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Policy Brief

GENDER, RADICALISATION AND PREVENTION OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM

BACKGROUND

Gender narratives are woven into (sub)cultural dynamics and everyday discourses about family, lifestyle, and health, among others. Such narratives can define identities, reinforce perceptions of threat, strengthen group boundaries, and legitimize particular social or political orders. In this way, they can become bound up with broader extremist claims as they may offer simple explanations for personal and social problems. Many researchers have contributed insights into the specific role of gender in radicalization, yet systematic EU guidance and national training are needed to translate research into actionable practice. At the same time, research on the impact of gender narratives different from those intertwined with extremism remains limited, but could prove equally informative for prevention practice.

HOW GENDER AND RADICALIZATION WORK TOGETHER

1. Gendered narratives as an entry point into radicalising worldviews

Everyone encounters gender, knowingly or unknowingly, in different areas of life. It can become especially pronounced when one disagrees with how some people conceive it. As gender is already part of how people make sense of themselves, it can become attached to different grievances. In extremist framings, ideas about masculinity, femininity, family roles and gender relations mark the “threatening other” or justify hierarchy and exclusion.

2. Spaces of gendered narratives

Gendered narratives gain traction through groups and subcultures and settle into physical as well as online spaces. Far-right extremist groups, for example, frequently make use of gyms, sports clubs, and other spaces related to physical culture for recruiting. They connect through martial arts, and masculinist health influencers play a prominent role in ideological mainstreaming and promoting alternative worldviews.

3. Bridging research and practice

The role of masculinity in radicalisation has received increased attention in academia, but this is yet to translate into the practitioner space through EU guidance and national training. Currently, it depends rather on individual practitioners to work explicitly on gender-related topics. At the same time, a number of individuals who present positive role models exist online and have gained recent traction, but research on public perceptions of these content creators remains limited.

4. A differentiated view that avoids over-securitisation

Conservative, traditional or religious views on gender, family and morality are not extremist in themselves. Prevention work that treats them as such risks forfeiting the community trust it depends on. Importantly, extending analytical attention and extending the reach of security measures are not synonymous.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A. To EU institutions

- Strengthen guidance on preventing gender narratives in extremist environments.
EU institutions should strengthen existing gender-sensitive guidance by including indicators for identifying when everyday gender discourse becomes part of extremist community-building. These indi-

cators should help clarify when narratives about masculinity, femininity and queerness become connected to broader extremist claims about threat, decline, enemies, hierarchy, exclusion and belonging. This would complement existing approaches to prevention by addressing narratives that may not be illegal or overtly violent in isolation, but can still contribute to the cohesion and appeal of extremist (online) environments. Caution is warranted to avoid treating conservative, traditional or religious gender views as extremist in themselves. This can be alienating and even counterproductive.

- Support EU-funded programs utilising subcultural elements as a tool for prevention. Subcultural spaces can serve as contact points for prevention. Far-right groups, for example, often appeal through martial arts and related health advice that serves as a way of ideological mainstreaming and promoting alternative worldviews. This may create opportunities for specific prevention measures that use strategic communications with young boys and men through health and fitness, focusing on nurturing personal and skill development and offering alternative groups of belonging.

B. To national governments

- Train practitioners to recognise gendered narratives in radicalisation. Ideas about masculinity, femininity, family roles and gender relations can define identities, reinforce perceptions of threat and belonging, strengthen group boundaries and legitimise particular social or political orders. The key concern arises when such narratives become linked to exclusion, out-group hostility or rigid hierarchies. Resources for structural training for practitioners on the gendered dynamics of cultural domains can further strengthen preventative practices. Such formats should go beyond recognising misogynistic or anti-feminist rhetoric by exploring links to current prominent subcultural areas and their gendered dynamics. An example are the spaces of physical culture like gyms, sports clubs and combat sports, which serve as sites of contact and community building for extremist groups. Equipping fitness and sports professionals to recognise relevant iconography, symbols and other indicators would allow them to identify the presence of such recruiters early.
- Complement targeted measures with broader preventative approaches in subcultural domains. Such more targeted efforts are productively combined with broader public efforts. Recent years have seen growing campaigns to promote anti-racist messaging in sport, such as 'Show Racism the Red Card' in football. Comparable initiatives are needed in other areas, such as music or combat sports and fitness settings. These initiatives should be supported to foster more culturally diverse and inclusive visions of belonging.

