Policy Brief

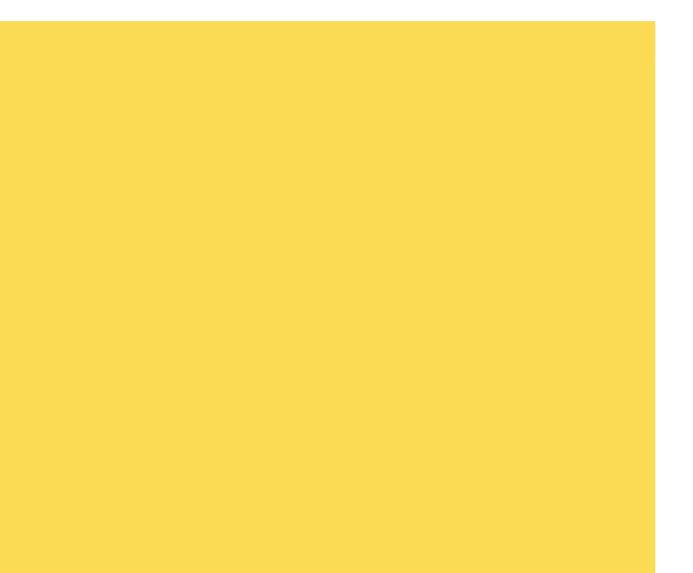**CFFP** THE CENTRE FOR FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY

How anti-feminist and anti-gender ideologies contribute to violent extremism – and what we can do about it

Violence Prevention Network and the Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy

Introduction & overview

Anti-feminist and anti-gender ideologies – and their basis in hostility and hatred towards women and LGBTQI* people – have long been an overlooked factor in analysing radicalisation and violent extremism. Both ideologies strongly appeal to groups organised around exclusionary principles because they provide language and a framework for the defence of hierarchical structures in society (Denkovski et al., 2021, 18). This trend is increasingly manifesting itself across a spectrum of violence. Despite a striking prevalence of anti-feminism and anti-gender attitudes within extremist worldviews, these motives have been considered at best secondary when analysing extremist attacks and groups (Wolf 2021). Yet, for extremist actors, they constitute a core element of their ideologies, a relevant area of recruitment within and outside extremist scenes, and an opportunity for strategic alliances.

Throughout right-wing attacks in the past decade, such as those in Christchurch, Hanau, and Halle, a clear pattern of anti-feminist and misogynistic beliefs can be detected. Within such attacks, the ideological basis for mass public violence is formed by adherence to multiple, overlapping exclusionary attitudes. For instance, one conspiracy theory that finds popularity among right-wing actors is that of the "Great Replacement". According to this idea, feminism was invented by Jewish elites to lower birth rates and advance mass migration, with the goal of replacing white European populations with non-European, non-white people, specifically Muslims (Fedders 2018). The Christchurch attacker had uploaded an online "manifesto" titled "the Great Replacement" before the attack on two mosques that killed 51 people – illustrating how anti-feminism is often intricately interwoven with racist and anti-Semitic thinking.

The issue of overlapping ideological codes, elements, and groups is becoming increasingly important as we witness growing complexity in the right-wing landscape of radicalisation and violence. However, misogyny and anti-feminism are also integral to violent attacks outside of right-wing scenes. Several terrorist attacks by members of the incel[1] community, such as those in the Californian city of Isla Vista in 2014, as well as the 2018 Toronto and 2019 Tallahassee attacks, have led to an increased awareness of the incel threat and the beginning of its consideration as a security threat in Western countries (see, for instance, Moonshot 2021). While embedded in a much broader online misogynist scene, misogynist incel ideologies promote particularly extreme misogyny, anti-feminism, and sexism. Misogynist incels see women as depriving them of their natural entitlement to sex. The use of dehumanising and aggressive language – and, in parts, open calls to violence

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1   Incel stands for involuntary celibacy – an online community originally started as a support network of individuals who struggle to find love and sex.

against women - provides the framework in which attacks, as mentioned above, occur. The most well-known incel attacker, for instance, just weeks before the attack in Isla Vista called upon incels to "realise their true strength and numbers", "overthrow this oppressive feminist system", and "start envisioning a world where WOMEN FEAR YOU" (Glasstetter 2014). These attacks were broadly referenced and discussed within incel and misogynist scenes and the extreme right more specifically. In Halle, the right-wing extremist who killed two people and tried to enter a local synagogue was listening to music that makes explicit references in name and content to the incel attack in Toronto in 2018.

