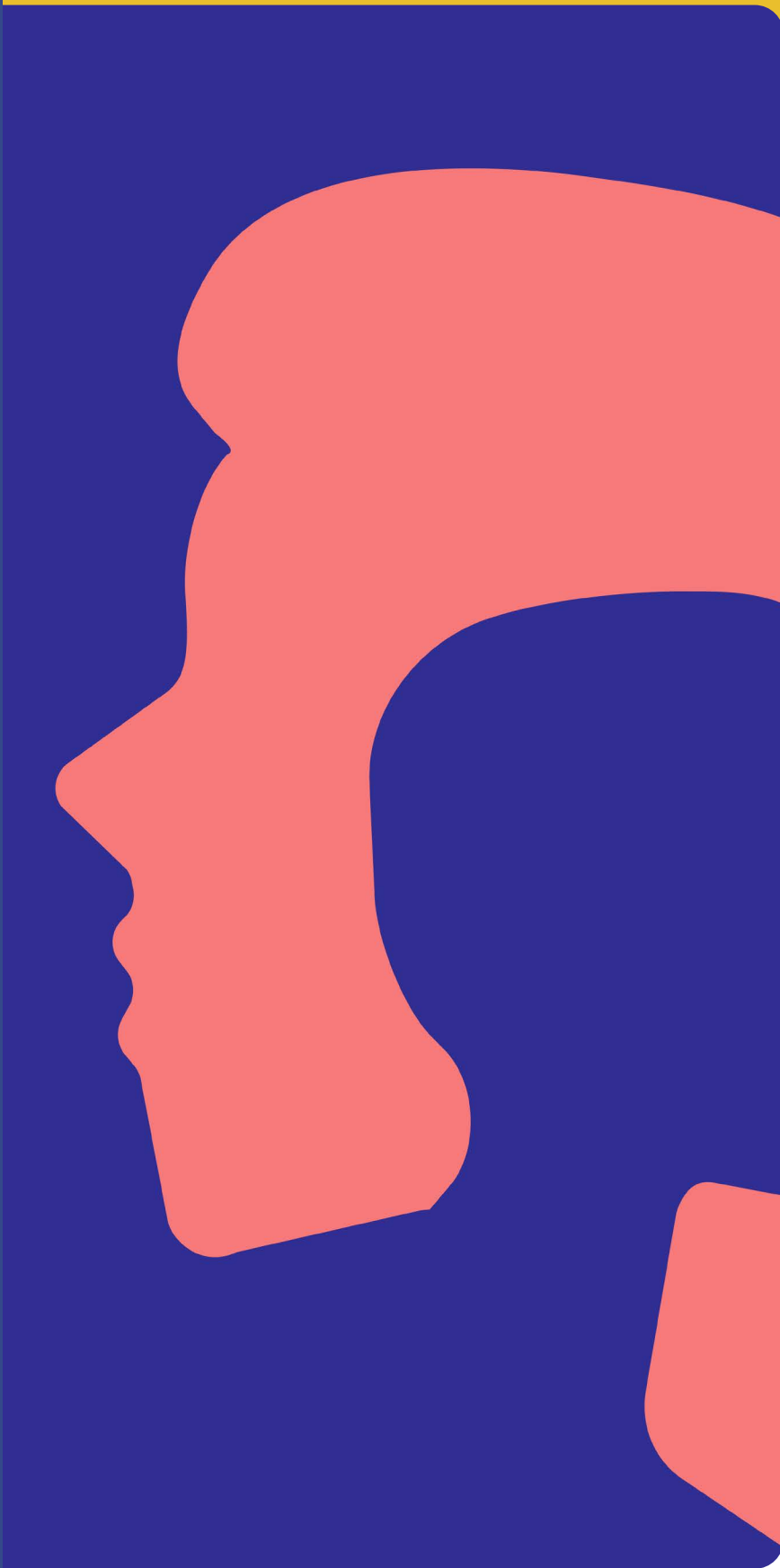


THE HUB. INSIGHTS

SEPTEMBER 2026

Gender
and PCVE



European
Commission



EU Knowledge Hub on
Prevention of Radicalisation



About the Knowledge Hub

The EU Knowledge Hub on the Prevention of Radicalisation supports Member States in strengthening their efforts on preventing radicalisation through a comprehensive, whole-of-society approach.

It provides a collaborative platform bringing together policymakers, practitioners and researchers across the EU to exchange knowledge, experience and best practices.

The views and opinions expressed in this Digital Magazine are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent or reflect the official position, views, or policies of the European Commission.



Editorial

Welcome to the sixth edition of the EU Knowledge Hub Digital Magazine. In this issue, we turn our focus to one of the most critical and rapidly evolving dimensions of Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism: the complex interplay between gender, radicalisation, and digital culture.

For too long, gender in security policy was treated as an optional analytical add-on or reduced to simple binaries. Women were frequently viewed through the narrow lens of “passive victims” or secondary supporters, while male radicalisation was analysed without examining how rigid constructions of masculinity drive violent behaviour. As the contributions in this edition compellingly demonstrate, moving beyond these blind spots is an operational necessity.

While overcoming gender binarism and recognising gender diversity through an intersectional framework remain critical for accurate threat assessment and sustainable reintegration, this edition intentionally focuses on gender primarily as a socio-cultural construct of “men” and “women”. The magazine adopts this specific analytical lens to reflect how rigid, patriarchal gender binaries serve as foundational ideological fault lines for extremist movements. These structural dynamics, often manifesting as violent performances of masculinity or biologicistic anti-gender ideologies, act as a primary gateway and driver for radicalisation, forming the baseline from which violence and discrimination against all other gender identities and expressions emerge.



A central thread running through this issue is the weaponisation of gender within modern digital ecosystems. In an era dominated by memetic media logics and algorithmic amplification, extremist actors rarely rely solely on explicit ideological manifestos. Instead, they exploit everyday online practices, ranging from the manosphere and “looksmaxxing” subcultures to gaming platforms and the broader gaming ecosystem, to normalise misogyny and hierarchical worldviews. These spaces capitalise on feelings of loneliness, status anxiety, and identity confusion among people, transforming personal vulnerabilities into grievance-based violent extremism.

Misogyny and anti-gender narratives are thus increasingly recognised not merely as peripheral social nuisances, but as foundational ingredients of violent extremism and hybrid threats that directly challenge democratic stability and the rule of law. To counter these evolving dynamics, our contributors emphasise actionable, whole-of-society responses. We explore secondary prevention strategies that contest extremist infiltration in combat-sports environments, alongside family-centred initiatives that equip parents to act as crucial “offline influencers” and digital role models in the home. Furthermore, we examine gender-responsive frameworks for Prosecution, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration (PRR) concerning returnees and associated minors, ensuring that intervention strategies remain individualised, trauma-informed, and grounded in human dignity.

Featuring insights from leading researchers, law enforcement practitioners and EUKH experts, this edition offers a comprehensive, evidence-based roadmap for practice and policy. We invite you to explore these contributions, challenge established assumptions and analyse violent extremism across the full spectrum: from far-right and jihadist ideologies to ethno-nationalism, and manosphere, understanding how foundational gender constructs fuel broader extremism and threats to all forms of identity.

A Special Message

Dear reader,
This current issue's focus reflects the increasing importance of gender in the field of Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE). As the following contributions amply illustrate, gender impacts on PCVE along several dimensions, the first being a gender-responsive analysis of radicalisation and deradicalisation, as well as the multiple roles women assume as actors, supporters, facilitators, recruiters, and influencers within various violent extremist milieus. Analyses and practical experiences (see the first interview in this issue) show that women's roles can be central in terrorist and extremist organisations and (online) milieus, even though often not perceived as such.

A second dimension concerns the integration of gender considerations into specific PCVE approaches and tools, including risk assessment methodologies, rehabilitation and reintegration programmes, disengagement processes, and intervention strategies. These approaches acknowledge and account for gender-specific experiences, structural constraints, and vulnerabilities and generally seek to adapt existing tools accordingly. A third and increasingly prominent dimension concerns gender roles themselves and the manner in which violent extremist actors construct, disseminate, and exploit conceptions of masculinity and femininity.

Gender roles have, in fact, been central to virtually all forms of violent extremism.

While these roles differ across ideological contexts, many violent extremist ideologies inherently contain retrograde and patriarchal conceptualisations of gender as a precondition for the establishment of their envisioned dystopian societies. Currently, European societies are confronted with a particularly strong antifeminist wave that aims to reinstate traditional gender roles and cancel political and societal achievements towards gender equality. An important component of this wave is a profound hostility towards LGBTIQ+ communities, which are seen as a threat to the desired social order. The propagation of these rigid gender roles has become central not only in more classic manifestations of extremism, but as part of the manosphere and of the so-called nihilist extremism.

These trends are further reinforced by the affordances of social media platforms. Algorithms amplify and prioritise emotionally charged and negative content, while the entrepreneurship of male and female influencers create aesthetically attractive audio-visual products that exploit these mechanisms. Such content reaches its audiences in a subliminal manner via pop cultural and lifestyle content, thus circumventing established barriers of critical thinking or awareness raising, and especially targeting young people.

Antifeminism and the extremist construction of gender roles constitute a significant threat to democracy. They challenge the equality of women and men, aim to restrict women's

political participation, freedom of movement, bodily autonomy, and equal access to opportunities, while simultaneously denying or undermining the rights of LGBTIQ+ individuals. Their impact is amplified through the potential to tap into existing stereotypes, patriarchal and sexist societal structures, and the strategies of seamlessly affecting the attitudes of the young generations, as recent surveys amply show.

At its most extreme, antifeminism manifests itself in misogyny. While central to certain online spheres such as the manosphere, misogyny has been increasingly recognised as a fundamental ingredient of violent extremism more broadly. Research on this aspect is still young, yet several instances of terrorism already illustrate how hate of and violence against women constitute an integral part of these perpetrators' worldview. Considering the nexus with violent crime, this in turn means that misogyny has become a security concern in its own right.

These developments underline the significant work that still lies ahead for practitioners, policymakers, and researchers. This issue already presents a number of important and innovative gender informed initiatives for primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention. Considering the limitations of online moderation, addressing antifeminism and toxic masculinity requires a broad societal effort. Democracy, gender equality, and the rights of LGBTIQ+ communities cannot be taken as granted, but need to be advocated upfront, while providing the young generation with the tools to recognise and counteract harmful gender narratives before they become normalised.

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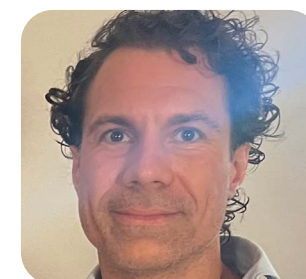
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Editorial board

To ensure high editorial standards, the Digital Magazine is supported by a dedicated Editorial Board comprising five permanent experts and one external specialist invited based on the edition's specific theme. This body is tasked with overseeing the magazine's content to guarantee its quality, integrity, and professional depth.



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Special Global Feature

WHY MISOGYNY IS A THREAT TO DEMOCRATIC STABILITY

Interview with the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) Director



Carlien Scheele
Director, European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE)

A chat with

“Ending gender-based violence is not only a social priority; it is foundational to safety, democratic participation, and the rule of law.”

The EU’s newly launched Gender Equality Strategy 2026–2030 highlights safety and freedom from violence as foundational pillars for a stable society. From EIGE’s perspective acting as the EU’s knowledge hub on gender equality, why is it critical that modern security and PCVE frameworks actively integrate a gender-responsive lens rather than treating gender as an isolated issue?

The new [Gender Equality Strategy 2026–2030](#) is a moment of truth for Europe’s Union of Equality. It sets out a strong and comprehensive framework, closely aligned with the Roadmap for Women’s Rights and EIGE’s Gender Equality Index. However, the challenge now is to turn that ambition into action. Progress is happening, but not fast enough. According to our latest evidence, full gender equality remains around 50 years away at the current pace – a pace which is threatened by the back rolling of not just women’s rights but attitudes people hold when it comes to gender equality. Younger men in particular are increasingly holding misogynist views and glorifying dominance in the face of toxic masculinity. We really need to keep our eyes on the content young people are consuming online as it’s shaping not only beliefs but behaviours.

That is why it is critical that modern security and PCVE frameworks integrate a gender-responsive lens from the start. Ending gender-based violence is not only a social priority; it is foundational to safety, democratic participation, and the rule of law. If women are not safe, they cannot participate fully in work, education, public life, decision-making, or achieve economic independence.

A gender-responsive approach helps practitioners see how violence, misogyny, hyper-masculinity, and stereotypes can shape risks, the patterns involved in recruiting violent extremists, and community vulnerabilities. It also ensures responses address both systems and culture: laws, services, enforcement, and the attitudes that normalise violence and inequality.

Evidence is a pathway for policymakers to identify where the biggest gender gaps are, to then target resources more effectively to close them, and measure whether commitments are translating into results across Member States. The real test will be implementation: funded measures, national action, and measurable progress that can be felt in people’s lives.

“Gender-based violence is both a cause and a consequence of gender inequality, and it is one of the most severe human rights violations.”



