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# MISOGYNISTIC AND ANTI-FEMINIST ONLINE TRENDS

## QUARTERLY RESEARCH REVIEW

Eneidia Bardho, Magali Gay-Berthomieu and Clémentine Babin-Heynard

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Radicalisation Awareness Network



Policy  
Support

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS

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<b>ALT-RIGHT</b>	alternative right
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>INCELS</b>	involuntary celibates
<b>QRR</b>	Quarterly Research Review
<b>WPS</b>	Women, Peace and Security
<b>P/CVE</b>	Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism.

## INTRODUCTION

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This Quarterly Research Review (QRR) summarises the current state of research in relation to the topic of online misogyny and anti-feminism, from non-violent extremist views to incels. The aim of this review is to provide policymakers with a collection of some of the most relevant publications and their key messages concerning the current understanding of misogynistic and anti-feminist trends in the online landscape, online indoctrination and radicalisation pathways towards gender-based violent extremism, and exit strategies, challenges, and ways forward.

The authors selected 14 papers that capture the current understanding and state of play of online anti-feminist trends. Considering the ToR specific focus on online misogyny and anti-feminism, the selection of articles was guided by their use of a gender lens, providing an analysis of the phenomenon that encompasses both broader societal dynamics and individual explanations. The selected papers bring an innovative and more comprehensive approach to the study of the phenomenon, taking on a more social and gendered perspective and looking at how structural factors and gender norms shape such online manifestations.

This QRR centres on the following subtopics and is structured as follows:

- **Methodology:** this section outlines the research methods, specifically the criteria for the inclusion of publications and limits of the review.
- **Strategic summary:** this section highlights the key takeaways from the literature review.
- **Understanding and framing misogynistic and anti-feminist trends in the online landscape** (Harris & Vitis, 2020; Morin, 2021; García-Mingo & Diaz-Fernandez, 2023; Baele, Brace & Ging, 2024; Barcellona, 2022): the first section provides an overview of misogynistic and anti-feminist trends in the online sphere with a focus on the European context. This includes themes such as:
  - the role of technology advancement in providing new avenues that exacerbate gender-based violence, creating a continuum between online and offline risks and harms;
  - the various misogynistic and anti-feminist manifestations in the manosphere, specifically, incel communities;
  - whether these online communities extend or reframe old resilient ideologies and whether these overlap with other forms of extremism, such as the alt-right.
- **Indoctrination and radicalisation pathways in the online sphere towards gender-based violent extremism** (Hambalko, 2022; Rothermel, 2023; Tietjen & Tirkkonen, 2023; Regehr, 2022; Botto & Gottzén, 2023): the articles in this section delve into the recruitment and radicalisation mechanisms that attract and retain individuals in online incel communities. This includes the following themes:
  - an analysis of the vulnerabilities that lead individuals to become radicalised.
  - the role of misogyny and of patriarchal society in general in shaping and feeding these online communities.
  - whether incel communities should be categorised as terrorist threat, and whether existing counter-terrorist processes would be sufficient to tackle the phenomenon.

- **Exit strategies, challenges and ways forward** (Thorburn, 2023; Kelly, Rothermel & Sugiura, 2024; Violence Prevention Network and Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy, 2021): this section looks at papers outlining factors that can aid de-radicalisation processes and existing recommendations to address the emerging threat of online extremism; it also encourages a mindful assessment of the existing literature, ensuring that references selected are backed by a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.
- **Conclusion:** this section provides an overview of key findings stemming from a cross-cutting analysis of evidence and insights from all the papers reviewed.

This QRR is linked to and consolidates the outcomes of the thematic research meeting 'Violent incels: refining differentiation and comparison for an emerging threat', held by the European Commission and RAN Policy Support on 27 October 2022.

## METHODOLOGY

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Researchers for this paper conducted targeted searches in English, French, Italian and Spanish to identify relevant literature with a view to include, as per the requirements:

- Sources published since 2020.
- Sources analysing the manifestations of the phenomenon within the European Union area. Authors affiliated with EU higher academic institutions were prioritised, however, due to their innovative element and relevance with respect to this QRR, three papers, two from Australia (Harris & Vitis, 2020; Thorburn, 2023) and one from the United Kingdom (Regehr, 2022) were included. With respect to content specific to the EU, due to the borderless nature of the digital world, all articles treat the issue from a global perspective, except for Morin (2021) and García-Mingo & S. Diaz-Fernandez (2023), who focus, respectively, on France, and Spain (including the general EU context).
- Sources that are accessible either as open-source publications through academic journals or as a grey literature publication (i.e. research published outside traditional commercial or academic publishing and distribution channels). Due to the relatively limited amount of new, relevant, and open-access literature from the EU as well as to ensure geographical balance, a paper by a French author (Morin, 2021) that is behind a paywall and relevant to this QRR was included.

The key search terms applied in the selection of the papers include: online anti-feminism, online misogyny, online misogynistic violence, violent right-wing extremism, violent incelism, manosphere, online radical discourse, anti-women, incel homicide/murder attacks, online violence against women, incel gender-based violence, and incel women hatred. Given that the focus of the review was on online misogyny and anti-feminist trends, it was important to tailor the search to adopt a more social and gendered perspective, contrasting with previous literature that focused on individual explanations. The search identified 65 relevant sources (61 academic articles, three grey literature sources, and one conference report) of which 14 were selected based on the above-mentioned criteria and the subtopics selected for this review:

- Understanding and framing misogynistic and anti-feminist trends in the online landscape
- Indoctrination and radicalisation pathways in the online sphere towards gender-based violent extremism
- Exit strategies, challenges, and ways forward

This review spans a significant range of contemporary sources relevant to the general topic 'Misogynistic and anti-feminist trends in the online landscape' and proposed subtopics. Considering the final audience of the paper, the authors prioritised papers addressing the issues in Member States of the European Union (EU), as a priority area of interest for the European Commission. However, this is not an exhaustive review of the literature and a few limitations should be mentioned:

- The online nature of the study topic inherently overcomes geographical borders, making the EU-focus challenging. In addition, most of the online spaces reviewed operate in English with no information on the countries their members originate from.
- Given the emerging nature of the literature on the topic in some EU Member States, the inclusion of articles from non-EU countries was necessary to ensure the review is up-to-date and provide more relevant findings to policymakers.
- Furthermore, focusing on only open-access publications narrows access to innovative and relevant findings.

## STRATEGIC SUMMARY

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This Quarterly Research Review (QRR) investigates misogynistic and anti-feminist trends occurring in the online sphere. Specifically, it explores whether these trends belong to old resilient ideologies or newly appeared narratives and how they are featured within current understandings and frameworks of terrorism. While research on violent extremism in other areas is well-established, the literature on misogynistic and anti-feminist violent extremism has only emerged in recent years. This QRR is organised into three main subtopics that aim at: providing an overview of online misogynistic and anti-feminist trends; understanding related online pathways of indoctrination and radicalisation; and, finally, presenting exit strategies, challenges and ways forward.