Few policy responses, to date, have enabled the development of appropriate responses to violent misogyny within the prevention and countering of violent extremism. Having experienced several incel attacks over the past few years, Canada has spearheaded such policy efforts. In 2020, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service recognised violent misogyny as a form of ideological extremism. Since 2020, gender-driven violence falls under one of three explicitly named categories of violent extremism and terrorism[2], enabling courts to try incel attacks and violence as acts of ideologically motivated extremist terrorism (Bell 2020). Anti-feminist and anti-gender ideologies target feminists and women who break patriarchal gender norms and the subjugation to these norms by pushing for emancipation through a universal human rights framework. Following the same logic, they also target the LGBTQI* community, who are seen as representing a changing gender order more broadly. This mobilisation takes place across the spectrum of actors and types of radicalisation. For instance, during the Trump administration in the United States, the characterisation of feminist and LGBTQI* human rights activism as radical and destabilising and the appeals to a return to a pre-feminist past have contributed to the mainstreaming of extreme exclusionary attitudes in the US and beyond (Sanders and Jenkins, 2020). In many countries, activists and human rights defenders are being targeted. In Georgia, more than 50 journalists and civil society representatives were injured in the context of violent protests against the 2021 Pride Parade in Tbilisi– the latest in a long history of attacks against the LGBTQI* community and their organisations organised in apparent alliance with extreme right-wing actors (Schiffers 2021). During the second most lethal attack in the history of the US, an Islamist extremist targeted the Pulse nightclub in Orlando 2016, a known meeting place for the queer Latinx community. In Dresden, during an anti-LGBTQI* attack in 2020, the perpetrator attacked a homosexual couple, killing one of the partners.

In Germany alone, hate crimes against LGBTQI* people increased by 36% in 2020, consolidating a trend from previous years (Anarte 2020), while 2019 saw

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2   The other two being anti-authority and xenophobic ideologically motivated violent extremism (Public Safety Canada, 2021).

an instance of femicide every second or third day (Baumgärtner et al. 2021). In 2020, the OSCE ODIHR hate crime monitor recorded 140 and 739 violent instances of gender-based hate crimes and anti-LGBTQI* hate crimes, respectively, compared to 41 and 798 cases in 2019 and 39 and 570 cases in 2018 (OSCE 2021). Despite these strong indications of an upward trend in violent attacks against women and LGBTQI* people, few jurisdictions record adequate data or treat it as a politically motivated act of violence, obscuring the true numbers.

These examples give a snapshot into the broad spectrum of actors and hostility linked to anti-feminist and anti-gender attitudes and their complex overlaps with other ideologies of injustice. This policy brief outlines the current state of international debates exploring how anti-gender and anti-feminist ideologies interlink with violent extremism. Drawing on research by Violence Prevention Network and the Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy, as well as work by academics and practitioners in the spheres of Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) and Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE), it highlights the urgent need to integrate these two agendas and frames of analysis across policymaking and practice, understand male supremacy as a security threat in its own right, and develop comprehensive policy responses. It also provides recommendations to policymakers and civil society on how these agendas can be effectively integrated.

What do we know about the role of anti-feminism in violent extremism?

Anti-feminism, anti-gender, and misogyny are interconnected ideologies and play a vital role at both the organisational and ideological levels as well as the functioning of extremist groups. They are based on beliefs and narratives that promote the inferiority of women, queer, and gender non-conforming people, policing and punishing any deviation from traditional gender norms and self-determined lifestyles (Schminke 2018, 29). As such, they are fundamentally in opposition to democratic notions of equality.