How do we elevate the prevention of gender-based violence and misogyny so that it is recognised not just as a social issue, but as a critical, hard-security imperative that threatens democratic stability and the rule of law?

This is a very significant distinction. Gender-based violence is both a cause and a consequence of gender inequality, and it is one of the most severe human rights violations. When one in three women in the EU has experienced physical or sexual violence in her lifetime according to the EU Gender-based violence survey between Eurostat, FRA, and EIGE, this cannot be treated as a private matter or as a separate social issue. It affects safety, participation, trust in institutions, and the functioning of democratic life itself.

To elevate prevention, we first need to make the scale and nature of the problem visible. Surveys on violence against women are essential because they show how many women experience different forms of violence, who is most at risk, what barriers exist when seeking help, and how services respond when women do ask for support. This evidence helps us build safer societies and stronger, more responsive policies.





But prevention cannot stop at measuring incidents after they happen. It must also address the conditions that allow violence and misogyny to take root: control, dominance, victim-blaming, economic dependence, online abuse, and stereotypes that make inequality appear normal. These dynamics can silence women, push them out of public spaces, and undermine equal participation in education, work, politics, and community life. [Research from Amnesty International](#) shows that 76% of women who have experienced abuse or harassment on social media platforms have made changes to the way they use platforms. That is, women are compelled to change their behaviour because of the abusive behaviours of others.

That is why gender-based violence and misogyny must be recognised as hard-security concerns. They weaken social cohesion, erode the rule of law, and create environments where coercion and extremism become more acceptable. A serious prevention agenda therefore needs laws, services, and enforcement, but also education, coordinated prevention, adequate resourcing, and accountability.

The EU has taken important steps, including the Gender Equality Strategy 2026-2030 – which puts ending gender-based violence high up in its commitments – the Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence, and the accession to the Istanbul Convention.



The task now is to fully implement these commitments across Member States and make prevention part of the security conversation. The safety, dignity, and rights of women and girls are not optional. They are non-negotiable.

EIGE is renowned for providing the definitive, evidence-based data that drives EU policymaking. When we examine the pathways to violent extremism, we often see distinct gendered dynamics—such as the weaponisation of hyper-masculinity, misogyny, or the specific recruitment strategies targeting women. How can PCVE practitioners and policymakers better utilise EIGE’s research and data tools to identify these early warning signs?

Different types of data, from surveys to administrative sources, help us see both the scale of inequality and the attitudes that sustain it. We do not only get numbers; we also get a clearer picture of the beliefs, experiences, and social norms that shape people’s lives.

For PCVE practitioners, this is particularly relevant when looking at hyper-masculinity and misogyny. Public attitude surveys can be very illuminating because they help identify where harmful beliefs are becoming normalised, and where those beliefs may create a permissive environment for violence, coercion, or exclusion.



EIGE’s Gender Equality Index 2024 thematic focus is a good example. It looked at the relationship between public attitudes, different forms of violence against women, and levels of gender equality, drawing on results from the European Commission’s Flash Eurobarometer on gender stereotypes and violence against women.

The findings show that while most respondents reject physical and sexual violence, significant shares of the population still tolerate or excuse other forms of violent and controlling behaviour.

Economic violence is one example. Across the EU, 46% of men and 26% of women agree that a man controlling his wife’s or partner’s finances can be acceptable.

What is especially concerning is that younger people were more likely to accept this form of control than older generations. That tells us something important: progress in law does not automatically translate into progress in attitudes.

Knowing these patterns are fundamental for prevention because they can point to early warning signs such as the normalisation of control, the trivialisation of abuse, victim-blaming, and ideas about masculinity that glorify dominance or ridicule vulnerability.



For practitioners and policymakers, EIGE’s data tools can help make these trends and dynamics visible before they escalate. They can support risk analysis, inform prevention strategies, and help ensure interventions are grounded in evidence rather than assumptions.

This is also why gender analysis should be built into PCVE work from the beginning, followed by gender impact assessment as policies and interventions are designed. Gender analyses help practitioners understand the realities and needs in society: whose insecurity is being measured, whose experiences are missing, and which social norms may be reinforcing exclusion, coercion, or violence. Gender impact assessment then helps check whether the proposed measures will actually address those inequalities in practice.

The encouraging point is that gender stereotypes are socially constructed, which means they can also be challenged and changed. With the right evidence, PCVE actors can identify harmful trends earlier, design more targeted responses, and contribute to more effective prevention.

With EIGE launching its new Gender Mainstreaming Helpdesk, Member States are receiving practical support to embed gender equality into their national action plans.

“Gender analyses help practitioners understand the realities and needs in society: whose insecurity is being measured, whose experiences are missing, and which social norms may be reinforcing exclusion, coercion, or violence.”





What advice would you give to national security coordinators and PCVE actors looking to use these tools to ensure intervention strategies are truly gender-responsive?

My advice would be to treat gender mainstreaming as a core part of effective security policy, not as an additional checklist at the end.



For national security coordinators and PCVE actors, that means starting with evidence: who is affected, how risks are experienced differently by women and men in all their diversity.

The value of the [Gender Mainstreaming Helpdesk](#) is that it can support the institutions to move from commitment to implementation. It offers practical support to ask the right questions early, design interventions that reflect lived realities and needs, and monitor whether measures are delivering for different groups in practice.

At the local level, this means combining gender expertise with security expertise, engaging communities meaningfully, and using regular, comparable data to keep strategies honest over time. Gender-responsive PCVE is strongest when it is practical, measurable, and accountable: when it helps practitioners understand early warning signs, target resources more effectively, and adapt approaches when the evidence shows that something is not working. Without ongoing evidence, ambitions risk losing focus and can start to drift. When we have evidence, implementation is more targeted, tailored, and true to reality.

Library

- [EU Gender-based Violence Survey: Evidence for Policy and Practice | European Institute for Gender Equality](#)
- [Why Europe needs to act earlier to stop violence against women | European Institute for Gender Equality](#)
- [Europe's moment of truth: the new Gender Equality Strategy | European Institute for Gender Equality](#)
- [Perception to policy: Dismantling gender stereotypes in the European Union | European Institute for Gender Equality](#)
- [Gender Equality Index 2024: Tackling violence against women, tackling gender inequalities | European Institute for Gender Equality](#)

Videos

- [It should be zero: Gender-based violence in the EU explained](#)
- [Gender-based Violence Survey](#)
- [Workshop “Messages Matter: Communicating effectively to help end violence against women”](#)
- [Violence against women \(Area D\)](#)
- [#AccelerateAction to Tackle Gender-Based Violence](#)
- [Ending Cyberviolence: Creating better #safespaces to protect women online](#)

Podcasts

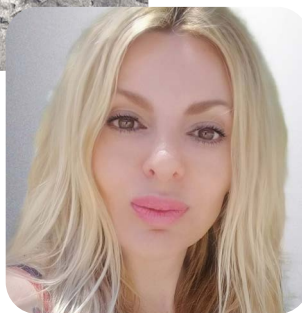
- [Ep. 4 | Gender Equality in Europe: Inside EIGE with Carlien Scheele](#)

Other resources

- [Gender mainstreaming | European Institute for Gender Equality](#)



MASCULINITY, MENTAL HEALTH, AND VULNERABILITY: UNDERSTANDING EMERGING RISKS IN PCVE



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“Masculinity is not a fixed concept but a social construct that evolves across cultures, generations, and contexts.”

Across Europe and beyond, growing attention is being paid to the relationship between masculinity, mental health,¹ and vulnerability to extremist narratives. While there is no evidence that mental health difficulties or particular expressions of masculinity directly cause radicalisation,² with most individuals who experience psychological distress never engaging with extremist ideologies, many recent cases of radicalised individuals increasingly suggests that feelings of isolation, rejection, perceived injustice, and lack of belonging can create vulnerabilities that extremist organisations are willing and able to exploit. Recent European assessments have highlighted the growing relevance of misogynistic violent extremism, incel-related violence, and online grievance-based communities as emerging concerns for prevention practitioners.³

¹ For the purposes of this article, mental health is understood in its broadest sense, encompassing not only clinically recognised mental health difficulties, such as depression, anxiety, trauma-related symptoms, or other forms of psychological distress, but also psychological vulnerabilities and broader life adversities that may affect wellbeing and social functioning. This includes factors such as low self-esteem, identity uncertainty, emotional dysregulation, unmet needs for belonging and significance, as well as experiences of social isolation, unemployment, relationship difficulties, discrimination, or perceived marginalisation. While none of these factors directly cause radicalisation, they may interact in complex ways that increase vulnerability to extremist recruitment and manipulation, particularly when accompanied by experiences of exclusion, grievance, or loss of meaning and purpose.

² Connell, R. W., & Messerschmidt, J. W. (2005). Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept.

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International Affairs, 95(6), 1251–1270. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz177>

³ Europol (2025). European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2025 (EU TE-SAT).

Publications Office of the European Union. <https://doi.org/10.2813/5425593>

European Commission, 2021 RAN, 2021 Council of Europe, 2025

In digital environments, these vulnerabilities may intersect with gendered narratives that offer simplified explanations for complex personal challenges. Understanding these dynamics is becoming increasingly important for actors and agencies working in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE), particularly as online communities continue to shape identity formation among young people.

Masculinity, Identity, and Psychological Vulnerability

Masculinity is not a fixed concept but a social construct that evolves across cultures, generations, and contexts. Contemporary societies have witnessed significant changes in expectations regarding gender roles, relationships, and identity. While these changes have created opportunities for greater equality and inclusion, some individuals may experience uncertainty about their place within changing social norms.

A growing body of research highlights that rigid gender norms and expectations can negatively affect wellbeing by discouraging emotional expression and shaping how individuals experience belonging, exclusion, vulnerability, and identity formation. [Understanding masculinities can therefore contribute to more nuanced approaches to prevention, resilience, and social cohesion.](#)

“For some individuals, particularly those facing social isolation, unemployment, relationship difficulties, or broader life frustrations, unmet psychological needs may contribute to feelings of alienation, diminished self-worth, and social disconnection.”

According to a [UN Women literature review](#), men and masculinities remain under-examined in policy and research despite the significant influence that gender norms and expectations have on experiences, vulnerabilities, and social outcomes. A more nuanced understanding of masculinities can therefore contribute to more effective and inclusive responses to contemporary social challenges.

Masculinity may shape how some individuals interpret experiences of failure, rejection, status loss, or social exclusion. In contexts where masculinity is closely associated with dominance, success, control, or sexual achievement, personal setbacks can be experienced not only as individual difficulties but also as threats to identity and self-worth. Extremist narratives may exploit these perceptions by reframing personal frustrations as evidence of broader societal injustice or cultural decline. For some individuals, particularly those facing social isolation, unemployment, relationship difficulties, or broader life frustrations, unmet psychological needs may contribute to feelings of alienation, diminished self-worth, and social disconnection. These experiences are not unique to any gender, but they can become particularly significant when combined with narratives that frame personal difficulties as evidence of systemic victimisation.

While these dynamics do not lead most individuals towards extremism, they can help explain why certain online communities and ideological movements are able to resonate with individuals experiencing identity-related vulnerabilities.

The Incel Ecosystem and Online Recruitment

One of the most visible examples of this dynamic is the emergence of the "incel" (involuntary celibate) online ecosystem. The European Commission's publication, [Incels: A First Scan of the Phenomenon \(in the EU\) and its Relevance and Challenges for PCVE](#), describes incels as individuals who believe they are unable to access consensual romantic or sexual relationships due to perceived physical or social inadequacies. While many participants do not advocate violence, parts of the online ecosystem have developed misogynistic narratives, glorified perpetrators of violence, and promoted hostility towards women and society more broadly.

Importantly, research suggests that individuals are often drawn into such spaces not because of pre-existing extremist beliefs, but because they are seeking answers to feelings of loneliness, rejection, or inadequacy. A recent [systematic review](#) published in *Current Psychology* found that incel communities frequently combine identity-related grievances with anti-feminist narratives and, in some cases, support for violence.

The appeal of these communities often lies in their ability to provide validation, belonging, and a shared explanation for personal frustrations. In this sense, the recruitment process resembles patterns observed across multiple forms of extremism: individuals experiencing uncertainty or exclusion encounter communities that offer certainty, identity, and a sense of purpose.

“Research suggests that individuals are often drawn into such spaces not because of pre-existing extremist beliefs, but because they are seeking answers to feelings of loneliness, rejection, or inadequacy.”

This observation is consistent with the [“Quest for Significance”](#) theory, which suggests that individuals who experience a loss of meaning, status, or social recognition may become more receptive to groups and narratives that promise significance, belonging, and meaning.

Anti-Modernity Narratives and Right-Wing Extremism

Some extremist actors have increasingly incorporated narratives centred on masculinity, presenting themselves as defenders of a supposedly threatened social order. Within certain right-wing extremist milieus, changing gender norms are portrayed as evidence of societal decline or cultural displacement, while traditional and often highly rigid conceptions of masculinity are promoted as solutions.

These narratives frequently appeal to individuals experiencing status anxiety, frustration, or a perceived loss of identity. Rather than addressing the structural, social, and personal factors contributing to these experiences, extremist narratives may redirect blame towards specific groups, institutions, or social changes. Such messaging can foster polarisation and strengthen “us versus them” worldviews that are common across extremist ideologies. [A research](#) funded through the European Union’s Horizon 2020 programme has highlighted how identity crises, social fragmentation, exclusion, perceived injustice, and increasing societal polarisation may create vulnerabilities that extremist actors can exploit.