The key takeaways identified in this review are the following:

- The development of digital technologies has created new avenues that contribute to exacerbating gender-based violence by extending it from the offline to the online sphere. The online elements of anonymity and lack of physical contact can reduce empathy and facilitate aggression, as manifested in the manosphere, a conglomerate of online communities wherein men diffuse a misogynistic culture. While older movements in the manosphere are milder, newer ones are more extreme, with incels (involuntary celibates) being the most violent. In the European context, the rise of local manospheres appeared linked to a socio-political context where far-right political parties, anti-feminist and de-democratisation processes are rising up, evidencing a clear connection between incels and far-right movements.
- While in recent years violent language has steadily increased within incel communities, this is heterogeneous across platforms, with dedicated forums being more violent than subreddits. Current understandings link this heterogeneity to platform censorship, with forums being less easily regulated, therefore, hosting more violent content.
- Social media platforms facilitate radicalisation towards gender-based violent extremism through the use of memes and irony as well as algorithm processes that amplify and normalise extremist content, and by providing space for these communities to connect. The distorted use of conventional methods of knowledge dissemination, such as scientific papers and statistics, also reinforces the sense of credibility of incel communities and aligns with mainstream conservative views and other extreme far-right narratives, therefore, holding great recruiting power.
- Recent episodes of violence associated to incel communities have revealed similarities with terrorist attacks (e.g., violence is used to generate fear among a specific target group to challenge the perceived political/social order), which have led some governments to classify incel groups as emergent terrorist threats. However, research highlights the gaps in current counterterrorist practices to effectively tackle this form of violent extremism. While the ideologies other forms of terrorist attacks rely on are unequivocally condemned, incel beliefs are grounded and confirmed in society, wherein gender inequality and sexism are still widespread. Still, incel attacks are not understood as a product of this social context, but remain explained through individual factors, such as mental illness, which results in misinterpreting the phenomenon.
- Young age, lack of life experience, loneliness and the desire for connection and belonging are risk factors that make individuals who feel socially rejected for not meeting traditional norms of masculinity more susceptible to engage with incel communities. High exposure to essentialist and misogynistic narratives fuels incels' anger, consolidates their radicalisation and encourages violent behaviours.
- Deradicalisation processes do not guarantee incels' disengagement from misogynistic thoughts, but self-acceptance and emotional self-reflection prove crucial in highlighting men's agency to overcome these



beliefs. Online spaces created to provide advice to people who wish to leave the incel community also work as helpful social support.

- Nevertheless, to ensure a comprehensive understanding of incel communities and effective deradicalisation policies and programmes, policy responses need to take into account gender inequalities that still pervade in society and how those shape misogynistic beliefs and incel violence.
- Overall, policymakers need to strengthen their conceptual understanding of misogyny and anti-feminism within violent extremism and radicalisation processes, especially, by recognising their political nature and their intersection with far-right groups; the development of strategies that address anti-feminist ideologies and projects that reach out to online spaces of recruitment to offer support should follow accordingly.

## SELECTED PAPERS

### UNDERSTANDING AND FRAMING MISOGYNISTIC AND ANTI-FEMINIST TRENDS IN THE ONLINE LANDSCAPE

B. Harris & L. Vitis (2020), 'Digital intrusions: Technology, spatiality and violence against women', *Journal of Gender-Based Violence*, vol.4, nr 3, p. 325-341. Available at: <https://eprints.qut.edu.au/204680/>.

#### KEY MESSAGES:

- The digital space and its feature of anonymity provides new avenues for extending and exacerbating violence against women, creating a continuum between the online and offline spheres.
- Digital violence permeates various aspects of a woman's life, spanning public, private, and professional spheres, and may even extend to offline violence. The manufacture and management of information and communication technologies continue to exhibit gender bias, which can facilitate manifestations of violence against women. This is particularly evident with the rise of the manosphere, online collectives of men perpetuating misogynistic beliefs in the virtual world.

In this article, Harris and Vitis investigate, through an exhaustive review of the literature, the impact of technology on gendered violence and the links between digital harms, including online violence, with offline violence against women.

The authors observe how the development of technology and digital media have changed self-expression and social interactions, breaking down geographic and temporal boundaries. While this advancement has positively impacted society allowing borderless connections and increased engagement, it has also created new channels for exporting existing forms of offline violence to the online sphere. The authors call for attention to the risks that the unique features of the online sphere pose, such as anonymity and the absence of physical contact, and warn on how these can reduce online users' empathy and amplify aggression.

Relying on abundant literature, the authors recall the disproportionate victimisation of women by men and show how digital violence, a 'spaceless' violence, does not exist in a vacuum, but is an extension of the broader spectrum of harm and gender inequality that women face offline. Therefore, these two forms of violence reinforce each other and cannot be separated. Online harm is also not static, as new technologies and platforms continually create new ways to perpetrate abuse and provide opportunities for harassment and surveillance. Like offline violence against women, digital violence similarly permeates all areas of women's lives and can happen anywhere and anytime a woman uses digital technologies. In addition, women online often face intersecting forms of discrimination, targeting their gender, sexuality, religion, ethnicity and/or disability. For instance, the article refers to research showing that lesbian, bisexual and transgender women have reported experiencing threats of sexual violence often framed as 'corrective' measures against perceived deviations from traditional gender roles and heteronormative sexuality<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, the authors call for an intersectional approach in understanding and addressing digital violence.

Another point highlighted by the article is the impact of the still overly male-dominated manufacture and management of digital technology, which leads to inherent hostility of the online spaces towards women, with algorithms and online cultures even fostering violence, and hateful and degrading language becoming

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<sup>1</sup> E.A., Jane (2014), 'Back to the kitchen, cunt': speaking the unspeakable about online misogyny', *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, vol. 28, nr 4, p. 459-475. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2014.924479>.

increasingly common since the rise of the internet. This is particularly evident with the rise of the manosphere, an online community of men propagating a misogynistic culture and contributing to normalising violence against women.

In conclusion, while States are exploring how online violence against women could be effectively tackled on digital spaces and technology, the authors warn about their evolving nature and how efforts to define and address online violence can quickly become outdated.

C. Morin (2021), 'Le renouvellement de l'antiféminisme dans la manosphère : idéalisation de la tradition et individualisme masculiniste', *Le Temps des médias*, vol. 36, nr 1, p. 172-191. Available at: <https://www.cairn.info/revue-le-temps-des-medias-2021-1-page-172.htm?contenu=auteurs>

#### KEY MESSAGES:

- In light of the reconfigurations of women-men relationships that took place in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the focus of online anti-feminist community has moved from a traditional defence of nuclear family to a condemnation of women's (neo)liberal sexuality.
- Sexuality and romantic relationships have become the point of crystallisation of the manosphere's misogynistic rationale.
- Online anti-feminism, while building on seemingly rationalist arguments to defend an idealised ideal of tradition, extensively draws from an emotional and intimist mode of communication.

Céline Morin's article investigates the revival and evolution of anti-feminist ideologies in the online manosphere. The thematic scope includes the ideological shifts within this digital space, emphasising the interplay between traditionalist views and contemporary masculinist individualism. While primarily centred on the French context, the findings reflect broader trends in Western societies.

