

W O M E N W I T H O U T B O R D E R S

WEAPONISED MISOGYNY

Extremism Under Our Noses

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THE POLICY CONTEXT.

Extremists from across the political spectrum have two things in common: a history of domestic or intimate partner violence and an ideology that seeks to curtail women's roles in society. While individuals who subscribe to extremist ideologies have always existed in society, male extremists are in recent years becoming more extreme and increasingly linked to violence. This development is owed to a myriad of factors, including ideological mingling via the internet, mass media production, and the rise of counter-misogynist narratives. In addition to physical violence, these ideologies breed online misogynist hate, which in turn render online and offline spaces less safe for women.



THE POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS.

There are several areas that policymakers can improve on to address the emerging threat of ideologically motivated misogyny more adequately. We first need to address the threat of misogynist extremism as a whole and identify ways to mitigate the threat. Much of this is correlated to how social media is used and abused. Additionally, there are significant gaps regarding the classification assigned to violence motivated by misogyny. This lacuna exists at both the macro and micro levels, where misogynist-motivated violence is neither classified as a hate crime nor as an act of terror by policymakers. Rather, it is mirrored at the local level by law enforcement, which has serious implications for self-reporting to police.

A GLOBAL RISE IN VIOLENT MISOGYNY

Extremists from across the political spectrum have two things in common: a history of domestic or intimate partner violence and an ideology that seeks to curtail women's roles in society. Misogyny has been ingrained in society through the historical suppression of female voices and women's rights, with current strains of attitudes towards women reinforcing modern institutionalised misogyny.¹ Many groups

¹ Wrisley, Samantha Pinson. "Feminist theory and the problem of misogyny." *Feminist Theory* (2021): 14647001211039365.

reimagine women's societal role and draw on antiquated values from an overwhelmingly fictional golden age that afforded them limited socioeconomic freedom and limited women to the private, familial sphere. Such dynamics have helped to validate and justify misogyny and even rationalise violence against women. Extremist groups on the far right, Jihadi Salafi groups, and incels (involuntary celibates) find common ground when it comes to misogynist attitudes, presenting a unique problem to be addressed by those countering violent extremism.

“ *Misogynist-motivated violence is neither classified as a hate crime nor as an act of terror by policymakers* ”

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increasingly linked to violence. This development is owed to a myriad of factors, including ideological mingling via the internet, mass media production, and the rise of counter-misogynist narratives. In addition to physical violence, these ideologies breed online misogynist hate, which in turn render online and offline spaces less safe for women.

There are several areas that policymakers can improve on to address the emerging threat of ideologically motivated misogyny more adequately. The threat from these communities is slowly being recognised, as evidenced by the US secret service's heightened threat alert regarding incels in recent months.² We thus first need to address the threat of misogynist extremism as a whole and identify ways to mitigate the threat. Much of this is correlated to how social media is used and abused. Additionally, there are significant gaps regarding the classification

² "'Incels' Are a Rising Threat in the US, Secret Service Report Finds." The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, March 16, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/mar/16/involuntary-celibates-incels-threat-us-secret-service>.

assigned to violence motivated by misogyny. This lacuna exists at both the macro and micro levels, where misogynist-motivated violence is neither classified as a hate crime nor as an act of terror by policymakers. Rather, it is mirrored at the local level by law enforcement, which has serious implications for self-reporting to police.³

Before addressing recommendations for policymakers to improve in these areas, it is necessary to outline the threat from misogynist violence and identify the areas of greatest importance for policymakers.

ASSESSING THE ONLINE THREAT

In general, extremist ideologies—including misogynist-influenced groups—coalesce in online spaces where themes of antifeminism, male supremacy, and general societal discontent run rampant.⁴ The online spaces where these groups proliferate, termed the Manosphere, are complex and convoluted. Many are built around memes, gifs, lore, and inside jokes that become “meta” as they are reposted and become viral. As Simon Cottee explains, the incel worldview is “rooted in a kind of incel lore—a stock of inherited clichés, wisdoms, and cautionary tales—about the natural order of things”.⁵ Outsiders or newcomers might be confused and it can be difficult to follow what individuals think amidst the cluster of “shitposting” and trolling behaviours.⁶ As Hoffman et al. explain, it is precisely this type of trolling that creates “feedback loops” in which posts foster responses that mask the seriousness of the original post about

³ Mullany, Louise, and Loretta Trickett. "The language of 'misogyny hate crime': Politics, policy and policing." *Professional communication: Consultancy, advocacy, activism* (2020): 249-272.

