bodily autonomy and safety for women and girls through cultural norms and the law is sufficient in breeding the likes of Boko Haram. Quoting one of the victims, her phrase 'listen to what is not said'[23] is reflective of the potential clandestine support by the village governments that hindered the very data collection and records on the rampant GBV.

Right-Wing Extremism

Although RWE groups have existed prior to the last decade, their recent growth in popularity in the US, sporadically throughout Europe, Australia and other former colonies can be attributed to the surge in immigrant populations and intake of refugees by states. A common belief held by RWE is in the Great Replacement Theory that fears the eventual decline of the superior Caucasian populace due to increased feminism in their society and subsequent lower birth rates, contrasted with growing non-White citizens and an eventual 'replacement'.[24]

Whilst political, RWE beliefs also place women at the centre of their ideology, for example, positing that the success or failure of the Great Replacement Theory hinges upon the role of women in their society. The pressure is placed on women to not succumb to the 'growing feminist notion of working women' and to have more children instead of consolidating most of their population's numbers. Kimmel and Ferber further expand on the ideology of RWEs by exploring how men in these societies no longer believe they are the perpetrators.[25] When faced with greater female involvement in the workforce and the rejection of childbearing as their sole goal in life, women have now become the ones holding the privilege of 'making men the victims of state feminism'.[26]

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[22] Atta Barkindo, Caroline K Wesley and Benjamin Tyavkase Gudaku, **"Our Bodies, Their Battleground Boko Haram and Gender-Based Violence against Christian Women and Children in North-Eastern Nigeria since 1999"**, no. 20.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Andreas Kemper, **"Germ Cell of the Nation - Part 2. How Parties and Movements in Europe are Radicalizing for Conservative Family Values, Against Tolerance and Diversity and Against Progressive Gender Politics"**, ed. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Forum Politics and Society, 2014.

[26] Ibid.

Despite active attempts to assert themselves as legitimate VE actors, such as through attempted violence at abortion centers, storming the US Capitol Building, and shooting 50 people in a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand, RWEs are addressed to a lesser extent than Islamic VEs in counter-terrorism strategies globally. Whilst States such as Canada and the UK have begun to recognise violence by RWE as domestic terrorism, the full scope of RWE ideology, in terms of its political agenda that includes racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, etc., remains under-appreciated.

The Incel Movement

Incel, short for involuntary celibate, is a movement that has led to the creation of an expansive, transnational online network of young men and boys who blame women for their lack of sexual experience. Their ideology is deeply rooted in male victimhood and is relevant to the discussion of VE since members of the movement have engaged in mass shootings, especially in the US and in Canada, and have even released manifestos to try and influence vulnerable males. Furthermore, the movement's growth has demonstrated how misogyny often plays a central role in the occurrence of extremist acts. Additionally, misogyny and male victimhood are common denominators for 'hyper-nationalist alt-right directives' that have 'an undeniable crossover with incel culture'.[27] Misogyny is relevant in Islamic extremism, too, suggesting that it has a primary role in many forms of VE. Unfortunately, for over a decade now, incel crimes have been viewed in isolation from any other forms of extremism.

Andrew Anglin, an American citizen, a self-proclaimed Neo-Nazi, and the creator of the 'Daily Stormer', wrote in one of his articles that 'women are the Jews of gender'.[28] Furthermore, he propagated a false narrative under which the White race was under threat and must prepare for a battle against 'Jews, Blacks, Muslims, Hispanics, Women, Liberals and Journalists'.[29] Anglin has also, among other things, stated that 'women crave being assaulted and locked in cages'.[30] This demonstrates how misogyny is a form of extremism that is inextricably intertwined with other forms of extremism, including racism, homophobia and bigotry.

Marc Lepine, who shot 14 women in Montreal and left a letter blaming feminists for his decline, and Elliot Rodger, an English American boy who went on a killing spree in California and is praised in incel forums as 'Saint Rodger', both equally share their status as incels. However, it is vital to point out that Lepine's obsession with 'racial purity' in Canada and Rodger's deeply rooted racism in which he deemed himself superior to all 'dark-skinned Mexicans and black-filth', point towards hostility

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[27] Chuka Emezue, **"The Danger of Incels—and How We Shift the Thinking of Men Attracted to These Groups"**, *MS Magazine*, September 2023.