The study employs a qualitative approach and uses a deductive and empirical-descriptive method to map the manosphere websites, identify the most significant portals (as the ones being cited as references in the inter-self of the manosphere), and perform content analysis. The study draws on historical and sociocultural contexts to understand the evolution and current dynamics of anti-feminism.

The author shows how manosphere extends and reconfigures anti-feminism, in light of the societal changes brought by the feminist struggles of the second half of the 20th century. Those (including women's access to divorce, contraception and elective abortion) marked a significant turning point in the history of intimacy and had a strong impact on romantic imaginaries, traditional love practices, and women's control of their bodies and sexuality. If anti-feminism movements that preceded the advent of the Internet focused on a traditional gendered division of roles within society and family (with women confined to the private sphere and men to the public one), the key focus of anti-feminism that manifests on the manosphere (grounded in a more individual emotional system) is sexuality, with men expressing grievances over the new perceived women dominance and rejecting those liberal societal shifts.

In a context where women's sexuality is considered too liberal, the manosphere draws parallels between economic and romantic neoliberalism, with men's economic and romantic vulnerability taking centre stage. Members of the manosphere consider that during prosperous times, women treat men as commodities on an 'affective market', while crises prompt them to adopt a more pragmatic approach and lower their exigences. This concept of neoliberalism is thus seen as weakening social structures and distorting natural gender expressions, particularly to the disadvantage of men.

While the manosphere relies on a rationalist rhetoric as a way to distance itself from emotions associated with women, online discourses are saturated with personal and emotional expressions rooted in a historically feminine expressivist and intimist register, where victimisation is frequent. The author argues that while building its narrative on the defence of tradition and in opposition to modern values, online anti-feminism actually mobilises communication modes centred on (modern) individual expression and emotional intimacy, tributary to feminist works legitimating emotions as a political tool.

The author concludes that the manosphere shows a nuanced transformation of anti-feminist ideas that merges old and new narratives to resonate with contemporary audiences. By enriching naturalistic functionalism, which promotes the nuclear family based on the natural complementarity of the father and mother, with an evolutionary psychology that essentialises men and women's behaviours by reducing them to sexual selection, it does not only perpetuate traditional patriarchal values and norms, but also adapts its narrative to modern society's individualism, making it more relatable and appealing to a wider audience of men who feel marginalised by recent societal changes.

E. García-Mingo & S. Diaz-Fernandez (2023), 'Mapping Research on Online Misogyny and Manosphere in Spain: The Way Ahead', *Masculinities & Social Change*, vol.12, nr 3, p. 293-309. Available at: <https://www.hipatiapress.com/hpjournals/index.php/mcs/article/view/11882>

#### KEY MESSAGES:

- Digital technologies have created new spaces for discriminatory behaviours that reinforce misogyny. Wide-reach features of the digital world and the use of memes and irony allow for a viral dissemination of these ideologies, which easily penetrates all levels of society.
- The global manosphere has evident connections with anti-feminist and right-wing ideologies.

In this article, García-Mingo and Diaz-Fernandez provide a comprehensive overview of studies related to the manifestations of the manosphere and anti-feminism in both Spanish and broader European contexts. The authors reviewed recent and relevant studies that delve into organised online misogyny and toxic technocultures. They specifically review the works on the manosphere carried out in Spain from 2018 to the present, consisting of 50 academic texts to define the concept of manosphere, explore various subjects related to it, and identify remaining gaps in research.

The rapid development of digital technologies has resulted in new avenues for the (re)production of discriminatory behaviours that reinforce social structures of gender inequality and misogyny. This has become the object of an emerging field of study in relation to the way masculine identities are constructed and affirmed in the online realm of the manosphere, a conglomerate of different Internet communities and digital spaces where men find themselves in opposition to feminism and gender equality.

Subcultures in the manosphere differ in their ideas and beliefs, yet they all share some common grounds, namely, anti-feminist sentiments, the re-establishment of white male privilege, the perpetuation of gender stereotypes, sexist speech, and male victimhood and suffering. The manosphere makes misogyny and symbolic violence hegemonic in the digital space, with its members seeking to silence, make invisible and discipline feminism in the digital landscape. They do so by channelling male resentment and promoting toxic masculinity and discourses that trivialise and legitimise violence against women in all its forms.

Assessing findings from previous research, the authors note that the local manifestations of the manosphere in different European States (and more specifically in Spain) cannot be understood independently from the socio-historical context in which those emerged, a context marked by a growing feminist awareness and the adoption

of pro-equality policies, that met strong opposition from far-right populist parties and anti-feminist campaigns. Over the past year, there has been an increase of misogynistic digital communities, with the manosphere becoming a space that brings together all those who have a common interest in masculinity and its supposed crisis. As this space is growing and becoming more visible, it also gains more social and political relevance and the authors find necessary to highlight the political dimension of the manosphere, observing the alignment between the anti-feminism of the far-right populist parties with the manosphere misogynistic discourses.

Finally, the authors question the tools used by the manosphere and their high capacity for becoming viral and penetrating into society, and reflect upon the codes and algorithms on which those social media and platforms rely to understand the hegemonic, hierarchical and exclusion dynamics that are made possible thanks to the specific designs and programming.

In conclusion, the manosphere, far from being insignificant, holds cultural and political significance. It serves as a channel for misogynistic ideas, transmitted through digital practices that entertain and go viral. Importantly, it has strong links with the far-right populist movement, acting as a conduit for ideas between political parties, cultural creators, and society at large. Understanding and analysing the manosphere is essential, as it impacts debates on gender equality and poses risks to progress in the fight for equal rights.

S. Baele, L. Brace & D. Ging (2024), 'A Diachronic Cross-Platforms Analysis of Violent Extremist Language in the Incel Online Ecosystem', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 36, nr 3, p. 382-405. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09546553.2022.2161373>

#### KEY MESSAGES:

- The incelosphere constitutes the most extreme subculture of the manosphere, and has led to debates on whether the ideology it relies on constitutes a form of violent extremism.
- While violent extremist language of incel online spaces has increased in the past years, differences appear across platforms, with extremist language being more common in main forums than subreddits.

In recent years, the rise of violent attacks driven by incel ideology have caused growing concern in Western societies over the offline impact of this online subculture, considered as the most extreme one when situated across the broader landscape of the manosphere. These attacks have created legal uncertainty as well as academic debates questioning the nature of the incel ideology and whether it constitutes a form of violent extremism. In this article, the authors note that those debates rely on research limited to specific online spaces, ignoring evolution over time. Thus, the authors intend to adopt a dynamic approach to explore violent extremist language in the incel online ecosystem, by tracking linguistic markers of violence against what they call 'dehumanised groups' across various platforms and over time. To do so, they analyse the largest known linguistic corpus of incel online content (11,717,516 posts, spanning all the major incel online spaces between 2014 and 2022) with a custom dictionary of incel violent extremist language, which include words such as 'rape', 'killing', 'torture', as well as other words specific to the incel community like 'foid', a derogatory and dehumanising term used to refer to women

Research on extremist movements, including terrorism, has highlighted the splintering processes whereby extremist ideologies tend to fragment over time into different (and sometimes opposed) sub-ideologies, where a minority goes towards increasing radicalism. Zooming on the manosphere, and its most extreme component the incelosphere, the authors recall that extremist (online) ideologies do not evolve in a uniform way. For instance, older manosphere communities appear milder compared to the newer ones, which uphold more extremist and misogynistic ideologies, and acts of violence inspired by the ideology have had both the effect of

increasing extremism or triggering the creation of sub-communities that clearly reject violence. External factors, such as the covid-19 pandemic, can also constitute a fertile situation for more extremist views to develop and increase activity. Social media platforms have also created new channels for these misogynistic views to evolve and be disseminated more widely than ever before, resulting in a large online misogynistic ecosystem. The authors also cite recent research that has pointed at connections and shared ideas between the incel and far-right online ecosystems, with far-right representatives exploiting incels' vulnerabilities and their anti-female supremacist beliefs to attract them towards white supremacist ideologies.