⁴ Chan, Eslie. "Technology-facilitated gender-based violence, hate speech, and terrorism: a risk assessment on the rise of the incel rebellion in Canada." *Violence against women* (2022): 10778012221125495.

⁵ Cottee, Simon. "Incel (E) motives: Resentment, shame and revenge." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 44, no. 2 (2020): 93-114.

⁶ Moonshot, C. V. E. "Incels: A guide to symbols and terminology." *Moonshot CVE*, <https://moonshotcve.com/incels-symbols-and-terminology> (2020).

beliefs and intentions. This same *modus operandi* of gifs and memes were a significant component in the rise of extremist groups on the far right such as the Boogaloo and Proud boys.

These online spaces can be incredibly toxic, and potentially dangerous for women, online and offline.⁷ Online aggression and violence includes revenge porn, misogynist speech, racial and other slurs, and threats of rape or death.⁸ Such hostile actions by misogynists that target women online, intended as tools of terror, simultaneously bolster the misogynistic attitudes of male users.⁹ Another online behaviour becoming increasingly common is *gender trolling*, when men use hateful speech towards women to derive attention from like-minded misogynists as being humorous and disseminating misogynist sentiments.¹⁰ Even more disconcerting, online hate has put women in physical danger and has resulted in their personal information being leaked intentionally as a form of doxing.¹¹ Misogynist doxing has resulted in women fearing personal harm, and some forced to change their locations, phone numbers, or even identities as they were inundated with harassment and threats.¹² This type of online behaviour is just one way in which these communities pose realistic threats to women that highlights the need for policy action to be taken against these types of groups in the online space.

⁷ Smith, Jo. "Bystander Experiences of Online Gendered Hate." *The Palgrave Handbook of Gendered Violence and Technology* (2021): 395-413.

⁸ Vickery, Jacqueline Ryan, and Tracy Everbach. "The persistence of misogyny: From the streets to our screens, to the White House." *Mediating misogyny: Gender, technology, and harassment* (2018): 1-27.

⁹ Mantilla, K. (2013). Gendertrolling: Misogyny adapts to new media. *Feminist studies*, 39(2), 563-570.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Paananen, Amanda, and Arleigh J. Reichl. "Gendertrolls just want to have fun, too." *Personality and Individual Differences* 141 (2019): 152-156.

¹² Mantilla, "Gendertrolling", 563-570.

THE MANOSPHERE AND ITS INCELS

When examining violent misogyny, it is imperative to understand the different manosphere spaces that have allowed this type of extremism to thrive. Originally, the manosphere mainly consisted of men's rights activists. This movement however emerged before the manosphere existed as part of the men's rights movements during the 1960s and 1970s, which advocated for men's issues and health.¹³ During the 1980s, however, a movement of men's rights activists was born. Men's rights activists (MRAs) still advocated for male issues, but now they blamed feminists and the feminist movement for men's societal grievances.¹⁴ These individuals were ideologically extreme, leveraging evolutionary and biological theories to justify male supremacy, and, in some cases, to justify gender-based violence and raping women.¹⁵ These activists eventually utilised the Internet to find likeminded individuals who shared their ideological beliefs.¹⁶ Currently, the manosphere includes traditional men's rights activists as well as other groups like Pick up Artists (PUA) and incels.¹⁷ However, current trends suggest that even more extreme groups in the manosphere, such as violent incels, are beginning to take over.¹⁸ Recent changes in social media moderation and safety, for example, under the ownership of Twitter by Elon Musk, portends poorly for safe online spaces.