It is important to note that dissatisfaction with contemporary social developments does not inherently lead to extremism. The risk emerges when personal grievances become integrated into ideological frameworks that justify hatred, exclusion, or violence.

Nihilism, Entitlement, and the Search for Meaning

Beyond ideological commitments, these dynamics are often rooted in broader psychological processes related to meaning, recognition, and identity. Individuals are motivated by a fundamental desire to feel respected, valued, and significant. Experiences such as social exclusion, humiliation, perceived injustice, loss of status, or personal failure can threaten this sense of significance. In some circumstances, extremist narratives become attractive because they offer a pathway to restore meaning, dignity, belonging, and personal importance.

Beyond ideological content, many contemporary extremist narratives appeal to deeper psychological dynamics. Feelings of frustration, perceived injustice, humiliation, or lack of recognition can contribute to a broader sense of meaninglessness. Some individuals may develop beliefs that they have been unfairly deprived of opportunities, relationships, or status that they feel entitled to receive.

“In some circumstances, extremist narratives become attractive because they offer a pathway to restore meaning, dignity, belonging, and personal importance.”

This combination of grievance and entitlement can create fertile ground for nihilistic worldviews. Such perspectives often reject democratic engagement, social cooperation, or personal agency in favour of fatalistic explanations and blame-based narratives. Online communities may reinforce these beliefs by repeatedly framing personal struggles as evidence of a corrupt or irredeemable society. In digital environments, these vulnerabilities may intersect with gendered narratives that offer simplified explanations for complex personal challenges. Algorithmic amplification, recommender systems, and participatory online dynamics may further reinforce exposure to grievance-based content, contributing to the formation of increasingly homogeneous online communities and echo chambers. Over time, these environments can normalise exclusionary beliefs, strengthen perceptions of collective victimhood, and reduce exposure to alternative perspectives, thereby increasing susceptibility to extremist narratives that provide a sense of certainty, belonging, and purpose.

For PCVE policymakers and practitioners, understanding these psychological dimensions is crucial. Vulnerability often stems not from ideology itself, but from unmet needs for belonging, significance, recognition, and purpose. Extremist narratives frequently succeed because they appear to address these needs, even when their proposed solutions are harmful or exclusionary.



Lessons Learned

- Mental health challenges do not cause extremism, but psychological vulnerabilities can increase susceptibility to extremist recruitment.
- Feelings of loneliness, rejection, identity confusion, and lack of belonging are recurring themes across multiple radicalisation pathways.
- Online communities can provide support and connection, but some spaces exploit vulnerabilities by promoting grievance-based and exclusionary worldviews.
- The incel ecosystem demonstrates how personal frustrations can be transformed into broader ideological narratives that normalise hostility and, in some cases, violence.
- Healthy and inclusive models of masculinity can contribute to resilience by encouraging emotional literacy, social connection, and constructive coping strategies.
- Effective PCVE approaches should address psychosocial needs alongside ideological factors, recognising the importance of belonging, purpose, and positive identity development.

Conclusion

The intersection of masculinity, mental health, and violent extremism presents both challenges and opportunities for PCVE policy and practice. Rather than viewing masculinity itself as a risk factor, PCVE professionals increasingly recognise the importance of understanding how identity, belonging, and wellbeing shape vulnerability and resilience. As digital environments continue to influence how individuals understand themselves and others, promoting inclusive forms of identity, strengthening social connections, and addressing psychological vulnerabilities will remain essential components of prevention efforts.

Ultimately, sustainable prevention depends not only on countering harmful narratives, but also on creating environments in which individuals can find dignity, purpose, belonging, and recognition without resorting to exclusionary or extremist worldviews.

“The intersection of masculinity, mental health, and violent extremism presents both challenges and opportunities for PCVE policy and practice.”



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THE EVOLUTION OF ONLINE EXTREMISM: Understanding the Convergence of Misogyny, Grievance Politics, and Com Networks



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“Research indicates that they are becoming interconnected within a hybrid online threat landscape that challenges existing approaches to assessment, intervention, and prevention efforts across sectors.”

Online ecosystems of violent extremism are undergoing significant transformations. Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE) has traditionally focused on ideologically motivated threats rooted in identifiable political or religious movements. Increasingly, however, emerging online communities are blurring these boundaries. Misogynistic movements such as the incel community, nihilistic violent extremism (NVE), red pill communities within broader manosphere groups, online sadistic networks, and digitally enabled child exploitation may not be best understood as separate phenomena. Instead, recent research indicates that they are becoming interconnected within a hybrid online threat landscape that challenges existing approaches to assessment, intervention, and prevention efforts across sectors.

The incel movement represents one of the earliest and most visible examples of online gender-based grievance evolving into extremist narratives. While the overwhelming majority of self-identified involuntary celibates will never engage in violence, the online incel ecosystem is characterised by collective victimhood, hostile sexism, and narratives of perceived injustice. Romantic rejection, changing gender norms, and feminism are reframed as evidence of systemic discrimination against men, transforming personal frustrations into a shared ideological identity.

Research suggests these narratives are driven by psychological processes commonly associated with radicalisation. Extant literature including a recent [systematic review by Squires and Smith \(2026\)](#) found consistent links between misogynistic extremism and hostile sexism, masculine identity threat, entitlement, rejection sensitivity, loneliness, depression, and perceived social exclusion. In particular, beliefs which frame masculinity as under threat and feminism as having disadvantaged men have emerged as strong predictors of misogynistic attitudes. [These findings reinforce the idea that a combination of factors, such as grievance and proximity to these communities rather than misogyny alone, are interconnected central drivers of radicalisation resulting in the “collective extremisation” of the members within these groups.](#)

At the same time, researchers are also observing overlap between incel-adjacent communities and nihilistic violent extremist networks. While incel spaces have historically centred on sexual exclusion and hostility towards women, many emerging online communities are less concerned with coherent ideological goals than with violence, domination, clout, and humiliation as ends in themselves. These behaviours are increasingly associated with accelerationist narratives that celebrate the idea of social norm collapse and escalating harm of vulnerable people.



This shift was a recurring theme at the [2026 Terrorism and Social Media \(TASM\) Conference in Swansea](#), where researchers, practitioners, and law enforcement representatives highlighted the growing convergence between Incel communities, the broader manosphere, nihilistic violent extremism and the emergence of [sadistic online networks aka “Com Networks.”](#) These decentralised online communities recruit vulnerable young people through mainstream social media, gaming platforms, encrypted messaging services, and private forums before exposing them to escalating forms of coercion, exploitation, and violence. The groups socialise their members to cause and celebrate harm, where exposure to violent and exploitative rhetoric and content is foundational. New members often become desensitised to violence and begin to participate in the exploitation of others to gain acceptance and achieve status within the group.

Unlike traditional extremist organisations, leadership is diffuse, membership is fluid, and motivations are often difficult to categorise. Individuals may engage simultaneously with misogynistic content, extremist propaganda, cybercrime, sadistic abuse, child sexual abuse material (CSAM), and self-harm communities, illustrating the increasingly overlapping nature of online harms. A key challenge in this emerging threat landscape is that these communities rarely



fit neatly within traditional counter-terrorism, organised crime or safeguarding frameworks. Instead, they operate across multiple domains simultaneously, reflecting what one expert described as a "hybridisation of harms."

These environments provide belonging, identity, and explanations for personal suffering while progressively normalising misogyny, coercion, and violence. This suggests that grievance politics may offer a more useful framework for understanding contemporary radicalisation than ideological labels alone. Of course, this does not imply that loneliness or mental health difficulties inevitably lead to extremism. The vast majority of people experiencing these challenges never engage with extremist behaviours. Risk emerges when personal vulnerabilities intersect with online environments that validate grievance, reinforce cognitive distortions, and reward increasingly extreme interpretations of lived experience.

These observations have important implications for policy and practice. Misogynistic extremism should no longer be viewed as a peripheral issue but recognised as part of a broader ecosystem of interconnected online harms. Equally, responses cannot rely solely on counter-terrorism. Many individuals within these networks are adolescents or young adults who occupy blurred roles as both victims and perpetrators, having experienced grooming, coercion, and exploitation before

“Risk emerges when personal vulnerabilities intersect with online environments that validate grievance, reinforce cognitive distortions, and reward increasingly extreme interpretations of lived experience.”

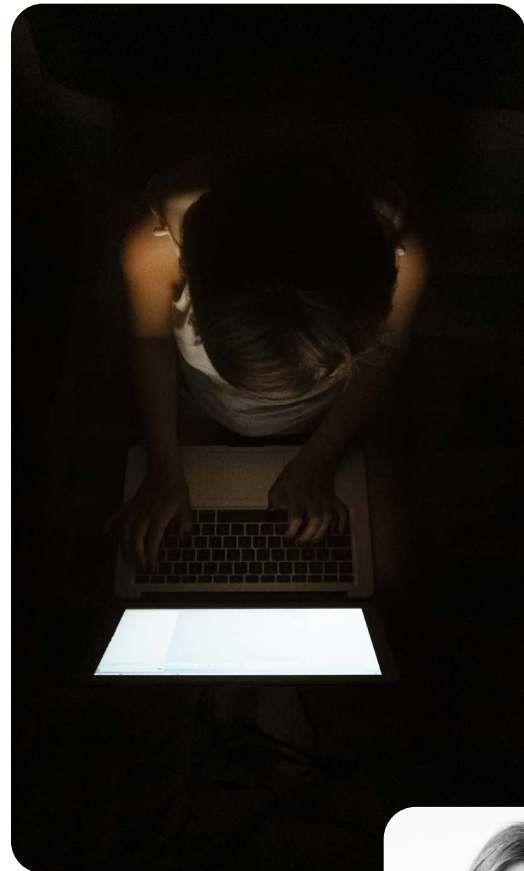
then being forced into the recruitment of others themselves. Addressing these threats therefore requires coordinated responses across education, psychology, child protection, policing, technology companies, and community organisations.

Understanding these evolving intersections represents one of the defining challenges for contemporary extremism research. It also provides an opportunity to develop prevention strategies that recognise how grievance, identity, online culture, and digital technologies are collectively reshaping pathways into violence. As the online threat landscape continues to evolve, so too must the frameworks used to understand and prevent it.

Library

- [The Incel Phenomenon: Structures, Narratives, and Interactions](#)
- [Radicalisation in Coercive Online Communities: A Research Note](#)
- [AI, Anger and Entitlement: What's Fuelling Misogynistic Extremism Online](#)
- [CREST \(Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats\)](#)

UNDERSTANDING GENDERED ONLINE VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN A MEMETIC MEDIA ERA



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“Memes function as condensation symbols, distilling complex ideological worldviews into simple, recognisable forms that are easily repeated, remixed, and circulated.”

One of the central challenges in understanding online violent extremism is that emerging media technologies and platform logics continuously reshape the conditions under which extremist ideas are produced, circulated, and normalised. Today, platforms characterised by memetic media logics (Zulli, 2022), increasingly define this new media environment. Here, the memetic refers not simply to memes as cultural units, but to platform infrastructures that organise participation through repetition, remixing, circulation, and the continuous recombination of content. Within these infrastructures, memes function as condensation symbols (Edwards, 2022), distilling complex ideological worldviews into simple, recognisable forms that are easily repeated, remixed, and circulated. As Edwards (2022) argues, “memes succeed by instigating emotional reactions and provoking choric responses that draw in and affirm community members while exposing and expelling outsiders.”

Gendered online ecosystems, particularly what has been conceptualised as the manosphere (Farrell et al., 2020; Kim, 2022; Dickel & Evolvi, 2023; Haslop et al., 2024), provide a particularly useful lens through which to understand how these memetic dynamics operate within contemporary extremist environments.

Using the manosphere as an analytical optic, this article argues that gendered online extremism and violence are increasingly mainstreamed through the interaction between ideological entrepreneurs, algorithms, and memetic participation (Pedersen 2026a).

According to Zulli (2022), memetic media like TikTok's design encourages imitation, replication, and remix as the dominant modes of participation. Algorithms play a central—yet still understudied—role in this process. Their influence unfolds through continuous interaction with ideological entrepreneurs (Pedersen, 2026) such as Andrew Tate, who strategically optimise emotionally resonant content for algorithmic visibility, and with users whose participation—whether supportive, critical, ironic, or simply entertainment-driven—extends its circulation far beyond its original audience.

Andrew Tate is a figure known for his controversial presence on social media, particularly due to his promotion of patriarchal and misogynistic ideas (Smith 2026; Pedersen 2026b). His rhetoric, often framed within hegemonic masculinity and social identity frameworks, has attracted a significant following, especially among young men (Haslop 2024). Tate's communication style and leadership appeal have been analysed as part of online manospheric communities, where his messages resonate with followers by offering a form of aspirational masculinity and entrepreneurial advice.

“Conflict is therefore not a by-product but a deliberate strategy for generating algorithmic attention.”

