

*Veronica Hambalko**

*Graduate Student of Security Studies, Institute of Political Studies,
Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University Prague*

GENDER BASED VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Abstract

This paper aims to explore possible ways that mainstream social media and alternative media platforms function possibly as catalysators for gender based violent extremism. Based on analysis of already existing research and events, we argue that social media platforms such as Reddit and 4chan function as echo chambers where already radical-thinking individuals and ideologies are validated and encourage further extreme thoughts. We also argue that through trends on mainstream apps such as TikTok, is violence against women made into a joke and entertainment, leading to a desensitization of the issue, making it harder to tackle. We conclude this paper by summing up the points and discussing the importance of more active policy targeting these online communities.

Key words: Misogyny, violence, social media, violent extremism, radicalization

* Email: 10713979@fsv.cuni.cz

INTRODUCTION

“If we can't solve our problems we must DESTROY our problems... One day incels will realise their true strength and numbers and will overthrow this oppressive feminist system. Start envisioning a world where WOMEN FEAR YOU.” Elliot Rodger (1991-2014), Isla Vista killer (2014).

Misogyny is one of the oldest forms of prejudice, causes and triggers of violence seen through human history, and it is becoming harder to detect through the emergence of sophisticated technology and social media platforms. Elliot Rodger as quoted is just one of many blaming their problems and life situation on women, and the lack of romantic attention from the opposite sex. For some individuals does this hatred run so deep that it triggers atrocious actions such as terror attacks and murder.

We are seeing trends of violent extremism happening towards women all over the world, without any limitations to specific national borders. In the UK and US have some of the most “famous” serial killers and murderers maintained target been female sex workers, where the killers think they are doing society a favour (Collins 2018). While in other countries like India women are targets of blind violence in the form of acid attacks (BBC 2017).

The women's movement and initiatives to improve women's security and rights are progressing over the years. However, at the same pace that progressive and positive changes are happening, are also newer more complex ways to share extremist thoughts and ideology evolving. Social media platforms such as 4chan and alternative gaming forums acts as echo chambers where alt-right social outcasts can meet and share their thoughts and manifestos. These platforms get to exist freely on the web with minimal censorship often making it impossible to detect until it is too late.

In this analytical paper will we look into the concept of gendered based violent extremism as a consequence of indirect radicalization through social media platforms. We will in this paper focus on extremism targeted against women based on alt-right ideology in the Western hemisphere. To answer this, we will proceed to answer the following research question: *How does social media platforms and forums lead to more radicalization and violent extremism targeted against women?*

We will first discuss and explain the topics of gendered based extremism and indirect radicalization separately, before we proceed to conduct an analysis of how platforms such as 4chan, Reddit and now

TikTok have triggered a new wave of increased misogyny and gendered based violent extremism.

EXTREMISM IN A GENDER-BASED PERSPECTIVE

Ideology of gender-based extremism

When discussing gender-based violent extremism and its ideology we must see it in relations to larger ideological movements such as the right wing and its alternative right movement. The gender perspective is not necessarily its own ideology but rather a branch and value of the alt-right and is usually connected to other extreme beliefs regarding race and sexuality (Sugiura 2021).

The alt-right movement is a form of far-right fascism, white supremacy, and white nationalism, connected to the ideas of the importance of upholding and the strengthening of the white race in the Western countries, and have been a growing ideology since 1964 (Hoffman et al. 2020). Followers of the alt-right movement are often seen glorifying white nationalists of the past such as Hitler and the Nazi ideology. The movement criticizes and goes against multiculturalism and diversity in the social room, and often condemns the LGBTQ+ community and ethnic minorities (OSCE 2019).