¹³ Ribeiro, Manoel Horta, Jeremy Blackburn, Barry Bradlyn, Emiliano De Cristofaro, Gianluca Stringhini, Summer Long, Stephanie Greenberg, and Savvas Zannettou. "The evolution of the manosphere across the web." In *Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media*, vol. 15, pp. 196-207. 2021.

¹⁴ Marwick, Alice E., and Robyn Caplan. "Drinking male tears: Language, the manosphere, and networked harassment." *Feminist Media Studies* 18, no. 4 (2018): 543-559.

¹⁵ Schmitz, Rachel M., and Emily Kazyak. "Masculinities in cyberspace: An analysis of portrayals of manhood in men's rights activist websites." *Social Sciences* 5, no. 2 (2016): 18.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Van Valkenburgh, Shawn P. "Digesting the red pill: Masculinity and neoliberalism in the manosphere." *Men and Masculinities* 24, no. 1 (2021): 84-103.

¹⁸ Ribeiro et al., "Evolution of the Manosphere", 196-207.

The origin of the ‘incel movement’ dates back to a website from 1997 called “Alana’s Involuntary Celibacy Project”. Shortened to “invcel”, and later “incel”, she claimed the word referred “to ... anybody of any gender who was lonely, had never had sex, or who hadn’t had a relationship in a long time. But we can’t call it that anymore”.¹⁹

“ *Modern incels have emerged as a reaction to this mixture of toxic masculinity and the increasing power of women’s rights.* ”

Alana’s Involuntary Celibacy Project—an online community of socially-awkward youth—“was [originally] a welcoming place, one where men who didn’t know how to talk to women could ask the community’s female members for advice (and vice versa)”.²⁰ Incels didn’t initially perceive themselves as victims, and the platform originally functioned as a venue to discuss their loneliness as well as their experiences (or inexperience) with dating and intimacy. A turning point in these types of online spaces occurred around 2014 with “Gamergate” in which a concerted harassment campaign threatened female video game designers with rape and death. Gamergate revealed the dark underbelly of toxic masculinity that lay beneath the surface of the gaming community. “Gamergate was the precursor to the modern men’s-rights movement, defined in part by a deep resentment of women”. Modern incels have emerged as a reaction to this mixture of toxic masculinity and the increasing power of women’s rights.²¹

Incels have constructed a pseudoscientific ideology of sex replete with its own taxonomy, including its own coloured “pill” jargon comprising

¹⁹ Taylor, Jim. “The woman who founded the ‘incel’ movement.” *BBC News* 30 (2018).

²⁰ Beauchamp, Zack. “Our incel problem.” *The highlight by Vox* (2019).

²¹ Owen, Tess, 2019. “Incel shitposts are making people nervous about the Joker premiere,” *Vice* (3 October), at <https://www.vice.com/en/article/evj5ep/incel-shitposts-are-making-people-nervous-about-the-joker-premiere>, accessed 11 May 2022.

blue, red, and black pills.²² As Debbie Ging explains, the pills pay homage to the Matrix movie franchise whereby taking the “blue pill” allows one to continue “living a life of delusion”. Taking the “red pill”, however, allows one to become “enlightened to life’s ugly truths” and, in the case of incels, “awaken men to feminism’s misandry and brainwashing”.²³ Ultimately, the red pill allows one to look beyond the “dominant propaganda” to fundamentally reject women’s modern sexual emancipation and her ability to pursue only the most attractive and successful men (“Chads”).²⁴ “Blackpill” adherents insist only physically attractive people can have romantic relationships, and said attractiveness is a function of birth. Incels who accept the Black Pill create a unique conceptualisation of society in which alpha, attractive males, i.e., “Chads” are at the top of the social hierarchy, with incels being a natural category at the bottom of the social hierarchy.²⁵ Since blackpillers view their incel status as inevitable due to some self-identified deficit such as being physically unattractive or socially inept, they feel there is no point in trying to pursue relationships with women as they view themselves as undesirable.²⁶ Sara Brzuszkiewicz elaborates further on the “blackpill” philosophy, highlighting a supplemental dimension that

²² There are also “fringe” pills, including the “rape pill” which Brzuszkiewicz describes as those believing all sex is coerced because women do not have the ability to make rational decisions. Additionally, there is a “purple pill,” which is a “moderate” pill. It is important to highlight that “Pill” jargon is not unique to incels as the metaphor is used throughout the Manosphere with various MRA organizations and within the far-right communities and among QAnon conspiracy theorists. Additionally, Elon Musk (the controversial founder of Tesla) tweeted “Take the Red Pill” to his 34 million followers in May of 2020 to which Ivanka Trump responded “Taken”.