As an ideological entrepreneur, Andrew Tate strategically mobilises emotionally resonant and algorithmically favoured content to maximise visibility, engagement, and circulation (Hyzen & Van den Bulck, 2021; Monaci & Persico, 2026). As Tate himself remarked, "What you ideally want is a mix of 60–70 percent fans and 30–40 percent haters. You want arguments, you want war." Conflict is therefore not a by-product but a deliberate strategy for generating algorithmic attention.

A popular example is looksmaxxing, an online self-improvement culture that illustrates how misogynistic ideology is increasingly learned through memetic participation rather than direct ideological instruction. Looksmaxxing illustrates how extremist worldviews become embedded within ordinary practices of self-improvement, allowing hierarchical incel ideology to circulate through beauty routines, humour, fitness, and lifestyle practices rather than through explicit ideological or extremist discourse. At first glance, looksmaxxing appears to focus on fitness, grooming, and appearance. Yet it also functions as a commodified and highly marketable expression of incel culture, translating its hierarchical worldview into routines of self-improvement, beauty, fitness, and lifestyle. In practice, it operates as a peer-to-peer learning environment in which a distinctive form of "bro-pedagogy" (Sousbois, 2025) socialises young men into understanding themselves, their bodies, and their place within hierarchical social orders.

One of the largest looksmaxxing forums hosts more than 174,000 registered members and approximately 28 million posts, with many participants appearing to be adolescent boys.

Central to looksmaxxing communities is the Perceived Sexual Level (PSL) ranking system, which categorises individuals on a scale from Sub-5 to Chad, the highest tier of idealised male attractiveness. While presented as a framework for evaluating attractiveness, the PSL hierarchy functions as a memetic template for hierarchical thinking, teaching that human value can be measured, ranked, and optimised. Once this logic is normalised, it becomes easily transferable beyond appearance to broader hierarchies of gender, race, and social worth. Rather than existing as separate domains, self-improvement, humour, memes, irony, misogyny, racism, and antisemitism circulate side by side within the same participatory ecosystem.

It is within these memetic media logics, meaning emerges through affect, repetition, remixing, and participation. Ideology then develops and circulates memetically, through these patterns, rather than through direct ideological persuasion. This ecosystem refracts misogynistic ideology, where it is continuously negotiated, reconfigured, and amplified through the mechanics of visibility and virality. Underlying these participatory dynamics is a misogynistic worldview that constructs society as a hierarchy of human value.

“This ecosystem refracts misogynistic ideology, where it is continuously negotiated, reconfigured, and amplified through the mechanics of visibility and virality.”

Within the manosphere, men are portrayed as the primary victims of a system believed to have been "rigged" by feminism, diversity initiatives, and progressive social change. Rather than advancing a coherent political or ideological programme, ideological entrepreneurs operate primarily at the memetic layer, where complex ideological claims are condensed into highly recognisable symbolic forms — The Matrix, red pill, blackpill, *normie*, Chad, sub-5, PSL, globalists, and mainstream media. Their repeated circulation across platforms enables these worldviews to be learned, reproduced, and normalised through everyday participation rather than explicit ideological instruction.

Key takeaways

- Emerging media technologies reshape how extremist ideas are produced, circulated, and normalised.
- The manosphere is best understood as a cross-platform, participatory ecosystem rather than an isolated extremist community.
- Ideological entrepreneurs such as Andrew Tate strategically optimise content for algorithmic visibility, while users extend its reach through memetic participation.
- Misogynistic ideology increasingly circulates through memes, humour, self-improvement, and everyday participation rather than explicit ideological instruction.

Conclusion

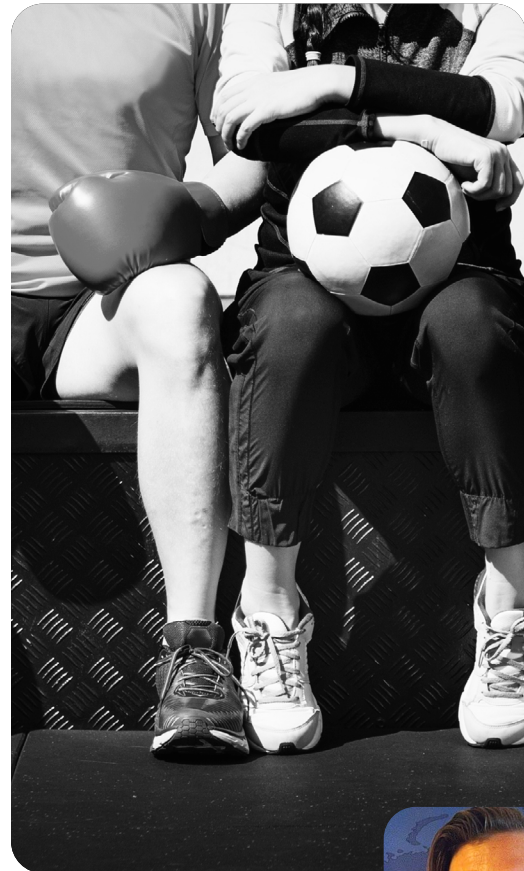
For PCVE, this means recognising that violent extremist ideas and narratives do not necessarily circulate as distinct or readily identifiable categories, but may be embedded within everyday participatory cultures, making them difficult to recognise and interpret without an understanding of the wider digital ecosystems in which they circulate. In a memetic media era, where new extremist and violent communities increasingly emerge through participatory digital cultures, researchers, practitioners, and policymakers are struggling to understand what is often described as "post-ideological" extremism. The challenge is not whether ideology still matters, but how contemporary media environments transform—and increasingly memefy—ideology. Understanding extremism today requires attention to the memetic layer, algorithms as co-authors of visibility, and memetic participation, through which ideological entrepreneurs and users collectively produce, negotiate, and circulate ideological meaning. This perspective offers a productive framework for understanding how extremism is mainstreamed across propaganda, media manipulation, information warfare, and ideological grooming.

“Understanding extremism today requires attention to the memetic layer, algorithms as co-authors of visibility, and memetic participation, through which ideological entrepreneurs and users collectively produce, negotiate, and circulate ideological meaning.”

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SPORT-BASED PREVENTION OF RADICALISATION: LOOKING BEYOND THE FOOTBALL PITCH



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“One of its fastest-growing forms runs through boxing rings, mixed-martial-arts gyms, and self-styled “active clubs”, where far-right networks recruit young men with the promise of brotherhood, loyalty, discipline, and a hardened body.”

Most sport-based prevention in Europe is built around the football pitch and the inclusive youth club, with most sport-based radicalisation taking place elsewhere. Stadiums and ultra scenes remain long-standing recruitment sites, and a growing share of mobilisation now runs online. One of its fastest-growing forms runs through boxing rings, mixed-martial-arts gyms, and self-styled “active clubs”, where far-right networks recruit young men with the promise of brotherhood, loyalty, discipline, and a hardened body – offering the belonging, status and significance that radicalisation research identifies as core drivers of the search for meaning.¹ That mismatch between prevention and recruitment is the central problem facing sport-based interventions today. This article argues that the field’s next task is to follow the threat into the gym and sets out what a credible combat-sports intervention looks like.

A Prevention Model with a Missing Tier

The dominant model of sport-based prevention is one of inclusion. In the tiered model that radicalisation prevention uses, this is primary (universal) prevention aimed at the whole youth population – the level at which UNODC situates sport-based programming – as distinct from secondary (targeted) prevention for higher-risk groups and settings, and tertiary work with those already radicalised.

¹ Kruglanski, Arie W., Jocelyn J. Bélanger, and Rohan Gunaratna, *The Three Pillars of Radicalization: Needs, Narratives, and Networks* (New York, 2019; online edn, Oxford Academic, 23 May 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190851125.001.0001>, last accessed 14 July 2026.

The [UNODC Technical Guide on Preventing Violent Extremism through Sport](#) organises programming around five protective conditions – safe spaces, social inclusion, education, resilience, and empowerment – and the strongest European examples follow that logic. [SPEY \(Sport for Prevention of Extremism in Youth\)](#), co-funded by the EU and led by the Union of Sports Federations of Catalonia (UFEC), used sport, mentoring, and skills work to address the psychosocial drivers of radicalisation among young people at risk of exclusion; [Erasmus+ Sport cooperation partnerships](#) fund comparable work across the Union. This model is valuable, and it is right that it exists. But it is calibrated for diffuse, primary prevention – building resilience in the general youth population – rather than for the specific settings where deliberate recruitment takes place. The gap is therefore not a wrong venue but a missing tier: secondary, setting-specific prevention where recruitment concentrates

Those settings are now well identified. The Radicalisation Awareness Network warned as early as 2021 that combat-sports gyms – operating in tandem with [online fitness ecosystems and Telegram](#) – promoting a “warrior mentality” had become recruitment places for the violent far right. Since then, the “active club” model – decentralised fitness cells that lead with training and brand identity and introduce ideology only later – has spread from the United States into Germany and beyond; in 2024, researchers at the [George Washington Program on Extremism](#) catalogued dozens of European groups using physical training

“The dominant model of sport-based prevention is one of inclusion.”



as a recruitment tool. The appeal is structural, not incidental: combat sports reward the masculine status and physical prowess that extremist narratives prize, a pattern now documented in the [academic literature on far-right mixed martial arts](#). A strategy aimed only at the football pitch and the youth centre leaves this space open.

Engaging Combat Sports

Combat sports are not criminogenic in themselves: well supervised, they build self-regulation and [prosocial behaviour](#), and serve as prevention tools in their own right. What matters is who sets the values in the room. Entering that space requires a different kind of intervention, and one already exists as a template. Germany’s “[Full Contact – Democracy and Martial Arts](#)” project ([VOLLKONTAKT](#)), run between 2020 and 2024 under the federal “Live Democracy!” programme, did not try to divert at-risk youths or to “convert” extremists through sport. It worked on the setting itself: sensitising coaches, gym owners, associations, and event organisers to extremist infiltration, embedding democratic standards into the discipline, and denying organised neo-Nazi promoters the legitimacy of the mainstream martial-arts scene. In that sense, the target is (and must be) the gatekeeper, not only the vulnerable individual. That is the conceptual shift combat-sports prevention demands today – from offering young people an alternative to extremism, to contesting the institutions extremists are trying to capture.

“The appeal is structural, not incidental: combat sports reward the masculine status and physical prowess that extremist narratives prize”



Several Member States fund work in this register, including Germany’s [federal programme against right-wing extremism and hatred in sport](#).

Lessons Learned

Three lessons follow for anyone designing the next programme. The first is to match the model to the venue. Inclusion projects and combat-sports interventions are not interchangeable: the first builds general resilience; the second contests a specific and organised milieu. They are distinct instruments serving one goal.

The second is to work through gatekeepers. In combat sports, the real leverage lies with coaches, federations, licensing bodies, and event organisers, who can withhold venues, apply sanctions, and promote the legitimacy that extremist promoters crave. Reaching them, not only the individual recruit, is what distinguishes a serious combat-sports strategy from a generic youth scheme – a distinction the regulated football world already has in instruments such as the Council of Europe’s [Saint-Denis Convention](#), which the gym sector lacks.

The third is to be candid about evidence. Combat-sports prevention is young and largely unevaluated, and even the inclusion model rests on limited outcome data, with SPEY’s reported reductions in moral disengagement among participants standing out as an exception rather than the norm. Programmes should build evaluation in from the outset.

“Doing that well begins with an honest map – and with the recognition that the most consequential sport-based intervention may be the one that happens where we have been least willing to look.”



Conclusion: Building the Evidence Base

None of this can be designed in the dark. Europe still lacks a consolidated, comparable picture of how Member States actually address sports-related radicalisation – which of them engage the combat-sports sector at all, with what instruments. Filling that gap is the purpose of a comparative mapping study currently underway by the author of this article. This study, commissioned by the EUKH following the 2025 PBC series on radicalisation in sporting environments, aims at mapping: through Member State surveys and analysis of national legislation and strategies during 2026, which policies and institutions exist, how effective they are and where coordination fails, with a design built to eventually extend to all 27. Because sport is only a supporting competence under [Article 165 of the TFEU](#), the Union cannot legislate the gym into safety; however, it can fund, coordinate, and set common standards. Doing that well begins with an honest map – and with the recognition that the most consequential sport-based intervention may be the one that happens where we have been least willing to look.

Library

- [RAN - The role of sports in violent right-wing extremist radicalisation and P/CVE \(2021\)](#)
- [VOLLKONTAKT - Full Contact: Democracy and Martial Arts \(Germany, 2020-2024\)](#)
- [UNODC - Preventing Violent Extremism through Sport: Technical Guide \(2020\)](#)
- [SPEY - Sport for Prevention of Extremism in Youth \(RAN inspiring practice\)](#)
- [GW Program on Extremism - Active Clubs and Transnational Far-Right Extremism](#)

PARENTS AS OFFLINE INFLUENCERS: THE FIRST LINE OF DEFENCE AGAINST DIGITAL DANGERS



Rafael Milan Kropiunigg

Director of Research,
Women without Borders

**“Radicalisation
moves more
decidedly
from streets to
screens.”**

As technology accelerates and radicalisation moves more decidedly from streets to screens, the face of extremism is becoming younger, faster, and harder to read. A growing involvement of minors in homegrown terrorism is materialising alongside steadily shrinking radicalisation timelines, whereby processes that once unfolded over years can now take mere months or weeks to complete. For well over a decade, recruitment has consolidated its online character, becoming less dependent on physical proximity, local networks, or visible community mobilisation over time. More commonly it now moves through social media, gaming spaces, encrypted channels, and algorithmic feeds, easily accessible to children in search of identity and belonging during the turbulent years of adolescence and beyond. As governments debate and institute social media bans and European prevention practitioners warn that extremist groups use sophisticated digital strategies to exploit the vulnerabilities of minors, the case for community-led strategies—including the call for family-centred prevention—has become newly urgent.