As a modern form of anti-feminist mobilisation, anti-gender ideology does not necessarily oppose feminism in the same way that anti-feminists have done so in the past. Instead, it relies on a set of notions revolving around radical 'gender feminists' and the 'homosexual agenda' advancing a world order that dismisses the 'natural' order of things (the 'natural' hierarchy of men and women, for instance), which, in pushing for individual identity over social expectations, undermines the anthropological basis of the family and, therefore, society. This concept provides an umbrella term and a framework for mobilisation for the anti-gender movement

by portraying the concept of 'gender' as a threat to society (Denkovski et al., 2021). Different fundamentalist and right-wing extremist forces are connected by a strong patriarchal belief in traditional gender roles. Studies of extremist groups across different types of religious-fundamentalist and right-wing extremism show they share a strong nostalgia for an imagined "golden age of male entitlement" (Dhaliwal and Kelly 2020, 29) and frame emancipatory movements as a threat to an alleged 'natural' order. They further share an "aggrieved" sense of "masculinity in which the use of violence is seen to restore power and influence" (ibid., 5), often referred to as militarised or toxic forms of masculinity. They seek to uphold reactionary, cis- and heteronormative concepts of family, sexuality, and gender (ibid.). This includes opposition towards the idea of a social construction of gender norms and the essentialist belief that any diversity and plurality outside of a binary gender order (man/woman) is 'unnatural' and harmful.

Ideologies of inequality, framed around a categorisation of 'us' and 'them' in which the respective 'other' is framed as inferior or dangerous, are central to extremist beliefs. Such group-based enmity, the devaluation and hostility against members of one group, is not only a constituting element of misogyny and anti-feminism, but of other group-based hatred such as racism, Islamophobia, and anti-Semitism (Zick and Küpper 2021). What they have in common is an ideology of inequality that builds upon a framework of anti-egalitarian thinking in which sexism and hostility towards LGBTQI* people legitimise the desired system of domination (Wolf and Hell 2022).

These reactionary gender norms are framed as protection to the in-group, which, depending on the movement, is defined in religious, nationalist, racist, or traditionalist terms. Such narratives produce a shared identity of internal unity while generating an imaginary group of shared enemies and promoting external exclusion – and, in turn, developing a type of unity based on the exclusion and inferiority of the out-group. They are essential to the identity-formation of anti-democratic and extremist movements. They can provide the basis for legitimising discrimination, hostility, and possible violence towards the out-group(s). Within this context, it is unsurprising that sexism, as one of the first types of inequality that we learn and are socialised in – and one of the most naturalised ones – is integral to extremist groups (ibid.).

One of the key topics that anti-democratic actors mobilise against is the concept of gender that includes, for example, gender studies on the academic level or gender-neutral language and awareness on the policy level. As discussed above, by framing the demands of feminist and queer academics, activists, and journalists as particularly revolutionary and radical, anti-democratic actors portray them as a destabilising threat to society. Messaging that employs 'traditional values' and appeals to 'the natural order of things' can be deployed to refer to anything from

militarism and the justification of torture, violence, and the subjugation of women and LGBTQI* persons (Wolf 2021). Concepts such as the 'filthy' or 'degenerate' 'other' constructed as a threat to the innocence of the in-group's children/families/women are shared between anti-gender and extremist narratives. All these ideas are united by their reliance on fear-based reactions and their assertion that equality of human rights for all is a radical, destabilising idea. Once this notion is deconstructed, and it is observed that there is nothing radical about expanding the concept of human rights to include traditionally politically marginalised groups, it is evident that it is the anti-gender and extremist ideology that advances radical ideas intending to promote a world order which maintains the dominance of misogynist and other exclusionary worldviews (Meiering et al. 2018; Dhaliwal and Kelly 2020; Denkovski et al. 2021).

Another motif these ideologies have in common is the patriarchal sense of entitlement over a woman's body. In Christian fundamentalist, Islamist, and other religious fundamentalism, the 'purity' of the female body and the control over female sexuality and reproductive decisions are core elements of the system of domination (Dhaliwal and Kelly 2020). Equally, in right-wing extremist ideologies, the role and purpose of the female body are instrumentalised and defined as reproduction and care work. Especially when it comes to sexual and reproductive health and rights, anti-gender and anti-feminist actors mobilise against abortion rights and new reproductive technologies. On the other hand, incel extremists feel entitled to turn violent towards women out of revenge for the perceived loss of 'control' over the female body and their proclaimed right to sex and love.
Moreover, anti-democratic actors mobilise against political initiatives and education efforts for inclusion in terms of gender and sexual diversity. Examples for strong alliances in Germany are 'Demo für Alle', 'Besorgte Eltern', and the 'Lebensschutzbewegung'. They frame homosexuality and trans, non-binary and intersex persons as threats to the well-being of their children and the stability of society (Wolf and Hell 2022).