Findings from the authors' research show that while there is a clear, steady overall increase of violent extremist language in the incelsphere across the years, this evolution has not been uniform, with violent extremist language sometimes being more than four times more salient in some online spaces compared to others. Interestingly, they find that contrarily to usual processes of splintering, it is the main lineage itself that seems to have moved towards greater violent extremism, not some small splinters. Indeed, data shows that incel violent extremist language appears more specific to the forums than to the subreddits, and this seems to be linked to platforms responses, as it is much more difficult to shut down a forum compared to a subreddit. In conclusion, the authors recall that understanding the incelsphere as a dynamic and continuously evolving ecosystem connected to neighbouring ones is crucial for analysis and prevention.

M. Barcellona (2022), 'Incel violence as a new terrorism threat: A brief investigation between Alt-Right and Manosphere dimensions', *Sortuz: Oñati Journal of Emergent Socio-Legal Studies*, vol. 11, nr 2, p. 170-186. Available at: <https://opo.iisj.net/index.php/sortuz/article/view/1471>

#### KEY MESSAGES:

- Following recent violent attacks from individuals belonging to alt-right and incel communities that resemble terrorist dynamics, governments are starting to treat these groups like emerging terrorism threats.
- Small social media platforms and algorithms should be considered as risk factors facilitating radicalisation.
- Different counterterrorism measures are needed as, unlike terrorist groups whose ideology is commonly condemned, incel communities share misogynistic beliefs that are still widely accepted in society, making them more difficult to eradicate.

Using existing research, the article aims at providing an overview of the different communities composing the global manosphere, to discuss the commonalities between the increasingly violent alt-right and incel communities, and examine how they situate within the context of terrorism.

After a mapping of the manosphere to provide some definitions of Men's Rights Activists, Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW), Pick Up Artists (PUA), Fathers' Rights groups and Incels, the author focuses more carefully on the latter. Specifically, the article looks at incels' ideologies and self-narratives. According to Incels, taking the "Red pill" consists in acknowledging the harsh reality that women are shallow and only interested in wealthy and attractive men. The "Black pill" represents the next stage, which involves accepting this reality as an unchangeable condition. This perspective highlights a key aspect of the Incel narrative: a sense of victimisation tied to self-pity and fatalism. Incels tend to depict themselves as victims of a predetermined condition they have no control over, thus removing their sense of agency and responsibility as well as 'barriers to antisocial behaviour and radicalisation' (p.175). The article then discusses the common features of the increasingly violent alt-right and incel communities, which both share a massive online presence, misogynistic beliefs, and the use of abusive language. In addition, their members have been found to gather or migrate to the same online platforms.

The article then provides an overview of the violent attacks that have been documented recently in several Western countries, with perpetrators being directly or indirectly affiliated to these two communities, and recalls that some governments have started to classify these attacks as terrorist activities, including incels, among emerging domestic terrorism threats. Some similarities between incels, far-right groups, and terrorist dynamics can be observed, such as exploiting the online realm as a community to share and reinforce their ideologies and plan attacks. Furthermore, these communities are not hierarchical, as there are no leaders giving orders, and incels act alone when carrying out violent attacks. However, when examining the counterterrorism legislative and policy framework in place since the 9/11 terrorist attack, the author recalls that those are still struggling to tackle the phenomenon of online extremism. While large social media platforms are introducing algorithms to restrict violent and harmful language, studies suggest that these very algorithms can also push users towards more extreme contents, thus enhancing radicalisation. Thus, the author urges governments to pay attention to smaller platforms, which present an attractive gateway for terrorists, following the restrictions on the larger ones.

In conclusion, the authors note that, while for other forms of terrorism societies unequivocally condemn not only the attack itself but also the ideological roots at the basis of it, the grounds of incel ideology appear to be confirmed by society, as gender inequality and sexism are still widespread and, to some extent, still socially accepted. This poses some challenges to deradicalisation processes and calls for the need to rethink counterterrorism strategies to address this specific form of terrorism.

## INDOCTRINATION AND RADICALISATION PATHWAYS IN THE ONLINE SPHERE TOWARDS GENDER-BASED VIOLENT EXTREMISM

V. Hambalko (2022), 'Gender Based Violent Extremism in the Age of Social Media ', The Policy of National Security, Special issue "Extremism, Internet, Gender", p. 89-99. Available at: <https://ips.ac.rs/publications/gender-based-violent-extremism-in-the-age-of-social-media/>

### KEY MESSAGES:

- Social media platforms can facilitate indirect radicalisation towards gender-based violent extremism.
- In mainstream social media, memes and humour disguise extremist content, which desensitises and normalises violence. Less surveilled online platforms allow for radical movements to flourish, wherein extremist beliefs are amplified and violent attacks explicitly planned.
- These indirect radicalisation processes remain hidden while violent attacks are misinterpreted as acts perpetrated by mentally ill individuals, thus ignoring the complex online infrastructure that leads to them.

This article aims to explore how mainstream and alternative social media platforms encourage and amplify gender-based violent extremism. Specifically, the author conducts a review of existing literature, offline events and online trends to analyse the intersection of social media (4chan, Reddit, TikTok), the alt-right radical ideology, and violence against women in Western societies. With the rise of social media, a new wave of extremist violence emerged with strong radical views rooted in the alt-right, a form of far-right movement concerned with upholding and strengthening the white race and traditional gender roles in Western countries. These values are found in different online communities that have branched out from the alt-right movement, including incels.



This paper argues that a process of indirect radicalisation occurs when individuals read information from various platforms that promote a specific radical ideology, and that this information can alter their perception and understanding of reality. Over time, this process can lead to the acceptance of extreme violence. Indirect radicalisation operates as silent recruiter, often going undetected unless specific algorithms are targeted or online communities are closely monitored.

Some social media platforms, particularly the least regulated ones (such as the dark web), have minimal surveillance, allowing radical movements to flourish without disturbance. This lack of oversight is problematic, as many violent attacks are announced beforehand, yet they remain unstoppable. These platforms enable people with extreme views to connect, share information, and reinforce their ideologies. Mainstream social media also play a role, with violent and extremist content often disguised through memes and the use of irony. This dark humour desensitises the audience, making extreme ideologies more acceptable. Consequently, young, impressionable individuals may be drawn in, leading to further radicalisation. Furthermore, algorithms amplify this effect by promoting similar content, subtly influencing perceptions of violence against women.