Parental engagement, as this contribution will argue, is paramount in the light of the missing European regulatory regime capable of safeguarding all minors against online risks and radicalisation.

Mothers and fathers—who tend to be closest to children’s everyday realities and the first educators in the lives of their children—ought to be considered in the wider prevention ecosystem as an early protective layer.

While they should not be expected to become digital experts or surveillance officers, parents are ideally placed to become effective ‘offline influencers’. Honing their critical thinking skills and role model potential should be a key EU policy and practice priority.

For around fifteen years, [Women without Borders \(WwB\)](#) has been advocating for the inclusion of parenting strategies as part of the ecosystem of community-based extremism prevention work, emphasising the protective potential that already exists inside families and communities before violence and radicalisation take root. Following two multi-country, translational research studies, WwB developed and rolled out its Parenting for Peace models: the [MotherSchools](#) and [FatherSchools](#). These programmes equip parents as first educators, trusted role models, and prevention allies in the lives of their children. Delivered by WwB-trained local facilitators in safe, structured group settings, the model builds confidence, communication skills, emotional literacy, and practical prevention knowledge so parents can strengthen family cohesion, recognise early warning signs, and intervene when necessary. Parents also receive training on the psychosocial developmental stages of life to better understand and support rather than obstruct the identity formation of their children. During the turbulent years of adolescence, for instance, parents thus also learn to better differentiate between potential warning signs of radicalisation and ordinary identity exploration, and to respond appropriately.

“While they should not be expected to become digital experts or surveillance officers, parents are ideally placed to become effective ‘offline influencers’ ”

While [WwB’s models are routinely cited as best practices](#), the viability of family-based approaches overall is reinforced by recent prevention [research identifying positive parental involvement as a protective factor](#) associated with lower levels of youth radicalisation.

WwB’s growing conviction of parents’ ‘offline influencer’ potential stems from interviews and conversations with our MotherSchools and FatherSchools beneficiaries since 2012, counting over 7000 graduates across 17 countries to date. Participants from WwB’s programmes have continuously returned to the same concern: ‘My child is always online, it frightens me, and I do not know what to do’. As recruitment has shifted increasingly into social media and gaming spaces, the problem has become less visible and less tangible to grasp for families and conventional first-line practitioners. Parents often feel overwhelmed by a digital environment that expands faster than their own knowledge and faster than policy can regulate the space.

Challenges notwithstanding, [digital spaces do indeed open important routes to learning, creativity, connection and belonging for children](#). At the same time, we have reached a point where [terrorist innovation, aided by digital innovation, is outpacing State response capabilities](#). In the field of prevention, responses are struggling to keep up with the pace at which ‘digital dangers’ are proliferating.

Beyond broader mental health concerns, these dangers include extremist grooming, algorithmic amplification, and misogynistic narratives that offer entry points for radicalisation and violent extremism. A key focus should be to build digital resilience from a young age by helping parents set appropriate boundaries and respond constructively when children encounter harmful content, using these moments as an opportunity for dialogue and sharpening critical thinking skills. In so doing, family-centred prevention promises to complement regulation and reduce reliance on blanket restrictions by governments.

Against this background, WwB began in 2026 to pilot a new thematic addition in the WwB Parenting for Peace work: 'Children in (Digital) Danger: Parents as Offline Influencers'. WwB created a three-step learning journey—closing perception and knowledge gaps, introducing and living by digital ground rules, and overcoming the personal echo chamber—to address parental concerns and their sense of powerlessness.

The first task is to understand dynamics of early warning signs. They may appear as withdrawal, sleep problems, secretive online contacts, hate speech, engaging in identity politics, or entertaining conspiratorial claims. On a thematic level, one of the most evident early warning signs is online misogyny, which is also increasingly being acknowledged as a hidden entry point into youth radicalisation. The devaluation of women and girls is ideologically cross-cutting and readies the ground for dehumanisation and wider anti-democratic worldviews.

“As recruitment has shifted increasingly into social media and gaming spaces, the problem has become less visible and less tangible to grasp for families and conventional first-line practitioners.”

Seemingly harmless memes and promises of masculine self-improvement can gradually and subtly be exploited to develop and elicit emotions of hate and revenge.

The second aspect WwB focuses on is creating a regulated digital framework at home. Parents are most effective when they remain supportive and reliable rather than policing every click. In the MotherSchools and FatherSchools, this role is described as that of a lighthouse: providing orientation, knowing when to intervene, and when to leave room for experience. This begins before adolescence. 'A mobile phone is not a pacifier' is among the session's messages. A screen cannot replace comfort and conversation. After all, one of the greatest barriers is the taboo surrounding conversations about children's online lives. Many parents feel they lack the knowledge to discuss social media, while children often fear being judged, punished, or having their devices taken away if they are honest about their online experiences. Breaking this cycle requires shifting from surveillance to a culture of trust and open communication.

The third task is to reclaim critical thinking. Algorithms learn what holds our attention and supply more of it, gradually turning interest into repetition and repetition into an echo chamber. Contradiction disappears while polarising reactions are rewarded, and a personalised feed begins to deepen one's individual bias. In the MotherSchools and FatherSchools parents therefore learn how these algorithms work and how their own personal views are being shaped—an important prerequisite if they wish to educate their children on how to navigate the online space.

“Parents are most effective when they remain supportive and reliable rather than policing every click.”

The policy lesson is that parents should be recognised and equipped as local first-line prevention actors. Family-centric digital resilience belongs in community programmes, schools, and social services, ideally delivered through trusted local organisations that understand everyday realities. Facilitators need practical training while parents need clear bridges to schools, counselling services, and specialist support. The [EU Knowledge Hub](#) has emphasised that radicalisation among minors combines developmental vulnerabilities, unmet psychosocial needs, and sophisticated online exploitation, requiring cross-sectoral cooperation and credible actors in non-formal settings. Any strategy that stops at the platform interface or school gate misses the place where the earliest changes are often visible: the home.

Lessons learned

- Digital prevention begins at home and before visible radicalisation requires intervention.
- Connection and open conversation are stronger protective barriers than punishment or surveillance.
- Online misogyny is an early-warning sign and a possible gateway into radicalisation and the broad spectrum of extremism (cross-ideological nature).
- Parents need orientation knowledge, practical options, and confidence in their own role.
- Local, family-centred prevention must complement and not replace platform accountability and public policy.

Conclusions

Parents are the earliest shapers of the offline environment in which children learn how to interpret digital life. Their power lies in proximity, trust, and access, and thus in the very preconditions needed to counteract children's susceptibility to radical narratives. When equipped with the right tools and translational knowledge, parents can turn everyday family life into a space of prevention centred around open communication, critical thinking, recognising early changes, and setting clear digital boundaries. The task likewise includes empowering parents as digital role models who examine their own digital habits and personalised echo chambers. Strengthening family resilience should be a practical pillar of PCVE, connected to the broader prevention ecosystem of strategies and stakeholders spanning schools, youth work, mental health, and other social services. WwB's focus with respect to digital resilience rests on harnessing the power of family partnership and parental role models. By moving from recognising, to acting, to reflecting, parents can contribute to ongoing efforts to preserve the common ground that algorithms so often obscure. They can be strong allies in the push to safeguard the foundations on which resilient families and open societies depend: facts, truth, and trust.

“Parents are the earliest shapers of the offline environment in which children learn how to interpret digital life.”

PREVENTING MISOGYNISTIC ATTITUDES AMONG BOYS: THE PROTECTIVE ROLE OF FATHERS



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The alarming phenomenon of violence against women across Europe has raised questions about effective prevention measures. Hatred of women, rooted in patriarchal structures, has increasingly become ideologised and is spread through online communities and social media, reaching young men and boys. Thus, it is crucial to protect the younger and future generations of men from violent masculinity, which not only victimises women, but has also been linked by research to violent extremism in general. Legal provisions and law enforcement interventions address only part of the problem. An effective response needs to incorporate fundamental changes in social narratives and traditional models of masculinity. In this context, the role of healthy, functioning families is essential, with fathers demonstrating positive and respectful models of masculinity.

The role of fathers

Criminological theories have long emphasised the importance of the family as the first environment where attitudes, values, and behavioural patterns associated with both conformity and deviance are learned. Family can function either as a protective factor against, or a risk factor for, deviant and criminal behaviour. Therefore, parents may either reinforce attitudes that increase the

risk of future violence, or foster resilience against deviant behaviour and extremist ideologies, including misogyny.

Gender roles and models of masculinity are learned through family dynamics and the way parents interact with one another and with their children. Particularly, the role of fathers' adherence to masculinity ideology has been seen as influencing the development of their sons' masculine ideals (intergenerational continuity of masculinity ideology), though not all scholars agree on the degree of the impact. Fathers are not only caregivers; they may also serve as positive male role models and ultimately as protective factors against the misogynistic narratives present online. They are able to shape boys' understanding of masculinity, relationships, rejecting dominance, entitlement, violence, and resentment towards women. This is particularly important, when contemporary constructions of masculinity are increasingly shaped by digital ecosystems, where masculine role models are encountered through influencers, gaming communities, online forums, and algorithmically recommended content.

Above all, this is not about "preaching" to children. Boys observe the example fathers set daily, treating their wives or partners, their daughters, and other women with dignity and respect, sharing household responsibilities, expressing emotions in a healthy way, and handling or resolving disagreements without intimidation or violence.

“Gender roles and models of masculinity are learned through family dynamics and the way parents interact with one another and with their children.”

Findings reveal that it is not so much ideology, but the behaviour of parents that affects children's development of gender-role attitudes. Respect for women is taught through lived experience.

While it has been suggested that “through parenting, fathers of daughters may develop a better understanding of women's and girls' disadvantages in society, resulting in a significant shift in their attitudes towards gender norms” (“Mighty Girl Effect”), fathering boys can be a transformative experience too. Also, in families with mixed-gender siblings, there is equal opportunity to see similarities between boys and girls, reinforcing a non-discriminatory parenting approach. Men have the chance to interrupt the intergenerational transmission of harmful gender norms they inherited and help break the cycle through which misogyny, discrimination, and domestic violence are passed on, especially by positive parental relationships, respect, non-violence, and care.

The impact of paternal behaviour inside the family extends to sibling and maternal relationships. Boys interact with their sisters and mothers on a daily basis, and this is the first social environment where actions acquired from online misogynistic narratives manifest, through (among others) disrespectful language, controlling attitudes, or discriminatory remarks, even in the form of jokes, towards female family members. Fathers could look out for any controlling, intimidating, or demeaning

behaviour boys may show towards their sisters, or even their mothers, as this could serve as early warning signs.

Pornography use is common practice in male adolescents and boys get exposed to online violent pornographic content, merging sex, the abuse of girls and women, and physical pain. This may lead to unrealistic and harmful attitudes, beliefs, and values about sexual intercourse and sexuality in general, as well as more positive attitudes towards sexual coercion, sexual aggression, and female sexual objectification. Fathers have an important role in helping boys understand that pornography is not realistically representing intimacy, and certain pornographic narratives objectify women's bodies for male gratification and normalise women's degradation and violence against them. Instead of relying on moralistic approaches or prohibitions, fathers should encourage critical thinking and promote healthy intimacy based on mutual respect and consent.

There is need for a coordinated social effort to support fathers in their pivotal role. For example, research has shown that fathers with more traditional gender role attitudes report less involved parenting and more authoritarian parenting attitudes, especially hostile sexism that defends traditional gender roles to uphold men's social power. At the same time there is evidence that quality-enhancing reforms, like parental leave for

“There is evidence that quality-enhancing reforms, like parental leave for fathers, can disrupt traditional gender roles and promote less stereotypical ones, having the power to decrease attitudinal gender bias.”

fathers, can disrupt traditional gender roles and promote less stereotypical ones, having the power to decrease attitudinal gender bias. Hence, policies encouraging fathers to become more actively involved in childcare could help them move away from their traditional conceptions on fatherhood, while positively influencing family dynamics against gender stereotyping.

Finally, the prevention of misogyny in the family should be a shared parental responsibility. Mothers also contribute to both their daughters' and sons' understanding of gender roles, through gendered ideology and behaviour. The combined influence of both parents strengthens the protective factors against misogynistic attitudes and the intergenerational transmission of violence, countering, as far as possible, the influence of misogynistic messages online and in popular culture.

Lessons Learned

- Prevention starts at home.
- Behaviour matters more than words.
- Recognising early warning signs matters.
- Healthy intimacy, respectful parental relationships, shared responsibilities, and non-violent conflict resolution are strong lessons.
- Supporting fathers is a public policy issue.
- Preventing misogyny requires a combined effort.