Within this dynamic, anti-feminist ideologies function as an efficient "symbolic glue" (Schminke 2018, 33; Denkovski et al. 2021) for alliances between diverse anti-democratic and extremist movements and actors. On the one hand, it enhances extremist movements' ability to form alliances across different types of extremism. On the other hand, it strengthens their ability to mobilise and recruit among a broader spectrum of non-extremist actors. The continuing entrenchment and reinforcement of anti-feminist, anti-gender, and misogynistic beliefs in many parts of society make these topics ever-more salient in recruitment efforts.

Main gaps in the conceptualisation and implementation of the WPS and P/CVE agendas

A 2018-19 opinion-based study in Indonesia, Bangladesh, the Philippines, and Libya finds that "hostile sexist attitudes toward women and support for violence against women are the factors most strongly associated with support for violent extremism" (Johnston and True 2019, 1). This is particularly pertinent, as, in turn, no connection was established with other factors commonly associated with the support for violent (Islamist) extremism, such as "degree of religiosity, age, gender, level of education achieved, employment and geographic area" (ibid.).

A growing body of research shows a predominance of misogyny in the form of gender-based violence and intimate partner violence within the personal histories and biographies of perpetrators of mass shootings and ideologically motivated extremist violence (Dhaliwal and Kelly 2020). Similarly, research conducted by CFFP on understanding and countering the transnational anti-gender movement increasingly points towards the need to look at misogyny and anti-feminism as more than individual acts of hate or personal problems. Instead, they should be understood as systemic challenges to the human rights of women and other politically marginalised groups, highlighting the need to explicitly explore their interlinkage with violence prevention strategies (Denkovski et al., 2021). To achieve this, the WPS community needs to see the full spectrum of roles women have in conflict beyond the concept of women peacebuilders alone, ensure the meaningful participation of women and WPS communities in the shaping and devising of security strategies, and integrate women-led violence prevention on a much broader scale (beyond the P/CVE agenda).

A Feminist Foreign Policy recognises the transformative approach of the WPS agenda and the need to focus on conflict prevention while rolling back escalating levels of militarised responses. It requires the commitment to actively counter anti-gender, misogynistic, and right-wing violence against women, sexual minorities, and people with diverse gender identifications, including introducing the criminal offence 'femicide' (CFFP 2021). Yet, actors, policies, and networks concerned with WPS and the prevention of misogyny are rarely linked to the prevention and countering of violent extremism. Sexism and anti-feminism, for instance in the form of gender-based violence, continue to be seen as apolitical rather than ideological and therefore underestimated as warning signs concerning ideologically motivated violence. The link between different forms of violence – those seen as 'private' and those in the public domain – warrants further attention and inclusion in P/CVE agendas and programming.

Germany and other governments have already recognised the need to link the WPS and P/CVE agendas, as enshrined in UNSCR 2242. A stronger link between these policy areas can improve gender-sensitive action in P/CVE by strengthening the prevention and participation pillars of the WPS agenda while providing a counterbalance to the traditional security- and male-focused approaches to P/CVE. However, for example, Germany also commits itself to projects that eliminate exclusionary and degrading gender stereotypes, which may encourage violence and sexism.

Many other practitioners and researchers are concerned about these interlinkages and see the need to take more concerted action on all levels to address this effectively – and provide responses to violent extremism that match the issues we are seeing.

Ways Forward: steps towards the recognition of anti-gender and anti-feminist attitudes and the role of misogyny in violent extremism, and the integration of the WPS and P/CVE agendas

1. Recognise the political nature of misogyny and anti-feminism in line with other forms of anti-egalitarian ideologies.

• Acknowledge that many anti-gender actors are attacking the rights of women and LGBTQI* to either gain or increase their power and ensure that responses to anti-gender campaigns reflect the political nature of their goals and strategies.