C. To civil society and practitioners

- Create spaces to discuss gender. Narratives about gender may give simple explanations for personal and social problems, including loneliness, failed relationships, family conflict, loss of status or anxiety about sociopolitical change. There is thus a need to address the grievances and needs that these narratives claim to solve. Practitioners should respond not only to what gendered narratives attack, but also to what they appear to offer. Creating spaces where people can discuss masculinity, femininity, or family roles, among others, is crucial to offering alternatives to rigid us vs them narratives. This can include peer discussions, mentoring and family support work.

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- Reflect and exchange on the role of gender in radicalisation.

The role of masculinity in radicalisation has received increased attention in academia, but this is yet to translate into the practitioner space, especially with its link to specific subcultural areas and regarding alternative role models.

D. To researchers

- Strengthen evidence on how gender discourse becomes linked to extremist threat narratives.

Researchers should examine when ordinary gender-related content becomes part of extremist narratives by focusing on concrete links between gender discourse and claims about threat, hierarchy, exclusion or dehumanisation. Future work could map recurring narratives about family breakdown, male authority, female virtue, modesty, motherhood, fatherhood, sexuality and moral decline across platforms, languages and ideological milieus. It could also examine how users interpret these narratives, including whether they experience them as guidance, belonging, grievance validation or justification for exclusion. A stronger evidence base would help avoid both underestimating gendered pathways into extremist environments and over-securitising conservative, traditional or religious gender views.

- Research the reception of positive role-model masculinity influencers.

A number of individuals who present positive role models also exist online and have gained recent traction. Focusing on these figures and engaging in research related to public perceptions of particular online content creators could prove beneficial for developing actionable insights that could inform civil society actors.

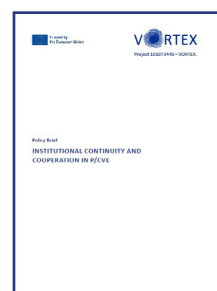
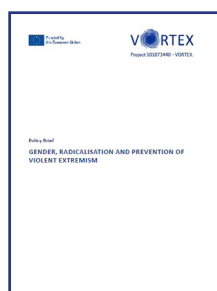
RECOMMENDATIONS AT A GLANCE

Actor	Timeline	Recommendation
EU institutions	Mid-term	Strengthen EU guidance on gender narratives in extremist environments
	Mid-term	Support EU-funded programmes that link subcultural elements to prevention
National governments	Mid-term	Train practitioners to recognise gendered narratives in various spaces of radicalisation
	Mid-term	Complement targeted measures with broader preventative approaches in subcultural domains
Civil society/ practitioners	Immediate	Create spaces to discuss gender-related issues
	Mid-term	Reflect and exchange on the role of gender in radicalisation
Researchers	Mid-term	Build evidence on how gender discourse links to extremist threat narratives
	Mid-term	Research the reception of positive role models

CONCLUSION

Gendered narratives constitute an under-examined pathway into extremist community-building. Ideas about family, masculinity, femininity and moral order are woven into everyday life and often gain traction in subcultural spaces. They can attach to a wide range of grievances and lend cohesion and appeal to extremist environments, often without being illegal or overtly violent in themselves. The various recommendations thus share the aim of strengthening the capacity to recognise when gender discourse becomes bound up with claims about threat, hierarchy and exclusion, while resisting the temptation to treat conservative, traditional or religious views as extremist in themselves.

This brief is based on the “White Paper on Radicalisation into Extremism and Terrorism”. It is part of a series of four policy briefs: “Towards Improved Knowledge Infrastructures in P/CVE”, “Gender, Radicalisation and Prevention”, “Rethinking Monitoring and Threat Assessment for Terrorist, Violent Extremist, or Radical Groups or Individuals”, and “Institutional Continuity and Cooperation”.



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