In the context of alt-right, gender is often connected to the biological understanding that it is the sex that individuals are born with and leaves little room for fluidity and self-identification. The gender roles associated with this is often built on the traditional values where men are protectors and the head of the house, while women's main role is as care givers (OSCE 2019). The modern feminist movement is therefore often discussed as a plague and an enemy that stops the fulfilment of these "traditional" values and allows women to act as too independent with too much free will, and that it disturbs the natural order of society. The victims of the consequences of this progression in the eyes of the alt-right is the white heterosexual male. Femininity is considered a weakness and masculinity the superior and most desired. The extreme comes in different forms, but it is often related to women having too many rights and too much sexual freedom and that one of the effective ways of stopping this is punishment through violence and fear (OSCE 2019). These values are found in different sub-cultures and movements that have branched out from the alt-right movement such as incels (involuntarily celibate), mansphere, men's right activism, and violent organizations such as Proud Boys and other hybrid masculine movements (Hoffman, et al. 2020).

Violent extremism through a gender lens

There is no general understanding of what violent extremism is. The Australian National Counter-Terrorism Committee Framework identifies violent extremism as the following: “A willingness to use or support the use of violence to further particular beliefs, including those of a political, social or ideological nature.” (Eddine et al. 2011, 9). Within this understanding we can find several sub-understandings and cases of violent extremism. When discussing violent extremism like gendered based extremism, we usually refer to this as single-issue extremism where the violence is targeted towards one specific goal, target or issue, where these individuals are willing to go to extreme heights to achieve said goals (Australian Government 2015). We can also see it in relations to ideological violence and extremism as many of these attackers believe that the world has betrayed them, and that a change in the world order is needed (Tomkinson et al. 2020)

Depending on the end goal could the carrying out of these attacks differ from each other. Some wish to conduct violence as a way to cause fear due to a feeling of entitlement as seen with Elliot Rodger as quoted in the introduction, an Incel extremist that went on a killing spree in 2014 claiming 6 lives and injuring 14. The victims were both male and female, and his goal was to punish what is described as Stacy’s (attractive women) and Chads (attractive and confident men) in the Incel community (Tomkinson et al. 2020). Another example could be the attacks done by Scott Beierlein Florida in 2018, claiming 2 women’s lives. Beierle was also in the same case of Rodger an active social media user and prone to post extremist ideology on different platforms, even in the form of music (Hoffman et al. 2020).

One common denominator in many cases of gender based violent extremism is that the perpetrator behind the extremist attacks acts alone rather than in groups, nevertheless, they are a part of large radical online communities. This leads us to the next part regarding indirect radicalization through social media.

INDIRECT RADICALIZATION AND SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

The act of violent extremism is never an accident, and to be able to understand how these actions happen there needs to be an understanding of where these radical ideas stem from. We usually differentiate between direct radicalization and indirect radicalization, but in the context of this

paper and to answer the research question on social media platforms as a radicalization pipeline, will we focus on the concept of indirect radicalization.

Indirect radicalization can happen when individuals or groups of people seek, read, and interpret information on different platforms that are targeted towards a specific way of radical thinking, ideology or way of life that changes the reality and perception of the ones reading it. The content is not necessarily produced to convince others of this way of thinking but through several factors will this way of thinking appeal to parts of the recipient's life, which could eventually lead to acceptance of the use of extreme violence to achieve goals (National Institute of Justice 2015). This differs from direct radicalization where radical organizations or close personal contacts will target and approach to convince or even in certain cases forcibly radicalize through torture techniques (National Institute of Justice 2015).

In the context of this paper is this indirect radicalization referred to when individuals interact with specific online platforms and communities such as 4chan and 8chan which both claim to be platforms that advocate for a complete and unfiltered "freedom of speech" (Hoffman et al. 2020). These websites and discords have thousands of visitors on a daily basis, where anyone can make an anonymous user and post anything one may desire. The danger comes from that these platforms have very low levels of censorship and surveillance, especially those found on "the dark web", meaning that radical movements and discords can easily be created and exist freely without disturbance. This is highly problematic as many of the violent attacks, are being announced ahead of time, yet they are still unstoppable (Hoffman et al. 2020).