²³ Ging, Debbie. “Alphas, betas, and incels: Theorizing the masculinities of the manosphere.” *Men and masculinities* 22, no. 4 (2019): 638-657.

²⁴ Being “redpillled” in the Manosphere means waking up to what’s seen as the truth of male-female relations, a key part of which is the idea that women are attracted to the highest-status men they can find. The “blackpill” derives from the belief that a man’s sexual success is entirely determined by biological traits: his jawline, cheekbones, or facial symmetry. The result, in their view, is that modern Western society is defined by a kind of sexual class system.

²⁵ O’Donnell, Catharina, and Eran Shor. ““This is a political movement, friend”: Why “incels” support violence.” *The British Journal of Sociology* 73, no. 2 (2022): 336-351.

²⁶ Scotto di Carlo, Giuseppina. “An analysis of self-other representations in the incelosphere: Between online misogyny and self-contempt.” *Discourse & Society* 34, no. 1 (2023): 3-21.

fosters a sense of hopelessness.²⁷ However, incels are far from a homogenous group and individuals can hold a range of ideological beliefs, extending from mild to extremely radical and dangerous. Not all of them subscribe to the “blackpill” ideology; some may just be lonely and not misogynistic. Despite marked divergences across the incel community, many incel pages have common themes and shared sentiments that unite members, usually regarding self-loathing and suicidal ideation. While “redpill” and “blackpill” philosophies may incite violence, the latter adds a suicidal element and a justification for violence, conferring an added element of danger (both for self-harm and harm to others).

A MOUNTING CULTURE OF VIOLENCE

Violent ideation is becoming increasingly prevalent on incel platforms. One of the most troublesome trends has been the admiration that incels have for other mass shooters, especially for those who target female classmates. Elliot Rodger, who carried out a deadly attack in Isla Vista, California in the name of the incel rebellion, has been canonised as a saint by many other incels.²⁸ This phenomenon of ‘incel sainthood’ has proven to be especially dangerous regarding ideologically primed incels

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who can become inspired to carry out acts of mass violence in the name of incels. One such incident occurred when Alek Minassian from Canada carried out an attack in which

²⁷ Brzuszkiewicz, Sara. *Incel radical milieu and external locus of control*. International Centre for Counterterrorism (ICCT), 2020.

²⁸ Baele, Stephane J., Lewys Brace, and Travis G. Coan. "From "Incel" to "Saint": Analyzing the violent worldview behind the 2018 Toronto attack." *Terrorism and political violence* 33, no. 8 (2021): 1667-1691.

he drove a van through a crowd of people, stating that he was inspired by Elliot Rodger and wanted to make his own contribution to the global incel movement.²⁹ In a more recent incel attack, Armando Hernandez unleashed his frustrations with his incel status on young couples in a shooting spree at the Westgate Mall in 2020.³⁰ Due to the recent increase in violence perpetrated by violent misogynists, especially incels, this type of violence is likely to continue to worsen in the form of mass-casualty and lone actor attacks. While events such as these are rare, scholars contend that examining high profile cases of misogynist violence may be valuable in the identification of extremist communities such as incels.³¹

This potential threat of physical harm from this community presents a risk, as seen with the incel motivated attacks that have occurred over recent years and need to be publicly addressed for what they are: acts of ideological violence. In her 2018 *New York Times* article, Jessica Valenti urges us to move away from calling these men “lone wolves” and to instead call the phenomenon by its name: misogynist terrorism. We tend, as Valenti contends, to see sexism as “natural”, which has the effect that “misogynist tendencies of mass shooters become afterthoughts rather than predictable and stark warnings”.³² To substantiate this view, Caron Gentry interrogates “misogynistic terrorism”, emphasising that violence against women is not something that happens only in the home. Approaching the topic from critical and intersectional lenses, Gentry argues that (counter-) terrorism studies suffer from several biases,

²⁹ Hoffman, Bruce, Jacob Ware, and Ezra Shapiro. "Assessing the threat of incel violence." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 43, no. 7 (2020): 565-587.