Conclusion

Misogynistic ideologies continue to spread online and increasingly intersect with violent extremism. One of the first arenas they can be challenged in is the family, where fathers have an important role to play. Of course, they cannot eliminate misogyny on their own, since misogynistic attitudes rarely develop in isolation or from family dynamics alone. Instead, they emerge through the interaction between personal vulnerabilities, peer groups, online ecosystems, and broader cultural discourses. Addressing misogyny requires a long-term policy commitment that should place greater emphasis on father engagement, positive models of masculinity, and programmes that equip parents to address online misogyny and harmful gender stereotypes. Supporting fathers in this role is an investment in violence prevention, social cohesion, and security.

“One of the first arenas they can be challenged in is the family, where fathers have an important role to play.”



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BLIND SPOTS: WHY GENDER-SENSITIVE RISK ASSESSMENT IS AN OPERATIONAL NECESSITY

Interview with Thematic Panel 7 on “Global and Geopolitical Factors and Undesirable Foreign Influences” co-leader.



Marco Olivini Ferraiolo

Major, Italian State Police; Thematic Panel 7 on “Global and Geopolitical Factors and Undesirable Foreign Influences” co-leader.

“Gender bias in the perception of the threat not only leads to inaccurate assessments but also creates blind spots that can be exploited by extremist and terrorist organisations or actors.”

In the field of PCVE, gender biases can significantly impact threat perception. Historically, there has been a tendency to view women involved in extremism primarily as passive victims or 'brides' of radicalised individuals, often underestimating their active ideological roles or involvement in recruitment. From a law enforcement operational perspective, how prevalent is this stereotype today and how does it manifest? What steps are being taken to refine risk assessment through a gender-sensitive lens?

The stereotype of women as passive victims or the “brides” of radicalised men does exist, but it is largely a perspective imported primarily from the extremist jihadist context and the international debate on the wives of foreign fighters. Post-war Italian Marxist-Leninist terrorism and extremism serves as a good case study challenging this assumption.

In the history of post-war extremism and terrorism, this assertion has not always held true. Above all, I am referring to left-wing extremism and terrorism in Italy, particularly of a Marxist-Leninist nature.

Indeed, various studies conducted over the years have put the proportion of Italian female militants in far-left groups between 1969 and 1989 at around 25 per cent,¹ a figure far higher than that of other violent political movements, and higher than the general average for women in clandestine organisations.² This is also reflected in the membership figures for the two largest groups of that period. In the Brigade Rosse (BR) / “Red Brigades”, the most significant and longest-running Italian terrorist group, 228 of the 911 total members were women, accounting for 25 per cent of the group. Meanwhile, in Prima Linea (PL) / “Front Line”, 201 women were recorded out of a total of 923 members, accounting for 21.8 per cent of the group.³

This is a proportion that no “passive” interpretation can explain. Nor were these merely ancillary roles. Indeed, the Red Brigades had, across three distinct historical phases, three different women at the helm who were also directly involved in brutal armed attacks: Margherita Cagol, codename “Mara”, who was a key figure at the very top of the organisation; Barbara Balzerani, codename “Sara”, the only woman to have played an operational role in the kidnapping of Aldo Moro, MP and president of the Democrazia Cristiana (DC) / “Christian Democrats” (1978); and Nadia Desdemona Lioce, leader of the Brigade Rosse per la Costruzione del Partito Comunista Combattente (BR-PCC) / “Red Brigades for the Construction of the Fighting Communist Party” and implicated in the murders of professors Massimo D’Antona (1999) and Marco Biagi (2002), advisers to the Italian Government, as well as that of police officer Emanuele Petri (2003).



¹ D. DELLA PORTA, “Specificità delle donne e violenza politica” in *Rivista di storia contemporanea*, I, (1989), p. 118
² D. BARUS, “Venere a mano armata. Donne e violenza politica nella stampa italiana (1969–1989)” in *Zapruder – Storie in movimento*, V, (2004), p. 32
³ D. BINI, *Donne e lotta armata in Italia (1970–1985)*, Roma, DeriveApprodi, 2017, p. 50

The stereotype was most widespread through public discourse in the early days of Italian left-wing extremism and terrorism. The press at the time portrayed women’s entry into the “armed struggle” as a sudden and forced “leap”, denying them any political agency. This prejudice resulted in an operational problem: as the Red Brigades member Paola Besuschio admitted, the female militants deliberately exploited the prevailing perception of women as less capable and less dangerous figures. They went unnoticed precisely because the investigative eye did not (initially) expect to find them there.

Over the last 20 years, however, following the dismantling of Italian Marxist–Leninist terrorist organisations, the main endogenous threat has been posed by insurrectionary anarchism. And even within this ideological context, investigations and intelligence operations have established that women continue to play an ideological and militant role. Consider Anna Beniamino, a member of the international terrorist group Informal Anarchist Federation / International Revolutionary Front (FAI/FRI), who is currently imprisoned in Italy in connection with an attack on a Carabinieri cadet school (Scuola Allievi Carabinieri) in Fossano. Furthermore, consider Sara Ardizzone, a leading figure in the national anarchist scene, who died on 19 March 2026 alongside Alessandro Mercogliano whilst, according to the investigative hypothesis, assembling an explosive device in a country cottage a few hundred metres from one of the main headquarters of the State Police, including the Central Directorate of Preventive Police.





Even within Islamist organisations or movements, one must not be influenced by the stereotype of women exclusively as unwitting victims. Women are often conscious participants and can fulfil various roles as logistical support, financing, spreading propaganda, indoctrination, recruitment, and incitement to commit acts of terrorism, right up to carrying out the attacks themselves.

The implication for risk assessment is clear. Gender bias in the perception of the threat not only leads to inaccurate assessments but also creates blind spots that can be exploited by extremist and terrorist organisations or actors. In operational terms, this could pose a significant risk to the personal safety of civilian populations, as well as police personnel. Refining risk assessment in a gender-sensitive manner therefore means two things at once: dispelling the assumption that women are, by definition, at lower risk, and doing so in an ideology-aware manner, because gender roles vary radically depending on the ideological context.

The Thematic Panel 7 focuses on geopolitical factors and undesirable foreign influences. Hostile state and non-state actors frequently weaponise polarisation around gender issues, ranging from 'hyper-masculinity' rhetoric to the aggressive defense of 'traditional values' against the West, as a propaganda tool to destabilise and radicalise.

“Gender bias in the perception of the threat not only leads to inaccurate assessments but also creates blind spots that can be exploited by extremist and terrorist organisations or actors.”



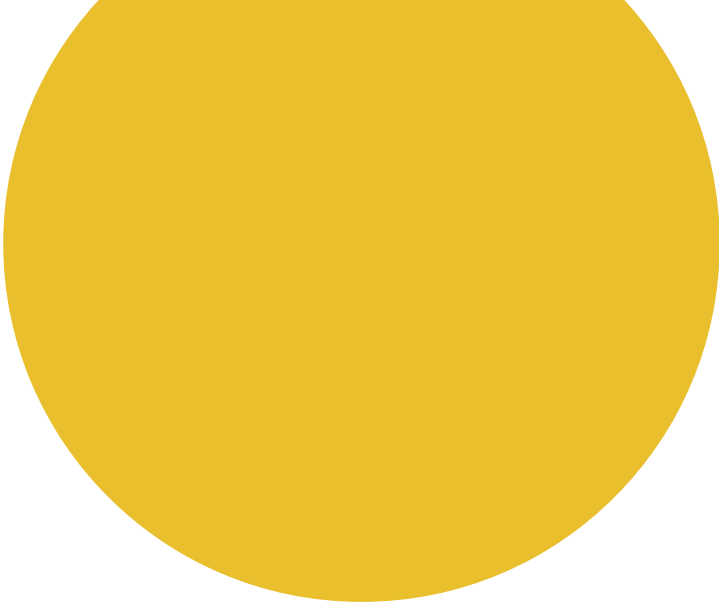
How do authorities monitor and counter this specific form of geopolitical manipulation that exploits gender dynamics?

The findings of TP7 have indeed highlighted how the manipulation of gender dynamics is an intentional vehicle for hybrid influence/ Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) by hostile actors, both state and non-state.

It has emerged that this kind of foreign influence operates by exploiting and amplifying pre-existing societal divisions, rather than creating them from scratch. From an analytical perspective, this aligns squarely with the “Divide” logic, one of the five techniques – alongside “Dismiss”, “Distort”, “Distract”, and “Dismay” – used by threat actors to influence our society (4th EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats, March 2026).

In this context, it has therefore become apparent that issues of identity and gender are both a target and an arena of contention. Consider, for example, the themes of misogyny, hyper-masculinity, and the alleged “social decline” at the heart of emerging violent subcultures targeting young people, including the nihilistic and violence-centred dynamics of the “incel” (involuntary celibates) milieu, all of which are environments that can be exploited by foreign states and non-state actors.





Some of these themes are also found in the context of hybrid extremism – or, rather, adaptive extremism – in which radicalised people, particularly within the ideological contexts of the far right and religious jihadism choose to utilise and adapt the themes, aesthetics, and the most effective operational tactics drawn from ideologically diverse, violent extremist groups or individuals, without any direct or structured collaboration (White Jihad).

A second strand contrasts so-called “traditional values” with the West: hostile actors combine religious soft power with nationalist ideology, promoting anti-gender, anti-LGBTQIA+, and anti-abortion narratives through undesirable foreign funding and GONGO-type front organisations.

Here too, the divide is not created, but amplified. An emblematic case, which emerged from the work of TP7, is that of the European Christian Right – itself a case of Undesirable Foreign Funding (UFF) – born out of the globalisation of the US-originated “culture war”. We are faced with a pre-existing domestic movement that is being harnessed and strengthened from outside.

From the perspective of monitoring these undesirable dynamics, the key lies in a multi-domain, data-driven approach: an analytical framework based on mapping behaviours and infrastructure that integrates intelligence, law enforcement, and financial investigation findings. It is through this integration – not through silos – that more robust attribution and targeted action on financial flows emerge.



The other side of the coin are countermeasures which, in accordance with the principle of non-securitisation, must be directed solely against manipulative activities, and never – even indirectly – against communities or gender groups.

On this point, Member States and the EU have five main levers at their disposal: sanctions, law enforcement, digital regulation (DSA/TCO), and building resilience. Voluntary cooperation should also be considered as a valid, trust-building and proactive engagement lever, both at EU Knowledge Hub (EUKH) and EU Internet Forum (EUIF) level. Rather than relying solely on binding or punitive measures, platforms, civil society organisations and other relevant actors could be engaged through non-coercive mechanisms, sharing information, best practices and early-warning signals, as already practised within the EUKH. The EUIF, in turn, is well positioned to serve as the natural vehicle for addressing the gendered radicalisation pathways that the EUKH research and the European Parliament are already flagging as priority by extending the context taxonomy, referring extremist content to platforms for review or coordinating redirect-style interventions (similar to what is already used for jihadist content).

These tools are designed to be broad, so that they can be applied to varying cases regardless of content. Therefore, the gender dimension does not necessarily emerge naturally from the tools



themselves, and instead must be incorporated. For this reason, gender sensitivity does not emerge automatically: it must be incorporated at an early stage by the analyst, both in recognising and classifying a campaign as manipulation that exploits gender dynamics, and in developing “prebunking” specifically targeted at those techniques.

More generally, it has been emphasised within TP7 that strategic communication is not optional, but fundamental as a “democratic firewall” for building society’s immunity against these ideological imports from abroad, defined as extremist narratives, values, or tactics. The unchecked spread of such narratives poses substantial risks to European security and social cohesion, including the normalisation of extremism, the erosion of trust in institutions, the intensification of radicalisation pathways, and potential policy paralysis. This has highlighted the urgent need for Europe to develop a proactive, inclusive, and robust strategic communication infrastructure.

Adopting a gender-sensitive approach to preventing radicalisation requires a cultural paradigm shift within law enforcement institutions themselves. What are the primary challenges police officers face on the ground when trying to overcome their own biases, and what training tools or institutional guidelines do you consider a priority for the future of policing in this sector?

From my perspective, the real challenge in this field is cultural rather than individual. And it is not a matter of a lack of awareness.



With reference to the Italian experience – though this is also evident in other terrorist phenomena in Europe, such as ETA and the IRA – operational intelligence has long been aware of the active role played by women in extremism and terrorism. Two sets of problems therefore arise. The first is the stereotype of the “passive victim”, whereby the investigative gaze does not expect women to be active participants, tends to resurface in new or unfamiliar environments. Here, prejudice can create blind spots. The second is that the knowledge gained in the field resides largely in the experience of individuals, and the challenge is to harness this by making it transferable, consolidating it into shared tools and training programmes.

Gender sensitivity in radicalisation contexts requires recognising both women as actors and male-specific drivers — misogyny, hypermasculinity, incel dynamics — as legitimate radicalisation pathways rather than dismissing them as peripheral.

This recognition carries two opposing risks: under-acknowledgement of these drivers on one hand, and indiscriminate suspicion on the other. Gender sensitivity must also be ideology-aware, since gender roles vary substantially across ideological contexts and can shift over time within a single context.