The unpredictability that comes with this type of radicalization is what makes it the most suitable for this research to understand how social media platforms can lead to more radicalization and violent extremism targeted towards women. In contrast to direct radicalization, functions indirect radicalization as a silent recruiter that is hard to detect unless one targets individual algorithms or conduct more surveillance of online communities. Indirect radicalization is also the most sufficient lens when it comes to this research on increase in violent extremism because as mentioned above and to be discussed further, users of these platforms meet other individuals with similar way of thinking or who have prior experience, which can function as guidance to committing violent extremism in the physical world.

There are several factors that can help us explain why extremist and radical ways of thinking is appealing. In psychological research and

political science, we can separate it between push, pull and individual factors that affects this process (Jacobsen 2017). Push factors could be referred to the feeling of being rejected in society, for instance in the Incel and Manosphere community where these individuals blame their problems on the lack of sexual attention due to women only accepting “attractive men”. The sense of community and respect in a virtual space or chatroom will therefore further act as an attractive pull factor. There are also individual factors such as mental illness and childhood trauma that leads to individuals reaching for radical environments (Jacobsen 2017).

ANALYSIS

The number of misogynistic based violent extremists are still existing in low numbers compared to other forms of violent extremism such as racist and religious based violent extremism. However, there have been a high increase, especially since the rise of social media and the dark web. In this section we will further analyse the reasons and possibilities to why this could be.

Platforms as uncensored echo chambers

The expansion of social media and communication platforms have in general functioned in a way to expand our knowledge; however, this expansion also allows certain communities to seek shelter on platforms that are hard to detect and find for the general public. This allows people with extreme values to find each other and share information, manifestos, entertainment etc. that further fuels their ideological views. On these social platforms you have the possibility to follow specific tags and forums that are dedicated to a specific ideology, topic, movement etc. such as Incel or Manosphere (Salojärvi et al. 2020). These communities are often characterized as lonely men who not necessarily fit in to the majority and have few close contacts. These platforms then act as a way of acknowledging and giving confirmation bias to their way of thinking about society and further radicalize already possible extreme thoughts. This reflection of their personal views is where the effect of indirect violence lies. Individuals see themselves in others with similar life experiences, and further seek more content from other individuals with similar ways of thinking (National Institute of Justice 2015).

These closed groups become very hostile to outsiders that are of the opposite opinion (Salojärvi et al. 2020). For example, there have been several cases of female gamers on specific discords being threatened

with brutal descriptions of murder and sexual assault on platforms that have a lot of misogynistic and extreme behaviour (Ging 2017). These behaviours exist in way larger numbers than the women, making it a hostile, verbally violent, and closed off environment further creating radical echo chambers. These threats have also been brought to life in the offline world in the form of sexual assaults on university campuses in the US, which have several times been claimed by the Manosphere community (Ging 2017).

In the aftermath of violent extremist attacks, are these platforms often flooded with celebrations and positive affirmations dedicated to the perpetrators, and in many cases are they described as heroes and idols where communities take pride in claiming these terrorists and extremists as one of their own (Hoffman 2020). An example could be the violent van attack done by misogynistic extremist Alek Minassain in Toronto in 2018, claiming 10 lives. This attack was heavily influenced by the gruesome acts of Elliot Rodger as mentioned previously. Minassain referred to Rodger as the “Supreme Gentleman” and praised his actions before his own attack 4 years after Rodger (Hoffman 2020). In other words, social media have created digital fan clubs and audiences that work as push factors for further violent extremism. There is a lot of violent language and dark descriptions and advocacy for attacks on women on platforms like 4chan, but for the most parts will it remain as empty threats. But for some will this encouragement be just what particular individuals need to act on these thoughts, which mean that these specific communities act as a potential direct security threat to women.

Memeification of extremism – The desensitisation of violence against women

When discussing extremist content, we often talk about content on platforms that aren't as accessible for the general public, but there are also cases on mainstream social media platforms where violence and extremism is hidden in forms of memes and trends where violent and brutal attacks against women are made into jokes and funny imaginations.