These processes of desensitisation from violence through social media not only increase radicalisation but also make it challenging to identify the origin of the violent attacks. In fact, misogynistic terror attacks are often dismissed as actions of mentally unstable individuals, rather than being linked to radical online environments.

The author concludes that online gender-based violent extremism poses significant risks and requires more attention and intervention. Addressing this issue requires comprehensive policies targeting online violent communities and a better understanding of the ideological roots of gender-based violent extremism to prevent future attacks.

A.-K. Rothermel (2023), 'The role of evidence-based misogyny in antifeminist online communities of the 'manosphere'', *Big Data & Society*, vol. 10, nr 1. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/20539517221145671>

#### KEY MESSAGES:

- Communities in the manosphere commonly use evidence-based misogyny, a micro-political discursive tactic in which various forms of evidence are presented to reinforce misogynistic views.
- Evidence-based misogyny legitimises male supremacy within the manosphere and aligns with mainstream conservative views and other extreme far-right narratives, thus holding great recruiting power.

In this commentary, the author explores the role of 'evidence-based misogyny' in the radicalisation process into anti-feminist and misogynist subcultures of the manosphere as well as in connecting with mainstream conservative and other far-right ideologies. Building on the author's previous work, this article involves a discourse analysis of content extracted from social media and forums in different subcultures of the manosphere with a Russian, Indian and USA user base.

Evidence-based misogyny is a micro-political discursive strategy in which various forms of fabricated or distorted evidence are presented to reinforce misogynistic views on gender relations. Members of the manosphere employ this tactic to lend credibility to their arguments and validate their male supremacist worldview. The evidence presented by manosphere users focuses on societal issues that specifically impact men. To make this evidence appear credible, they utilise political, cultural, and scientific studies and statements to support claims of male superiority and victimisation in society. While much of the 'evidence' put forth by the manosphere is distorted or entirely false, some of it holds factual accuracy. One prevalent tactic involves omitting or playing



down the victimisation of other groups to focus on portraying men as the most disadvantaged. An example involves the parallelism between rape victims and victims of false rape allegations. The argument used in the manosphere emphasises that women who make false rape claims often face no consequences. This perspective is supported by suggesting high percentages of false rape allegations drawn from the misinterpretation of data from existing studies. However, these studies explicitly stress notable analytical shortcomings that prevent from determining accurate rates of false rape allegations. In addition, by false allegations the authors of the studies also mean other circumstances, such as lack of evidence and police misattribution, which suggest a different meaning to what is claimed in the manosphere. Ultimately, in this alternative gender knowledge creation women are considered winners of current gender relations at the expense of men, who are the ultimate victims of modern society.

This narrative of victimisation is also a common feature of right-wing discourses, employed to justify hostility toward certain societal groups. It is thus unsurprising that the manosphere aligns with other far-right spheres, which rely on similar mechanisms of victimisation while capitalising on existing hegemonic knowledge systems of white and male supremacy. The resulting gender knowledge systems are intrinsically linked to underlying misogynistic structures existing in society. This connection reinforces patriarchal gender knowledge and perpetuates unequal gender power relations. Evidence-based misogyny not only strengthens and legitimises the collective identity of male supremacy within the manosphere but also creates a pathway for it to merge with mainstream conservative views and other extreme far-right narratives.

In conclusion, the author stresses how the power of the evidence provided lies in its connection to an underlying societal truth already accepted by manosphere users and, to a large extent, mainstream society. This amplifies the persuasive force of evidence-based misogyny, given that it upholds mainstream patriarchal norms. Therefore, the author warns that manosphere gender knowledge, disseminated as both common sense and marginalised, holds significant recruiting power.

R.R. Tietjen & S.K. Tirkkonen (2023), 'The Rage of Lonely Men: Loneliness and Misogyny in the Online Movement of "Involuntary Celibates" (Incels)', *Topoi*, vol. 42, p. 1229-1241. Available at: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11245-023-09921-6>

#### KEY MESSAGES:

- Loneliness plays a key role in individuals' radicalisation processes to the incel community. From a feeling of vulnerability and inadequacy in meeting traditional norms of masculinity, loneliness progressively turns into anger, following a victimisation process that reinforces misogyny and traditional masculinity.
- Men join incel communities seeking a sense of belonging, however, this remains unfound as these communities exacerbate loneliness and foster collective anger.

This article looks at the role of loneliness in incels' online radicalisation pathway. Loneliness is featured prominently in incels' own accounts of misogynistic attitudes and violent behaviour, yet, these elements have not received enough attention in academia. Drawing on critical phenomenology and feminist theory, the authors explore qualitative empirical and philosophical literature on the incel movement, loneliness, online radicalisation, misogyny and negative political sentiment to analyse incels' subjective experiences of loneliness.

The authors situate loneliness in the incels' experiences of social exclusion and unfulfilled desire to belong. The sense of belonging is centred on seeking intimate relationships, specifically, sexual relationships, not only because of sex, but mainly for a sense of validation. However, they depict their involuntary celibacy as the sole

cause of their loneliness and obsessively believe that being in an intimate relationship would be the solution to all their problems. Incels' preoccupation with their failure to meet the ideal heteronormative romantic love stems from socio-cultural expectations on finding 'the other half', which inevitably feeds feelings of loneliness. Yet, these emotions of loneliness become existential feelings when coupled with incels' ideological commitment to nihilism. This is specific to processes of social interaction whereby incels feel helpless and predetermined to fail in meeting masculinity norms.

Yet, paradoxically, incels do not want a romantic relationship and sex with anyone, but rather with the 'hot white girl', who is the very subject of their misogynistic attacks and the cause of their situation of despair. Indeed, incels blame women, especially the most attractive ones, for not fulfilling their desires. They express anger and hatred for women while desiring them. Therefore, incels' loneliness is both based on and reinforces misogynistic, racist and heteronormative desires, while it incrementally turns into anger and aggression, namely, what authors refer to as 'ressentiment'.

To conclude, the authors explain that incel communities, while formed to seek support and acceptance, exacerbate loneliness and isolation and provide limited understanding and connection. Indeed, these communities reject criticism, 'outsider' views that challenge their negative self-conceptions, and employ indoctrination patterns that are common to other radicalised groups. New members are provided with specialised vocabulary and explanations for their situation that normalise anger and hatred, creating a paradoxical context in which loneliness becomes tied to collective anger. In this way, the original desire for meaningful connection and social recognition remains unmet. The authors stress that more attention needs to be paid to the role of loneliness in both group radicalisation and lone actor terrorism.

K. Regehr (2022), 'In(cel)doctrination: How technologically facilitated misogyny moves violence off screens and on to streets', *New Media & Society*, vol. 24, nr 1, p. 138-155. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1461444820959019>

#### KEY MESSAGES:

- Incel violence should not be viewed as the outcome of isolated incidents but rather as a sophisticated five-step indoctrination process:
  1. Incel communities foster an illusory sense of belonging and understanding.
  2. Exposure to misogynistic narratives and explanations fuel incels' anger.
  3. Creative misogynistic expressions normalise violence.
  4. Echo chamber effects amplify and reinforce violent ideologies.
  5. The glorification of mass killers incentivises violence.