• Recognise, research, and develop ways to address the overlap of different anti-egalitarian ideologies, such as anti-Semitism and racism with anti-feminism and misogyny. Ensure that interventions do not reinforce boys', and men's entitlement by strengthening programme design through collaboration with organisations working on gender justice (Kelly et al. 2021: 28).

• Understand that misogynist incels are not unique in their misogyny but exist in relation to male supremacism in a broader context within our societies. Recognising this can support practitioners and policymakers in ensuring that responses developed to address the incel threat do not enable other forms of

misogyny as solutions to the incel threat (Kelly et al. 2021: 4).

•   Consistently recognise the investigation of anti-gender, misogynistic, and sexist ideologies and behaviour as a task of violence prevention at all levels and implement it as part of pedagogical practice. To this end, this strategy must be supported by institutions, research, politics, and individuals in pedagogical practice.

•   Recognise male supremacism as a threat in its own right while advancing the understanding of how it can cross-pollinate with or be a conduit to white supremacism and other harmful ideologies.

•   Intervene early and through routine systems to prevent movement along a spectrum of dehumanisation and misogyny toward violent extremes (Kelly et al. 2021: 29).

•   Provide visibility to the gendered dimensions of attacks and their underlying ideologies in the media and elsewhere. Improve statistics and labelling on the issue. Fund more research and collaborations into male supremacism (broadly defined) and protect researchers' ability to work in the face of threats and doxing (Kelly et al. 2021: 30).

•   Strengthen laws addressing gender-based and intimate partner violence. Strengthen the conceptual inclusion and recognition of the relevance of misogyny for radicalisation and violent extremism.

•   Proactively raise awareness of the threat of anti-gender campaigns to human rights, our democracies, and security. Build explicitly pro-gender alliances within multilateral fora.

2. Close the gaps between the WPS and P/CVE agendas by linking these fields' policy, research, practice, and actors.

•   Include gender mainstreaming as a cross-sectoral task in policy frameworks for preventing and countering violent extremism across primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention work. This includes not equating the topic of 'gender' with 'women', rather creating gender-reflective and -sensitive programmes for all genders.

•   Include explicit references to misogynist violence in National Action Plans

on WPS and P/CVE. Mainstream sexism, anti-feminism, and misogyny within concept-development, research, and programmes in P/CVE.

• Through funding and agenda-setting, prioritise space for civil society to create alliances and work together in the long-term to address cross-cutting issues. Support women-led and queer-led organisations engaging in WPS and P/CVE.

• Enable the linking of feminist and multi-disciplinary gender studies with the study of terrorism and extremism in academia.

3. Reconceptualise funding priorities and programming and invest in capacity building.

• Fund further research and programmes addressing the interlinkages of different forms of violence, namely gender-based violence, intimate partner violence, and public violence.

• Fund comparative research into anti-feminism and misogyny within different extremist groups to enable learning across various manifestations of extremism. A more detailed analysis contributes significantly to understanding the dynamics within the respective extremist movements and carries significant potential to instruct and strengthen the practical prevention of extremism.

• Make project funding and resources for further education and training available for practitioners which appropriately reflect the high level of expertise and time required to implement gender-reflective work in preventing and countering violent extremism.

• Design hybrid and online projects that reach out to the online spheres where misogynist actors recruit. Offer the necessary training and resources to improve digital skills among social workers and other practitioners and design cross-sectoral programmes.

• Shape and implement media training to ensure anti-feminist and misogynist violence are understood within and outside the frame of violent extremism. For guidelines on media reporting on incels, refer to the IRMS's recommendations (IRMS 2021).

• Implement support networks for researchers and practitioners working in this field, including safety and well-being programmes, toolboxes, and protection

in the face of (online) threats, doxing, burnout, and other adverse effects. Routinely include supervision and mental health support in all funding channels related to violent extremism.

• Raise awareness among practitioners in P/CVE and other support systems (i.e. social work, mental health practitioners, youth services) to recognise misogyny, as well as anti–feminist, male supremacist, and incel ideologies.

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