In the last 5 years have the social media platform TikTok quickly become one of the most used social media platforms of all time. This app allows you to share short videos that you can make yourself, usually in the form of funny and entertaining content (Anderson 2020). However, from time-to-time will trends and popular posts show up that raises concerns and create controversy. In March of 2022 there was seen a popular trend between boys and men with the tagline “imagine if we went on a date”

which was then followed by brutal descriptions of how these dates would end up with the woman dead or severely injured. An example of such post is the following: “Imagine we go on a date & I smash your head in with a 2x4 & you f***** die”, this post alone had over 55 000 likes (Tu 2022). Another trend also recently flourished is the so called “super straight” movement. This movement started with a man posting about how he viewed trans women as not being “real” women and created a sexuality that only involves being attracted to biologically born females. This quickly moved to other platforms such as reddit and 4chan and alt-right groups, where Nazi symbols and colours were used to make flags for this new “sexuality” to reach several platforms and encourage people to join the movement, which in reality was used to spread hate speech and threats towards trans women online, becoming more and more extreme as it moved across platforms (Kumar 2021).

When confronted with criticism and concern for these trends and jokes especially if its coming from women, will these men often react with anger and hostile comments. Communities that justify such jokes are often describing it as “dark humour” and “just a joke”, and that women are too sensitive to understand (Thorleifsson 2021). By making radical and extreme content into memes and jokes it makes it more digestible and excusable without having to take any responsibility or feeling of remorse.

Creating memes and trends out of violent and radical thought is a way to desensitize the issue making it attractive to young impressionable boys. This could possibly lead to more radicalization in more extreme communities and platforms, as it mobilises the impact of extreme ideology. Through algorithms furthermore posts with similar content shows up, which could possibly affect the way people unconsciously think about violence against women, as it makes it difficult to detect the underlying tone and seriousness of the content (Askanius 2021).

This desensitisation of violent extremism against women through memes and social media not only leads to possible increased radicalization, but also creates problems for identifying the background of attacks that are performed. There is a huge definitional gap in the assessment of violent extremism against women and we have seen several cases of misogynistic terror where the perpetrator is considered mentally unstable instead of going deeper into the ideology and radical online environments they existed in before the attack. This further allows violent extreme gendered based ideology to develop further without the censorship and policies that is needed to stop this growing wave of misogynistic violent extremism (Zimmerman et al. 2018).

CONCLUSION

Violence against women is not something new, however, through the rise of social media have we seen a new wave of extremist violence with strong radical and ideological views rooted in alt-right and white nationalism. Instead of reflecting on these thoughts alone, they now exist in large scale communities. The purpose of this paper was to gain a thorough understanding on how social media have been and continue to play a central role as a push factor for radicalisation and violent extremism against women.

Platforms such as Reddit and 4chan attract young impressionable men with radical attitudes against women. Here they find comfort in communities such as theIncel and Manospherecommunity painted in alt-right ideology. They view women as the weaker gender, that have through the feminist movement become too independent which threatens the natural order of society, and thereby deserve punishment in the form of morbid violence. These communities exist on both secluded and universal social media platforms. Here echo chambers of one-sided radical information get to float freely and function as push factors for both radicalization and violent extremism such as the gruesome attacks of Elliot Rodger and Alek Minassain both heavily active social media users.

A central issue identified during the research was the way violent extremism targeted against women is not taken seriously enough as an ideology in mainstream media. By hiding it in the form of memes and generic trends, is advocacy for extremist violence against women allowed to exist freely without interference. The perpetrators activity is usually not identified as extremism until after violent attacks and deaths have occurred.