This qualitative study examines the experiences of young men within incel communities and the process of indoctrination into misogynistic extremism. The findings challenge the 'lone wolf' narrative often associated with incels, revealing a sophisticated community structure that facilitates a five-step indoctrination process, transforming loneliness into anger and, potentially, violence.

As noted in the other articles consulted under this subtopic, the quest for community or belonging is a central theme in incel's accounts, which reveal a profound struggle with low self-esteem, feelings of isolation and loneliness and an inability to engage in social settings. Thus, incel communities fill a void, fostering an illusory sense of commonality and mutual understanding. This context sets the scene and outlines the first of the five steps of the indoctrination system.

The second step sees loneliness turning into anger following exposure to the incel ideology and its misogynistic narratives justified through evolutionary biology. Incel communities employ and invent concepts that nullify individual responsibility and blame women and modern society at large for their condition, a process that fuels anger towards a reality they allegedly have no control over. An example is 'lookism', a term frequently used in the Incel community to refer to discrimination based on appearance. Many Incels believe that women's prejudice toward men's looks is the primary reason for their unhappiness and social isolation.

The third step refers to a deeper involvement into the incel culture through creative expression that further normalises this harmful ideology. Violent misogynistic material is presented in the form of art, such as dark humour, video creation and memes. As these reinforce and normalise anti-feminist beliefs, the transition from online discourse to real-world violence seems like a natural progression.

The fourth step of indoctrination occurs due to the echo chamber effect of the online realm, which amplifies and reinforces these misogynistic and violent ideologies, making them fixed beliefs.

Lastly, the glorification of mass killers creates a continuous cycle that incentivises violence. This form of violence is '*encouraged, documented, shared, celebrated, and then encouraged once more*', creating a loop whereby violent misogynistic acts move from digital platforms to real-world scenarios and back again. This cycle serves to cement and perpetuate future acts of violence.

The author concludes by reiterating the complexity of the incel community and calls for the recognition of incel-related violent attack as outcomes of a sophisticated indoctrination process, rather than isolated incidents.

M. Botto & L. Gottzén (2023), 'Swallowing and spitting out the red pill: young men, vulnerability, and radicalization pathways in the manosphere', *Journal of Gender Studies*, p.1-13. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09589236.2023.2260318>

#### KEY MESSAGES:

- Young men progress into misogynist extremism through a three-step phase: they adopt an essentialist view of gender and sexuality resonating with their frustration; the extensive time spent in the manosphere then exacerbates their vulnerabilities; finally, they exit the manosphere, yet without renouncing all misogynist beliefs associated with its underlying ideology.
- Disengaging from the manosphere is not enough to deradicalise individuals from misogynist extremism.

This article aims to analyse the gendered dynamics of online misogynist radicalisation pathways through an analysis of content shared on Reddit by former manosphere users. Specifically, this paper draws on critical feminist theory to explore 30 young men's experiences of entering and exiting the manosphere and unpacks the important role of vulnerability in these processes.

The literature on radicalisation indicates that many individuals join extremist movements without fully adopting all their beliefs and practices. Similarly, people can abandon certain aspects of an extremist ideology while still supporting other parts of it. Individuals might deradicalise yet continue to socialise with the group, or they may disengage but maintain their extremist beliefs. This is especially true when the ideology intersects with ideas that are accepted in mainstream society. Specific trends have been identified in the progression to misogynist extremism, where young men initially seek community and belonging as they are pressured to adhere to traditional masculine norms they do not meet. However, once they enter incel environments, their loneliness

often turns into anger, culminating in the adoption of a misogynistic worldview. The manosphere acts as an echo chamber where grievances are validated and amplified by the community. This indoctrination process often includes encouragements to violence and the glorification of incel mass murderers.

While the authors recognise that the processes of radicalisation and deradicalisation are complex and not straightforward, the findings showed that the narratives generally followed a three-phase structure. Initially, the young men reported adopting an essentialist view of gender and sexuality, which resonated with their personal experiences of vulnerability, particularly regarding dating, sexual relationships and their marginalisation with respect to traditional masculinity. This view was especially effective as presented through an evolutionary psychology fashion, whereby sexist claims about women's preferences are portrayed as irrefutable facts, e.g., women are only interested in men who are attractive or have a high social status. In the second phase, they described how extensive time spent in the manosphere and adherence to its ideology increased their mistrust towards women and exacerbated their vulnerabilities, contrarily to the manosphere's promises. Finally, in the third phase, the young men exited the manosphere, either due to its inconsistencies or because it no longer aligned with their experiences. However, they continued to struggle with renouncing all sexist and misogynist beliefs associated with this ideology. Throughout all these phases, vulnerability consistently emerged as a central theme.

In conclusion, the authors found that vulnerability can both enable more progressive masculinities as well as be a way into misogynistic radicalisation. Most importantly, deradicalising from misogynist extremism involves more than just leaving an online community, rather, it also involves transforming how young men feel about women. In fact, the authors stress that the misogynistic attitudes fostered by the manosphere may persist even after disengagement, as sexism and misogyny remain pervasive in societies.

## EXIT STRATEGIES, CHALLENGES, AND WAYS FORWARD

J. Thorburn (2023), 'Exiting the Manosphere. A Gendered Analysis of Radicalization, Diversion and Deradicalization Narratives from *r/IncelExit* and *r/ExRedPill*', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, p. 1-25. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1057610X.2023.2244192>

### KEY MESSAGES:

- Subreddits created to provide advice to people who wish to leave the incel community work as helpful social support.
- Individuals do not necessarily seek to join incel communities, but factors like young age and online algorithms can influence radicalisation pathways.
- Deradicalisation processes do not ensure disengagement from misogynistic thoughts, but self-acceptance and emotional self-reflection prove crucial in highlighting men's agency to overcome these beliefs.

This article explores the experiences of individuals who have diverted from or left the manosphere through the analysis of two subreddits, *r/ExRedPill* and *r/IncelExit* and sheds light on the dynamics of radicalisation to and from the manosphere. The methodology underpinning this study involves a digital ethnography whereby the authors observed and analysed 80 posts on each subreddit through a gendered and reflexive thematic analysis.

*r/ExRedPill* and *r/IncelExit* were created to provide support for people who wish to leave the incel community as well as space for sharing the damage it caused. Users praise how the subreddits provide sympathetic counter-

narratives about appearance and self-image, working as helpful social support and advice. Indeed, rigid concepts surrounding appearance reinforce incels' feelings of inadequacy and proliferate in the manosphere. It is important to note that individuals may not actively seek incel communities. Rather, users explained they ended up in these spaces through a multitude of video recommendations, thus showing how social media algorithms can influence one's radicalisation pathway. Age also appears to be a relevant factor in radicalisation to the manosphere, with adolescents and young boys being more susceptible due to their lack of experience. Indeed, many explained that their deradicalisation pathway began once they started noticing the flaws of the manosphere belief systems following their different lived experiences.