³⁰ Kaplan, B. (2022, September 12). Westgate Entertainment District. Retrieved September 20, 2022, from <https://westgateaz.com/>

³¹ Maher, JaneMaree, Jude McCulloch, and Gail Mason. "Punishing gendered violence as hate crime: aggravated sentences as a means of recognising hate as motivation for violent crimes against women." *Australian Feminist Law Journal* 41, no. 1 (2015): 177-193.

³² Valenti, Jessica. "When Misogynists Become Terrorists." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, April 26, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/26/opinion/when-misogynists-become-terrorists.html>.

including embedded racial, cultural, and gendered assumptions, and that the idea of “misogynistic terrorism” has been noticeably absent from terrorism literature.³³ Furthermore, researchers and practitioners inevitably embed biases in their research or CVE programming. These biases are reflected in the definitions, or the disparate media coverage of events. All of which have broader implications on sentencing rates, distinguishing between different forms of intimate partner violence or mass casualty attacks.³⁴

In research on terrorism, violent misogyny has begun to be recognised as precursor behaviour to radical actions or as a facilitating element. Yet more action is still needed. At the DHS Center of Excellence, START,

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researcher Michael Jensen includes male supremacy as an ideological subcategory in the 2018 codebook for the PIRUS dataset (Profiles of Individuals Radicalized in the United States)

from the University of Maryland.³⁵ Researchers support the notion that incel violence targeting women can be deemed terrorism when perpetrator motivations are rooted in misogynist ideology. Canada legally tried its first violent incel—a teenage boy who carried out a fatal stabbing—on terrorism charges in 2020, potentially setting a legal precedent for future criminal proceedings regarding this type of violence.

³³ Gentry, Caron. *Disordered Violence: How Gender, Race and Heteronormativity Structure Terrorism*. Edinburgh University Press, 2020.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ “Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (Pirus).” Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) | START.umd.edu. Accessed March 28, 2023. <https://www.start.umd.edu/data-tools/profiles-individual-radicalization-united-states-pirus>.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The first step that policymakers need to take is to address the classification of this type of violence. By identifying mass violence attacks motivated by misogyny and direct acts of misogynist violence as hate crimes, there will 1) be more awareness of these types of crimes; 2) harsher penalties for perpetrators of these types of crimes; and 3) encouragement for victims to step forward, and to feel supported and heard.

“ *Weaponised misogyny will continue to be a bellwether for radicalisation, and as is the case with lone actors, serial killers, and terrorists, women are often the first victims in a long line of casualties.* ”

Additionally, training and knowledge at the local level regarding misogynist violence is paramount. The under reporting by police of misogynist violence needs to be addressed to avoid normalising this type of violence and treat these types of attacks more seriously, which would not only improve victim-police relations but would set a steppingstone to reduce these types of incidents altogether.

Finally, it is important that we track how violent misogyny contributes to the process of radicalisation and lowers inhibitions to move individuals from radical intention to radical action. With intersectionality in mind, it is also conceivable that incels who are attracted to other violent ideologies like Jihadi Salafism, or the Far Right will prove even more dangerous over time. Weaponised misogyny will continue to be a bellwether for radicalisation, and as is the case with lone actors, serial killers, and terrorists, women are often the first victims in a long line of casualties.

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Women without Borders (WwB) is an international non-profit organisation headquartered in Vienna. Since 2001, WwB has been building capacity through women leadership and empowered dialogue efforts to address gender-based violence and violent extremism, the world over.