Without the proper securitization of gender based violent extremism by properly tackling the ideological aspect of the growing tolerance of violence against women in mainstream entertainment content, will the movement continue to grow, and radicalisation happen. With a thorough understanding of the issue will it make it easier to identify possible attacks before it happens. Violence against women is not “just a joke”.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, Elson Katie. 2020. Getting acquainted with social networks and apps: it is time to talk about TikTok. New Jersey. Emerald Publishing Limited. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1108/LHTN-01-2020-0001>
- Askanius, Tina, and Nadine Keller. 2021. *Murder fantasies in memes: fascist aesthetics of death threats and the banalization of white supremacist violence*. Malmö. Routledge. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2021.1974517>
- Australian Government. 2015. *Preventing Violent Extremism and Radicalization in Australia*. Living Safe Together. URL: <https://www.livingsafetogether.gov.au/Documents/preventing-violent-extremism-and-radicalisation-in-australia.PDF>
- BBC. 2017. *Indian woman attacked with acid for fifth time*. BBC. URL: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-40474360>
- Collins, Brooke. 2018. *A horror tale of male entitlement: Jack The Ripper and "his" shadow, The incel movement*. London. University College London. URL: <https://ippr-journal.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/BrookeCollins.pdf>
- Eddine-Nasser, Minvera., Bridget Graham, Katerina Agostino and Gilbert Caluya. 2011. *Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Literature Review*. Australia. Counter Terrorism and Security Technology Centre. URL: <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/citations/ADA543686>
- Ging, Debbie. 2017. *Alphas, Betas, and Incels: Theorizing the Masculinities of the Manosphere*. Dublin. SAGE. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1097184X17706401>
- Hoffman, Bruce, Jacob Ware and Ezra Shapiro. 2020. *Assessing the Threat of Incel Violence*. In *Conflict & Terrorism*, 565-587. Washington DC. Routledge. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2020.1751459>
- Jacobsen, Annemette. 2017. *Push and pulls of radicalisation into violent Islamist extremism and prevention measures targeting these, comparing men and women*. Malmö. Malmö Högskola. URL: <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1485811/FULLTEXT01.pdf>
- Kumar, Jaishree. 2021. *Inside the «Super Straight» movement that got banned on TikTok and Reddit*. VICE. URL: <https://www.vice.com/en/article/5dp793/superstraight-sexuality-movement-transphobia-reddit-tiktok>

- National Institute of Justice. 2015. *Radicalization and Violent Extremism: Lessons Learned From Canada, the U.K. and the U.S.* Arlington. National Institute of Justice. URL: <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/249947.pdf>
- OSCE. 2019. *Understanding the Role of Gender in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization That Lead to Terrorism. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.* Vienna. OSCE. URL: https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/0/b/420563_1.pdf
- Salojärvi, Eero, Matti Rantanen, Emilia Nieminen, Alina Juote, and Heidi Hanhela. 2020. *The «Incel» Phenomenon in the Digital Era – How Echo Chambers have Fueled the Incel Movement.* Helsinki. University of Helsinki. URL: <https://philarchive.org/archive/SALTIP>
- Sugiura, Lisa. 2021. *Weirdos or Extremists?*. In *The Rise of the Manosphere and the Virtual War Against Women.* Emerald Publishing Limited. URL: <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/978-1-83982-254-420211007/full/pdf?title=weirdos-or-extremists>
- Thorleifsson, Cathrine. 2021. *From cyberfascism to terrorism: On 4chan/pol/ culture and the transnational production of memetic violence.* Oslo. Nations and Nationalism. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12780>
- Tomkinson, Sian, Tael Harper, and Katie Attwell. 2020. *Confronting Incel: exploring possible policy responses to misogynistic violent extremism.* Perth. Australian Journal of Political Science. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10361146.2020.1747393>
- Tu, Jessie. 2022. *Tiktok trend shows men fantasising about ways to murder women.* Women's agenda. URL: <https://womensagenda.com.au/girls-covid/health-rights-and-gender-based-violence/tiktok-trend-shows-men-fantasising-about-the-ways-to-murder-women/>
- Zimmerman, Shannon, Luisa Ryan, and David Duriesmith. 2018. *Recognizing the Violent Extremist Ideology of Incels.* Washington DC. Women In International Security. URL: <https://www.wiisglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Policybrief-Violent-Extremists-Incels.pdf>.*

* Manuscript was received on September 10, 2022 and the paper was accepted for publishing on September 26, 2022.