For some deradicalised users, compassionate experiences with women were critical in questioning and reassessing their beliefs. However, the social isolation and avoidance of women may hinder these opportunities. Users also criticised the unsustainability and futility of inauthenticity, having to perform masculinity in scripted ways that do not align with their authentic selves, stressing that they want to be loved for being themselves. This highlights how deradicalisation journeys may sometimes be grounded in self-acceptance. Processes of deradicalisation do not necessarily mean that individuals will not continue to hold sexist views towards gender and romantic relationships. Yet, some users showed that, even when they experienced misogynistic thoughts, they can recognise and proactively address them through emotional self-reflection. This is crucial as it highlights men's agency and capacity to move past misogynistic beliefs.

Finally, this article places responsibility on larger cultural and technological factors that influence young men's access to the manosphere, such as the endemic misogynistic attitudes in society and the algorithmic recommendation systems.

M. Kelly, A.K. Rothermel & L. Sugiura (2024), 'Victim, Violent, Vulnerable. A Feminist Response to the Incel Radicalisation Scale', *Perspectives on terrorism*, vol. 18, nr 1, p. 91-119. Available at: <https://boris.unibe.ch/195824/>

#### KEY MESSAGES:

- Explanations of incel violence focusing on 'certain individuals' and their mental illness ignore structural causes and stigmatise mental health.
- A comprehensive understanding of incel communities needs to take into account the misogynistic system that still pervades society and how this shapes incel violence.

This paper critically analyses the methodological, theoretical and epistemological basis of an academic article that claims to identify, measure and prevent radicalisation among incels through the proposal of an incel Radicalisation Scale (IRS)<sup>2</sup>. The article under criticism could be a potentially influential publication as it would easily fit within policy-making practices by promising a tool for the early detection of individuals vulnerable to radicalisation, yet it lacks a comprehensive understanding of the incel communities and how they are featured within societal power dynamics.

The IRS survey is supposed to be directly administered to incels to gain primary data about their experiences and to explore the relationship between radicalisation, incelhood and mental health. However, this type of primary data can reveal a mismatch between public perception of incels and their self-description. The authors

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<sup>2</sup> S. Moskalenko, N. Kates, J. Fernández-Garayzábal González & M. Bloom (2022), 'Predictors of Radical Intentions among Incels: A Survey of 54 Self-identified Incels', *Journal of Online Trust and Safety*, vol. 1, nr 3, p. 1-21. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.54501/jots.v1i3.57>.

warn that this supposed mismatch is part of incels' identification as ultimate victims and is crucial to their strategies to legitimise and perpetuate misogynist violence.

Consequently, the authors argue that the IRS scale is unreliable, contributes to mainstreaming misogynistic discourses of victimhood and anti-feminism, reproduces anti-feminist stances within academia, as well as an outdated perspective on the role of social media and online radicalisation. With findings framing incels as simply vulnerable, mostly peaceful, and emphasising their mental health issues and histories of victimisation, the scale pathologises the issue as a problem that concerns only a minority of individuals, and consequently depoliticises the misogyny and violent rhetoric that has been recognised as widespread in incel communities and that has fuelled violent attacks. Disregarding the connection between misogyny and the wider patriarchal structure of society leads to consolidating assumptions of male supremacy. At the same time, depicting mental health as a main factor for participating in incel communities and related misogynistic practices further stigmatises the issue.

Against this background, the authors recall that misogyny is not a psychological attitude of individual men, but is embedded within the norms of the wider societal structure, expectations that dictate, police and inevitably affect women's (oppressed) lives. Consequently, misogyny is not just a matter of verbal or physical violence against women, but rather a cluster of seemingly harmless norms and practices that serve to normalise this violence. Therefore, the study of incel communities cannot be separated from these societal power dynamics, neither can the effort to prevent and tackle this phenomenon.

Violence Prevention Network and Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy (2021), 'How anti-feminist and anti-gender ideologies contribute to violent extremism – and what we can do about it', *Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy*, Berlin. Available [here](#).

#### KEY MESSAGES:

- Misogynist and anti-feminist ideologies have long been overlooked in the study of violent extremism. Several attacks associated to individuals upholding these ideologies in the past years have led to the need for appropriate policy responses.
- The authors argue that future policies should:
  - strengthen the conceptual understanding of misogyny and anti-feminism within violent extremism by capturing its systemic roots in society;
  - collaborate with gender justice organisations in developing strategies to respond to misogyny and anti-feminism;
  - fund research and programmes focussing on misogyny and anti-feminism as well as its intersection with other extremist groups; and
  - integrate anti-feminist and misogynist violent extremism within gender-based violence laws and national action plans on security.

This policy brief explores how anti-feminist ideologies connect with violent extremism. Specifically, it aims to highlight the need to understand male supremacy as a security threat and provides policy recommendations for the integration of this concept within the policy agendas of Women, Peace and Security (WPS) and Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE). It draws on a review of relevant international research by academics and practitioners, as well as on the work of the Violence Prevention Network and the Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy.

Despite their striking prevalence within extremist groups, especially in the right-wing and religious-fundamentalist landscape, and the several incel attacks over the past few years, misogynist and anti-feminist ideologies have long been overlooked in the study of radicalisation and violent extremism. In fact, only a few national policies have enabled appropriate responses in preventing and countering this phenomenon. On this basis, this paper recommends policymakers to:

- Strengthen the conceptual understanding of misogyny and anti-feminism within violent extremism and radicalisation processes, especially, by recognising and highlighting the gender dimension underlying these ideologies to provide visibility to the issue and raise awareness in society. Specifically, anti-feminism and misogyny need to be understood as systemic challenges to the human rights of women and other marginalised groups, and not as individual acts or personal problems.
- Understand that incel communities are not unique in upholding male supremacy and misogyny, as these elements are still endemic in broader society. Therefore, the involvement and collaboration with gender justice organisation is crucial to ensure that interventions do not reinforce these beliefs or enable other forms of misogyny. On this basis, develop strategies that address anti-feminist and misogynist ideologies, recognising the threat they represent on their own as well as at the intersection with other forms of extremist ideologies, such as white supremacy.
- Mainstream and fund research and programmes focusing on anti-feminism, misogyny, sexism and their intersection with extremist groups. In doing so, also establish support networks, including safety programmes and mental health support, for researchers and practitioners working in this field. Furthermore, design early intervention projects and cross-sectoral programmes that reach out to online spaces of recruitment and radicalisation to offer support.
- Integrate anti-feminist and misogynist violent extremism within laws on gender-based violence, national action plans and agendas on WPS and P/CVE.



## CONCLUSIONS

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This Quarterly Research Review has presented the key findings from the selected papers. The following conclusions draw on an analysis of these findings and identify similarities and differences that are relevant to the current understanding of anti-feminism and misogyny in the online landscape. Where relevant, the analysis is also complemented with the findings of the online RAN Policy Support Thematic Research Meeting (TRM) on 'Violent Incels: Refining Differentiation and Comparison for an Emerging Threat'.