[28] Center on Extremism, **"Incels (Involuntary Celibates)"**, Backgrounder, Anti Anti-Defamation League, July 2020.

[29] Luke O'Brien, **"The Making of An American Nazi"**, *The Atlantic,* December 2023.

[30] Ibid.

towards women and racial minorities.[31] Whilst it is crucial to look at incel extremism as an offshoot of misogyny, it is equally important to analyse misogyny's prevalence in various VE groups' ideologies, tactics and acts.

Incel forums also desensitise men to violence against women so that violence for a political cause is normalised. For example, to specifically target and recruit Muslim boys and men on incel forums, ISIS propagandists offered that if they were to join ISIS or another violent Jihadist group, they would be rewarded with girls for sexual relations. It is, therefore, not surprising that a man recently arrested for terrorism-involvement charges in the UK was also found to be an active member of Incel chatrooms on Reddit.[32]

Reforming Counter-Terrorism

Increased attention to the gender dynamics at play in VE and terrorism is crucial to comprehensive counter-terrorism responses. A series of interviews with women from 30 countries in South Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East by the Institute for Inclusive Security found that women in communities where VE was rising were found as being the most aware and resistant to its growth. This was because they were often 'the first target of fundamentalism that restricted their rights and led to an increase in domestic violence before it translated into open armed conflict'.[33] Women are well aware in communities with low gender equality that it is their security that will primarily bear the brunt of VE. Thus, they have a vested interest in countering radicalism and VE—the interest being their physical and other forms of security.

Nonetheless, even when included in counter-terrorism or counter-radicalism responses, women's role continues to be reduced to the private sphere. Although their presence is crucial to grassroots efforts, reflected in Pakistani mothers' deradicalisation of their sons within their homes,[34] the absence of women at the top can only facilitate groundwork efforts so much. The under-representation of women in international security further stifles the efforts of NGOs and academics, whose research and effort can only go so far as the top supports it. The deconstruction of patriarchal practices and power dynamics from a bottom-up approach is obsolete if misogynistic practices and attitudes persist at the decision-making levels globally.

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[31] Elliot Rodger, **"My Twister World: The Story of Elliot Rodger"**, 2014.

[32] **"The Threat Landscape: Incel and Misogynist Violent Extremism"**, The McCain Institute & The Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2021, p. 6.

[33] Marie O'Reilly, **"Why Women? Inclusive Security and Peaceful Societies"**, Institute for Inclusive Security, Washington, DC, October 2015.

[34] Naureen Chowdhury Fink, Sara Zeiger and Rafia Bhulai, **"A Man's World? Exploring the Roles of Women in Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism"**, Hedayah and The Global Center on Cooperative Security, 2016, p. 11.

Conclusion

The omnipresence of misogyny, patriarchal practices and GBV in various political violent extremist groups suggests that the acceptance of misogynistic violence as a form of VE is central to understanding VE groups. While it is justified for states to view cases of VE-linked to terrorist organisations as threats to their security, counter-terrorism tactics need to tackle the conditions which foster the rise of VE. States must recognise acts of violence against women in their countries as acts of 'everyday terrorism, intimate terrorism and eventually a form of VE used to exert power'[35] that are inextricably linked with other forms of extremism. Tackling GBV and VE require transparency for support from the top—only then can true change be enacted. Furthermore, counter-terror measures must be accompanied by gender and cultural sensitivities to be deemed successful.

While incel culture and Islamic and right-wing extremism are all viewed as being on different ends of extremist beliefs, their similarity of deeming women as inferior and subsequently treating them as much should be viewed as a stark reminder that misogyny never exists in isolation. If not for the fundamental promotion of female safety for the sake of women, it is crucial that countries recognise misogyny as a stepping stone for extremism, likely to provide them with a national or international security threat. Whilst it is beginning to be perceived by some states, such as Canada and the UK, as a form of domestic terrorism, the term 'terrorism' largely remains politicised and reserved for Islamic extremism. The proliferation of incel and especially misogyny-driven crimes points towards the need for a more expansive framework to tackle both the growing online presence of incels as well as their VE.

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[35] Rachel Pain, **"Everyday Terrorism: Connecting Domestic Violence and Global Terrorism"**, *Progress in Human Geography*, Vol. 38, No. 4, 2014, pp. 531–550.

About the Author

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