In terms of tools, my conviction is that the antidote to prejudice is not an abstract awareness-raising training course, but a method that practitioners apply, in particular the so-called “structured professional judgement” (SPJ), used within multidisciplinary teams.



Essentially, rather than relying on an overall impression of the individual – where the stereotype of “dangerous man, victimised woman” may lurk – the practitioner systematically works through a list of empirically grounded risk factors. And they do not do this alone, but as part of a group comprising psychologists (including those from the police force itself), social services, community workers or cultural/religious mediators, healthcare professionals and other experts relevant to the specific case, all working within the local area, so as to integrate different perspectives and reduce individual bias.

Three things, in my view, should drive the agenda. Integrating the gender lens into the tools already in use, tailoring it to the ideological context, rather than creating a separate tool. Continuous, role-specific training grounded in real-life cases (at European level, a body such as CEPOL can serve as a vehicle for standardising such training across Member States and making it transferable). And finally, framing this paradigm shift in operational terms, not as a values-based mandate, but as a means of closing blind spots that could be exploited by the adversary.

In conclusion, it is worth bearing in mind that the gender lens is a tool for refining assessments, not for turning women or communities into objects of suspicion. The principle of non-securitisation applies here as firmly as elsewhere. Furthermore, women working in prevention must be empowered based on their knowledge and skills, rather than being confined to the role of mother/caregiver, as if that were the only legitimate way to ensure community safety.



Many PCVE programs highlight the importance of women within families and communities as 'early warning systems' to detect initial signs of radicalisation in youth. From your institutional perspective, how can we value and leverage the role of women in early prevention without risking their instrumentalisation or trapping them in the stereotype of the mother/caretaker as the sole channel for community security?

Women can and do play an important role in the early prevention of violent extremism. In my view, this is not due to any supposed predisposition or innate sensitivity linked to the stereotypical notion of women as “natural peacemakers” within the community, but rather because they often find themselves in positions of closeness and trust – within the family, the community, and the educational and social fabric – which enable them to spot early warning signs of distress and radicalisation, and to intervene effectively.

This is a matter of position and expertise, not a gender-specific attribute. And this distinction is not merely academic, but precisely what separates empowerment from exploitation.

A concrete and highly emblematic example of this concept is the potential employment of women with a history of involvement in extremist or terrorist networks or organisations. Having fully distanced themselves from these, they can act as mentors to women who are radicalised or at risk of radicalisation. Their value lies not in their being women, but in their lived experience and a credibility that no ordinary institutional practitioner can replicate.



The metaphor of the “early warning system” risks reducing women to passive sensors in the service of security, a channel for gathering information. Truly valuing them means the opposite: recognising them as agents of prevention, with a voice, expertise, and equal standing in dialogue. Treating them as sentinels not only confines them to a stereotype but also exposes them to a significant burden and risk. For example, consider the mother who is, in effect, called upon to report her own child (an increasingly common scenario, particularly in the context of ideological extremism involving supremacist, accelerationist, and nihilist ideologies).

There is also an operational reason, not merely one of fairness. Focusing early warning on a “single channel” – the mother, the primary caregiver, etc. – undermines the entire prevention system, as it overlooks all other actors within the community. Diversifying the channels, on the other hand, makes it considerably more robust.

Ultimately, however, the guiding principle remains non-securitisation: women must be involved as full partners in prevention, drawing on their knowledge and skills, and not enlisted as instruments for surveilling their own communities.



BEYOND BROAD CATEGORIES: INTEGRATING A GENDER LENS INTO THE MANAGEMENT OF RETURNEES

Inside TP6's Gender-Responsive Framework



Daniel Rémai

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“For many women, rehabilitation cannot be separated from parenting, housing, health care, education, legal status, employment, family mediation, and community acceptance.”

Thematic Panel (TP) 6 deals with some of the most complex portfolios in PCVE: the management of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF), volunteers, and their families, a scope that inherently involves diverse genders, ages, and family dynamics. To set the stage, how has the integration of a dedicated gender lens transformed the strategic approach of TP6 over recent years, and why is understanding these gender dynamics now considered a baseline for effective management rather than just an optional perspective?

A gender lens has helped TP6 move beyond broad categories, such as “returnee”, “foreign terrorist fighter”, or “family member”, and look more carefully at the individual pathways, roles, needs, and vulnerabilities behind each case. In this field, gender is not an optional analytical add-on. It is part of how risk, resilience, trauma, family dynamics, and reintegration prospects are understood.

It also needs to be inherently connected to the way we as responsible actors in the process of return, repatriation, and re-integration think about a case – we need to reflect our own stereotypes in order to be able to deliver fair, just, and reasonable treatment and case management.

This is particularly important because women, men, girls, and boys may have experienced radicalisation, conflict-zone life, detention, loss, family separation, and return in different ways. Some women may have experienced coercion, dependency, violence, or social control. Others may also have exercised agency, supported extremist environments, transmitted ideology, educated children within closed belief systems, or contributed to the social infrastructure of violent extremist groups. TP6 discussions have therefore underlined the need to avoid simplistic narratives that generally portray women only as victims or perpetrators. We have therefore emphasised that each case requires a nuanced, gender-sensitive, and context-specific response.

The same caution applies to minors. Children associated with FTF families should never be treated as a homogeneous risk category. They are children first. At the same time, their experiences may include exposure to violence, disrupted education, indoctrination, displacement, identity uncertainty, and family trauma. Effective responses therefore require child-specific, trauma-informed, and family-centred approaches.



In this context, the role of mothers and primary caregivers deserves particular attention. They may become important protective figures in a child's recovery, especially when they support schooling, emotional stability, trust-building, and contact with wider society. At the same time, practitioners should not assume this role automatically. In some cases, unresolved trauma, ideological attachment, fear, dependency, or social isolation may limit the caregiver's ability to support the child's reintegration.

For TP6, the gender lens has strengthened three strategic priorities: individualised assessment, community-based reintegration, where applicable, and responsible long-term support. It helps practitioners ask better questions: what role did the person actually play? What forms of harm did they cause or experience? What protective factors exist around them? What risks remain hidden in the family or community environment? What support can realistically reduce those risks?

Looking ahead, this will become even more important. The future of FTF management will not only concern past Daesh-related cases. It will also involve future prison releases, delayed returns, children growing into adolescence and adulthood, evolving extremist narratives, online influence, and potentially other forms of foreign fighter mobilisation.



A specific challenge will be posed by children who were born in camps or who spent their early childhood in conflict-zone or detention-like environments, with little or no direct experience of ordinary social life in Europe. For these children, reintegration is not simply a return to a previous environment. It may be the first structured encounter with regular schooling, pluralistic social norms, public institutions, and stable community life. This requires patience, specialised child protection expertise, and long-term support that can adapt as the child grows older. A gender-sensitive approach helps ensure that responses remain precise, proportionate, and grounded in human dignity.

Developing comprehensive Prosecution, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration (PRR) strategies is a core priority for the management of returnees. Because men and women often experience radicalisation, identity crises, and trauma differently, a one-size-fits-all approach to exit programs falls short. What are the primary structural or psychological differences that TP6 highlights when designing rehabilitation frameworks for female returnees compared to male FTFs?

The first difference concerns visibility. Male FTFs are often assessed through more visible indicators,

“For many women, rehabilitation cannot be separated from parenting, housing, health care, education, legal status, employment, family mediation, and community acceptance.”

such as travel, training, combat-related allegations, imprisonment, recruitment, or facilitation. In the case of women, roles may be less visible, more informal, or embedded in domestic, educational, ideological, and family settings. This should not lead to either underestimation or overreaction. It calls for careful, evidence-informed assessment and prosecution.

The second difference concerns dependency and trauma. These issues are, of course, not exclusive to women. Male returnees may also experience trauma, dependency, fear, social isolation or unresolved psychological harm. The point is therefore not to essentialise women’s experiences, but to recognise how gender can shape the visibility, interpretation, and management of these challenges. Female returnees may face overlapping challenges: psychological trauma, economic dependency, caregiving responsibilities, family pressure, social isolation, or fear of speaking openly about past experiences. TP6 discussions also noted that behavioural compliance does not always mean genuine disengagement. In some cases, individuals may appear cooperative while still carrying unresolved trauma, fear, dependency, or ideological attachment.

The third difference concerns the reintegration pathway. For many women, rehabilitation cannot be separated from parenting, housing, health care, education, legal status, employment, family



mediation, and community acceptance. Where children are involved, the reintegration of the parent and the reintegration of the child are deeply connected. This connection, however, does not necessarily mean that the parent and the child should always follow the same reintegration pathway. In some national contexts, and depending on the best interests of the child, the child's protection, recovery, and social integration may need to be managed separately from the parent's criminal justice, rehabilitation, or supervision process. A sustainable approach should therefore remain flexible enough to support family-based reintegration where appropriate, while also allowing child-centred arrangements when this is safer or more beneficial for the child. This is also a practical challenge for administrations. Long-term, flexible support requires resources, inter-agency coordination, continuity of expertise, and clear responsibility-sharing. Where these conditions are weak, there is a risk that intervention ends too early simply because a programme period, funding cycle, or administrative mandate has expired.

This is particularly important because the family environment can function in both directions. A mother or caregiver may become a stabilising and protective figure, but may also, in certain cases, reproduce harmful narratives, reinforce isolation, obstruct trust-building with institutions, or transmit unresolved ideological commitments. The key question is what kind of influence is actually present, and how it affects the child's safety, development, and reintegration prospects.



This is where the question of the “exit point” becomes central. In my opinion this question will become even more important. One of the most difficult questions in rehabilitation is not only how to begin support, but how to reduce it responsibly once progress has been achieved.

A humane and effective model should avoid both extremes. It should not keep individuals under indefinite institutional attention when this is no longer necessary. It should also not close cases simply because a programme period has ended. A more responsible model is a graduated transition: intensive support is reduced step by step when risk indicators, protective factors, mental health, family stability, education, employment, community relations, and the person's own capacity to seek help all point towards sustainable reintegration.

Recent TP6 insights emphasise that the success of reintegration relies heavily on the receiving communities. However, societal stigma operates in highly gendered ways; communities often view returning women, mothers, and their children through a different lens than male returnees. How do gender expectations influence how a local community receives female returnees, and what strategies can practitioners use to mitigate stigma while ensuring community safety?

Stigma should not be treated as a soft or secondary issue. It is an operational factor.

If a person or family is permanently rejected by the receiving community, access to school, employment, housing, health care, peer relationships, and ordinary social life becomes much more difficult. This can increase isolation, weaken trust, and reduce the protective factors that reintegration is trying to build.

Gender expectations can intensify this problem. Male returnees may often be perceived primarily through the lens of violence, imprisonment, or direct security risk. Women returnees may face additional judgement linked to motherhood, morality, family roles, and perceived responsibility for children. They may be seen as dangerous, manipulated, disloyal, irresponsible, or morally compromised. Their children may also be stigmatised because of where they were born, who their parents are, what they survived, or what the community assumes about their exposure to extremist environments. In practice, this also means that reintegration does not always take place in the original community of departure. Some families may settle elsewhere, either because returning to the previous neighbourhood would expose them to intense stigma, media attention, or security concerns, or because a different environment offers better prospects for schooling, housing, employment, and social stabilisation. This can reduce immediate pressure, but it can also create new challenges: local actors may have limited background knowledge, trust has to be built from the beginning, and information-sharing must remain proportionate and legally compliant.



According to our discussions in TP6 the community rejection, stigma, and social exclusion are major barriers to sustainable reintegration. They also underlined the importance of interdisciplinary support involving psychologists, teachers, social workers, journalists, families, and local institutions, with schools playing a central role in the reintegration of children and young people.

The first strategy is preparation. Decision-makers have to determine who should receive what information and at what time—in accordance with the need-to-know principle. Local actors need clear, proportionate, and legally compliant communication about why reintegration matters, what safeguards exist, and how public safety is protected. At the same time, returnees must be given the opportunity to start their “new” lives and to settle in a safe environment.

The second strategy is the use of trusted intermediaries. Teachers, social workers, psychologists, local mentors, civil society organisations, religious actors where appropriate, and community leaders can help create communication channels between institutions, families, and communities. This is especially important where returnees distrust state institutions, or where state actors and civil society organisations still need to build confidence in each other.

The third strategy is responsible public communication. Sensationalist media narratives can undo months of careful work. Public communication should reassure communities without exposing sensitive personal information or reinforcing stereotypes.

The fourth strategy is fairness. Communities may react negatively if they believe returnees receive special treatment while other vulnerable families are neglected. Practitioners should therefore frame reintegration within broader community resilience, social inclusion, and child protection efforts.

A humane approach does not mean ignoring risk. It means managing risk through better relationships, better assessment, better coordination, and better support. Stigma reduction is therefore not separate from security. It is part of an effective security model.

A significant portion of the families managed under the FTF umbrella includes minors who were either brought to conflict zones or born there. As these children grow up, gendered dynamics continue to shape their realities, such as the distinct ways young boys may have been targeted for physical/military socialisation versus how young girls were conditioned. How does TP6 approach gender-responsive rehabilitation for minors, and how can practitioners better support mothers or family units to interrupt intergenerational radicalisation?