### OLD IDEOLOGY, NEW NARRATIVES: THE RENEWAL OF ANTI-FEMINISM

The online RAN Policy Support Thematic Research Meeting (TRM) on 'Violent Incels: Refining Differentiation and Comparison for an Emerging Threat' noted that incel violence seems to be increasing and should be understood as just one aspect of a wider and older phenomenon of misogynist violence and hatred that still exist in society. Most of the articles under review agree with this analysis and show how the misogynist online landscape retains roots in traditional patriarchal ideologies that promote male supremacy and oppose feminist movements. However, since traditionally antifeminism focused on gender roles within family and society, the narrative that cements those contemporary online movements, such as the manosphere, concentrates on a condemnation of women's newly acquired sexual rights and their supposed negative impact on men's rights. The use of victimisation narratives and rationalisation techniques to validate their stance highlight the nuanced and multifaceted nature of modern online anti-feminism. The digital era has allowed anti-feminist movements to flourish in new ways and spaces, with online platforms and algorithms facilitating the spread of these ideologies (Harris & Vitis, 2020; Baele et al., 2024; Hambalko, 2022; Rothermel, 2023). While these ideologies continue to draw from historical misogyny, their manifestations in online spaces and alignment with political movements underscore their significant cultural and political relevance today, as the next point shows.

### ONLINE ANTI-FEMINISM AND MISOGYNY AND THE CONNECTION TO FAR-RIGHT MOVEMENTS

The previous RAN Policy Support Thematic Research Meeting on violent incels noted similarities between incel and far-right ideologies, underscoring the need for investigating the links and cross-pollination between violent incels, online misogyny, and right-wing extremism. Several articles in this review also point at the commonalities between the manosphere, especially the incels and far-right movements, specifically the alt-right (Garcia-Mingo & Diaz-Fernandez, 2023; Baele et al., 2024; Barcellona, 2022; Hambalko, 2022; Rothermel, 2023; Violence Prevention Network and Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy, 2021). However, there are some divergences in the conceptualisation of this connection. For instance, Baele et al. (2024) refer to recent research to argue that the alt-right seems to take advantage of incels' anti-feminist beliefs to push them towards male white supremacist ideologies. Hambalko (2022) argues that incels are inherently rooted in the alt-right movement, but have moved away from it to take a different direction. While there is no consensus on the nature of their relationship, the articles agree that incels and the alt-right share a deep-rooted misogynistic and anti-feminist stance, viewing gender equality and feminism as threats to the perceived natural order. Both groups are online phenomena and their members have been found to gather or migrate to the same online platforms, where they share and reinforce male supremacy ideologies by employing narratives that depict them as victims. The manosphere relies on existing knowledge systems of male supremacy that align well with far-right ideologies, a connection that cannot be overlooked as it holds massive recruiting power according to Hambalko (2022). They are connected through shared beliefs in traditional gender roles and opposition to progressive social change, but their primary grievances differ. Incels focus on their lack of sexual relationships and intimate connections, viewing their situation as a personal injustice inflicted by women. In contrast, far-right movements often centre



their grievances on broader socio-political issues such as immigration and the preservation of Western culture. These similarities and differences provide a complex landscape for understanding how these groups intersect, diverge and influence individual behaviours and broader socio-political dynamics. Therefore, further research on the connection between incel communities and the alt-right is necessary to understand how it can affect the ongoing efforts for achieving equal rights.

## **RISK FACTORS AND RADICALISATION PROCESSES**

The radicalisation process of incels appears multifaceted, involving a complex interplay of individual vulnerabilities, ideological indoctrination and online community dynamics.

One of the key findings from the online RAN Policy Support Thematic Research Meeting (TRM) on 'Violent Incels: Refining Differentiation and Comparison for an Emerging Threat', was that loneliness leads incels to show increased aggressive behaviour, which in turn can inhibit their ability to create new social bonds and compound their experience of rejection and loneliness. The role of loneliness and social exclusion in the radicalisation process of incels is, indeed, a central aspect addressed in a number of the reviewed articles (Tietjen and Tirkkonen, 2023; Regehr, 2022; Botto and Gottzén, 2023; Thorburn, 2023). Incels' perceived inability to conform to societal expectations of masculinity creates profound feelings of isolation, leading them to seek belonging and understanding in online communities that instead reinforce their negative self-perceptions and misogynistic beliefs (thus leaving their needs of connection unmet).

Several articles also bring a new perspective to the issue, highlighting the particular vulnerability of younger individuals to incel radicalisation (Hambalko, 2022; Regehr, 2022; Botto and Gottzén, 2023; Thorburn, 2023). The convergence of youth insecurity, identity exploration and the pressures of conforming to traditional masculine norms renders young men more susceptible to incel ideologies. The role of algorithms in this radicalisation processes is also significant, and several articles highlight how social media platforms, through their recommendation systems and echo chamber effect, lead vulnerable young users down paths that expose them to increasingly extreme misogynistic content, which in turn contributes to reinforcing their existing insecurities and gender biases.

There is also a clear consensus across all articles that digital spaces can serve as catalysts for anti-feminist and misogynistic expression and perpetuation of gender inequality and violence against women. Specifically, the use of irony, memes and humour contribute to desensitising users, and their wide dissemination through algorithms normalise extreme beliefs and behaviours, constituting what Hambalko (2022) has described as 'indirect radicalisation'.

## **FROM PERSONAL (MENTAL HEALTH) TO POLITICAL (TERRORISM): UNDERSTANDING INCEL ATTACKS AS A MATTER OF SECURITY**

Incel attacks have increasingly been linked to terrorism, with some States beginning to label them as such. This shift acknowledges an increased understanding that these violent acts are not merely the result of individual personal problems or mental health issues, but are deeply rooted in broader societal issues. While the previous online RAN Policy Support Thematic Research Meeting (TRM) on violent incels placed more focus on the individual factors that lead people to join the incel sphere (and commit attacks), the articles under review question the limit of those to explain the phenomenon fully. They emphasise the importance of understanding and acknowledging the socio-political context in which those acts take place, notably marked by persisting gender inequalities, to effectively develop and implement de-radicalisation and counterterrorism strategies.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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**Eneidia Bardho** is a Research Assistant in gender equality and public policy at ICF. She holds a bachelor's degree in Criminology and Criminal Psychology and a master's degree in Criminology, Gender and Sexualities from the University of Greenwich, London. Her main area of expertise is violence against women and girls, with contributions to research projects and publications analysing domestic, conflict-related, as well as online contexts.

**Magali Gay-Berthomieu** is a Lead Managing Consultant at ICF where she leads gender and equality policy research and evaluation work in Europe. She holds a master's degree in Women, Gender and Citizenship from the University of Barcelona, as well as a master's degree in Political Sciences from Paris I Pantheon-Sorbonne University and a diploma (master's degree) in Political Science from the Political Science Institute of Toulouse (Sciences Po).

**Clémentine Babin-Heynard** is a Public Policy Analyst at ICF with experience in the fields of security, public policy and humanitarian response. She holds a master's degree in Anthropology from the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences; a master's degree in Anthropology, Environment, and Development from University College London (UCL); and a bachelor of arts in War Studies from King's College London.

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