TP6 approaches minors first through a child protection, rights-based and trauma-informed perspective. Children associated with FTF families may have experienced conflict, detention, displacement, family loss, violence, indoctrination, disrupted schooling, and identity uncertainty. These experiences do not produce one single profile. Each child needs an individual assessment, and practitioners should avoid assumptions based only on gender, age, family background, or place of birth.

“Each child needs an individual assessment, and practitioners should avoid assumptions based only on gender, age, family background, or place of birth.”



At the same time, gendered experiences should be recognised carefully. Boys may have been exposed to ideas of physical toughness, combat identity, or loyalty to militant masculinity. Girls may have been exposed to restrictive gender roles, domestic expectations, early marriage narratives, or ideas of obedience and separation from wider society. These patterns matter, but they must not become stereotypes. They should guide sensitive assessment, not determine conclusions in advance.



TP6 discussions have repeatedly emphasised the need for specialised tools for minors. The Berlin meeting in June 2025 highlighted the need for child-specific assessment and intervention tools, while the Budapest meeting in December 2025 reaffirmed that children’s mental health and protection are among the most critical challenges in reintegration.

Schools are central to this process. Education provides routine, language development, peer contact, recognition, and a route into ordinary social life. Teachers and school-based professionals therefore need practical guidance on how to support children without labelling them.

Supporting mothers and family units is equally important. In many cases, the family can either reproduce harmful narratives or become the strongest protective environment against them. Practitioners should therefore work with mothers and caregivers on parenting support, trauma recovery, economic stability, communication with schools, access to health care, and the gradual rebuilding of trust. Where appropriate and safe, wider family members should also be engaged.

Interrupting intergenerational radicalisation requires more than ideological counselling. It requires alternative sources of belonging, safe adult relationships, emotional regulation, credible education pathways, social inclusion, and a future that appears realistic to the child and the family. This is also why the “exit point” for minors must be handled with particular care. A child may appear stable for a period and later experience delayed trauma reactions, identity conflicts, adolescence-related vulnerability, or renewed family pressure. Case closure should therefore not mean that the system becomes unavailable. A responsible model should allow lighter-touch follow-ups, school-based observation, voluntary re-contact, and re-entry into support when necessary.

The long-term objective is not permanent surveillance. It is sustainable independence. The most effective model is one in which children and families gradually need less specialised intervention because ordinary protective systems — school, family, community, health care, and social services — are strong enough to support them.



Library

- ProtectEU: Agenda to prevent and counter terrorism https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/protecteu-agenda-prevent-and-counter-terrorism_en
- EU Knowledge Hub – Thematic Panel 6: Management of Foreign Terrorist Fighters, Volunteers and their Families – Conclusion Papers https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/eu-knowledge-hub-prevention-radicalisation/thematic-panels/thematic-panel-6-management-foreign-terrorist-fighters-ftfs-volunteers-and-their-families_en
- Strategic Orientations on a coordinated EU approach to prevention of radicalisation https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/eu-knowledge-hub-prevention-radicalisation/strategic-orientations-coordinated-eu-approach-prevention-radicalisation_en

Videos

- Should families of foreign ISIL fighters be able to return home? | Inside Story - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gPsLjLCRDQ>

Podcasts

- The Repatriation Imperative: Why Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters and Family Members Matters - <https://www.youtube.com/live/b07LDcoODNs>

Other resources

- Thematic Panel 6 – Annual Work Programme 2026 https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/whats-new/publications/thematic-panel-6-annual-work-programme-2026_en
- Gender-sensitive responses to returnees from foreign terrorist organisations https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/whats-new/publications/gender-sensitive-responses-returnees-foreign-terrorist-organisations-december-2021_en

ORGANISATIONS AND OTHER INITIATIVES



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ADVANCING WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN COUNTER-TERRORISM: FROM POLICY COMMITMENTS TO PRACTICE

Women play a vital yet often underrecognised role in preventing and countering terrorism and violent extremism. While international frameworks increasingly acknowledge the importance of women's participation in security and justice sectors, structural barriers continue to limit their representation and leadership in counter-terrorism institutions. Advancing women's meaningful participation is therefore not only a matter of equality but a prerequisite for more effective, inclusive, and sustainable security responses.

The adoption of [UN Security Council Resolution 1325](#) on Women, Peace and Security in 2000 marked a significant step in recognising women's contribution to conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and security governance. Since then, international organisations and governments have increasingly sought to integrate gender perspectives into counter-terrorism policy, with the [Global Counterterrorism Forum \(GCTF\)](#) emphasising that diverse perspectives strengthen prevention, response, and community engagement.

Despite this progress, women remain underrepresented across criminal justice, law enforcement, intelligence, and judicial institutions, constrained by limited access to leadership, insufficient mentorship, and persistent social norms. Empirical evidence suggests that, under specific institutional conditions, greater diversity improves outcomes: women's participation in UN peacekeeping has been linked to better community engagement and fewer misconduct complaints (UN Global Study on UNSCR 1325), while women's presence on decision-making panels has been found to increase institutional trust and legitimacy in some contexts. This suggests diversity strengthens effectiveness primarily when paired with supportive policies and structural change, rather than as a standalone driver.

Practitioner experience similarly points to the value of women's inclusion in counter-terrorism specifically, though rigorous quantitative research remains limited (GIWPS, 2018). The clearest evidence concerns community access. This access advantage extends to information-gathering more broadly, though critics caution that positioning women as intelligence-gatherers can reinforce profiling and expose them to retaliation (ICAN, 2023).

Evidence on early identification of radicalisation risk is more provisional, resting largely on programmatic experience with family- and mother-focused prevention efforts rather than outcomes data. Claims about more comprehensive, gender-responsive responses are well supported in policy literature (GCTF, 2016; UN Women, 2021) but function as good-practice guidance rather than causal proof, and practitioners caution against one-size-fits-all approaches.

To address these challenges, the [International Institute for Justice and the Rule of Law](#) is implementing a three-year EU-funded programme aimed at strengthening women's participation and leadership in counter-terrorism across the MENA, East and West Africa, and Central and Southeast Asia. A key component of the initiative is the development of a GCTF Framework Document on Strengthening Women's Participation and Leadership in Counter-Terrorism.



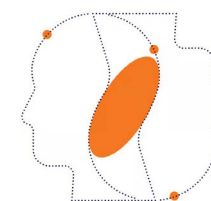
Resources

- Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) Gender and Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism Policy Toolkit, September 2022.
- GCTF Good Practices on Women and Countering Violent Extremism
- Women in International Security (WIIS) Promoting the role of women in security and counterterrorism Guidelines for the counterterrorism and criminal justice response to terrorism sectors, February 2023.



AMALTHEA PROJECT

Recent research on the gender aspects of preventing violent extremism (PCVE) lacks comprehensive data analysis. Traditional counterterrorism literature often overlooks gender issues. A critical examination of how unequal socialisation drives violent extremism is essential. Incorporating feminist and intersectional perspectives can enhance understanding of gender-specific factors in radicalisation. The EU-funded AMALTHEA project will conduct research and develop innovations in knowledge creation for law enforcement agencies (LEAs), civil society organisations (CSOs), social support professionals, educators, and other PCVE practitioners. It will focus on improving the understanding of the role of gender in violent extremism and creating tailored tools for LEAs and CSOs to facilitate engagement and collaboration, support effective policymaking, and enhance decision-making aimed at de-radicalisation.



CATALYST – CHRISTCHURCH CALL FOUNDATION

Catalyst is a flagship multi-stakeholder initiative. Catalyst is a scalable 18-month consortium project tackling online misogyny and gender-based violence as pathways to radicalisation and violent extremism. Led by the [Christchurch Call Foundation](#) with implementing partners including ISD, Meedan, Search for Common Ground, PERIL at American University, and the Blavatnik School of Government at Oxford, Catalyst delivers prevention programmes across Canada, Jordan, Kenya, and transnational gaming communities.

The programme recognises that men and boys who support violence against women are up to three times more likely to support violent extremism. Through community interventions, online inoculations, classifier development, and policy frameworks, Catalyst works to increase resilience against pathways to violence while building the evidence base for what works.

EXPLORE CATALYST RESOURCES

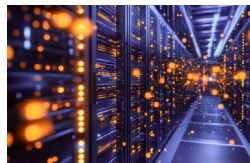


GAMING SAFELY RESOURCES HUB

Young people spend more time in online gaming spaces than almost anywhere else online, yet many parents and caregivers find that world genuinely hard to follow. Their Gaming Safely Resources Hub exists to close that gap — giving young gamers and the adults around them practical strategies to build resilience to online harms, including violent extremism, in the spaces where they actually play.

To support that, their team have developed online e-learning modules and a podcast series that share this knowledge in the ways people actually want to learn it.

[Go to the HUB](#)



ADAPTING BYSTANDER INTERVENTIONS

This report, produced under the Christchurch Call Foundation's Catalyst programme by researchers Rachel Kowert and Elizabeth Newbury, examines how traditional bystander intervention training can be adapted to address technology-facilitated gender-based violence and online misogyny within digital gaming spaces.

[Read the report](#)



ADDRESSING THE INTERSECTION

A Project Catalyst Series. A publication by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), produced as part of Project Catalyst led by the Christchurch Call Foundation. A Practical Toolkit Addressing the intersection of misogyny, targeted hate and violent extremism.

[Read the publication](#)



RADICALISATION
THROUGH GAMING: THE
ROLE OF GENDERED
SOCIAL IDENTITY |
ROYAL UNITED SERVICES
INSTITUTE

This project aims to understand, through a gender and intersectional lens, how socialisation processes coupled with exposure to harassment, hate-based discrimination and extreme content can potentially lower resilience to radicalisation in gaming.



TEENAGE GAMER
PERSONAS

This first investigation in ISD's series examining the YouTube recommendation algorithm explores how content was recommended to two 14-year-old users who were fans of popular gaming channels and videos. Additionally, ISD wished to explore whether the gender of the account would impact the content being recommended.

WATCH



"Why the damage that fathers
can do is insurmountable"
Dr Shefali on Instagram

Watch [HERE](#)

LISTEN



"How do you raise boys in a
culture of misogyny?"
*Jess Phillips - Home Office Minister
at Electoral Dysfunction podcast*

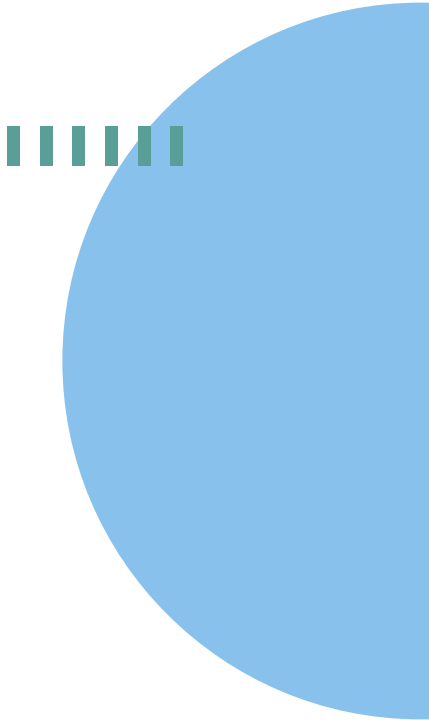
Listen [HERE](#)

READ



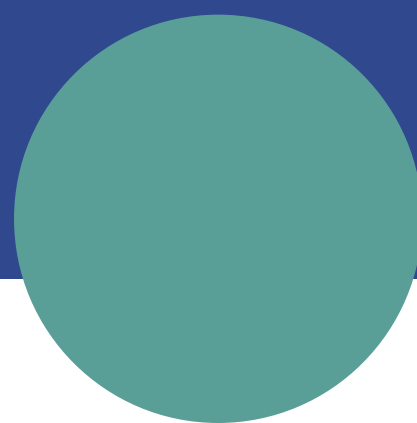
"Children show 'ingrained
misogyny', teacher warns"
BBC News, 5 May 2022

Read [HERE](#)



Library

1. <https://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/home/items/900963/en>
2. <https://yougov.com/en-gb/articles/52864-what-do-parents-say-about-misogyny-among-boys-and-young-men>
3. <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/blogs/protecting-children-from-misogyny-manosphere>
4. <https://the-european.eu/story-59721/solving-britains-male-misogyny-crisis-starts-at-home.html>
5. <https://www.lse.ac.uk/News/Latest-news-from-LSE/2018/12-December-2018/%EF%BB%BFFathers-less-likely-to-hold-sexist-attitudes-if-they-have-a-girl>
6. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/changing-gender-norms-engaging-with-men-and-boys/changing-gender-norms-engaging-with-men-and-boys>
7. <https://www.equimundo.org/resources/learning-brief-role-of-facilitation-in-gender-transformative-programs-that-engage-men-and-boys/>
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13. <https://eige.europa.eu/newsroom/news/how-can-we-turn-men-and-boys-violence-prevention-allies-lessons-swedens-10-year-strategy>



**BUILDING RESILIENT COMMUNITIES,
TOGETHER.**



European
Commission



EU Knowledge Hub on
Prevention of Radicalisation