

# MISOGYNY: THE EXTREMIST GATEWAY?

JUNE 2021

Extremism InFocus, Issue Brief 2



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Misogyny is often central to violent extremist indoctrination, recruitment and ideology and yet it mostly escapes scrutiny by policymakers. Closer attention to the relationship between misogyny and violent extremism will improve understanding of how the two relate at the level of individual radicalization, the dynamics within violent extremist groups and in shaping their political agendas. While the problem of misogyny is not new – as it is rooted in longstanding structural inequalities and discrimination against women – its relationship with violent extremism is rapidly evolving, due in part to the rise of social media and Internet-enabled globalization of hate.

Misogyny is linked to violent extremism in several ways. Some men have deliberately targeted women in attacks they justify as driven by their hatred of women, incidents that sometimes are called terrorist attacks. Certain violent extremist groups have also made practices such as rape, forced marriage and enslavement a part of their repertoires of violence and forms of social control. Online attacks, such as doxing, disproportionately target women at a time when many violent extremist groups are embracing ideologies that perceive the gains women have made in recent decades in terms of participation in public life, leadership and the economy as a threat.

The internet and social media have steadily normalized hate speech and violence against women. With their tendency to create like-minded communities, various online platforms have brought together men, and some women, and often drawn them down a path towards expressing hatred towards women. Participants have created environments in which women are subjected to storms of abuse on social media, occasionally erupting in violence. Online abuse of women is now a global problem, which will not be tackled with technological solutions alone.

Tackling misogyny and entrenched structural violence against women is important and these issues should not be subsumed within the framework of preventing violent extremism. Policy and programming to protect women and safeguard their rights, as well as to enhance the economic and political standing of women and their participation in all levels of public life are vital in and of themselves. But supporting women can also help reduce violent extremism: women often identify problems early, push back against them and bring communities together. While women are also involved themselves in violent extremism, they join in much smaller numbers than men. Countries that tackle actions and ideologies that subordinate women, whether at individual or societal levels, are more peaceful and successful economically.[1]

This paper highlights that policymakers preoccupied with preventing violent extremism lack a nuanced understanding of how confronting misogyny could help. There is little support to draw men away from misogyny. Too few men understand that by keeping women down, they harm themselves. Misogyny is an act of self-harm, resulting in poorer, more violent, more troubled lives for men. It is also a template for other hierarchies and systems of control: where there is unfettered suppression of women, there is also authoritarianism, racism, and other forms of repression.

## DEFINING MISOGYNY AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Misogyny is often defined as the hatred of women, conceived as a belief held by individual men and some women. Philosopher Kate Manne however defines it more broadly as: “a political phenomenon whose purpose is to police and enforce women’s subordination and to uphold male dominance.”[2] Men demand a variety of services from women: love, admiration, attention, care, sex, submission and others. If those are not forthcoming or women occupy public space normally occupied by men, they are often targeted for misogynist abuse or violence.

Violent extremism can also be defined in multiple ways. One way of understanding it is to think of it as the belief that the very survival of a group depends on enacting violence against their opponents. This conviction, rather than any specific ideology, is what makes violent extremism distinct from other forms of political violence, such as separatist insurgencies which use violence as a means to achieve a defined objective.

The policy brief was developed by the **UNDP Oslo Governance Centre** as part of the Oslo Governance Centre’s initiative to further support advancement of the research agenda on Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE).

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# THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MISOGYNY AND FORMS OF EXTREMIST VIOLENCE

Misogyny has been described as “the gateway, driver and early warning sign” of many acts of violent extremism.[4] Misogyny has been described as “the gateway, driver and early warning sign” of many acts of violent extremism.[5] The hatred of women and the need to control them also appears to be an entry point to violent extremism for some men.[6]

Some violent extremist movements seek to control the fertility of women as a central aspect of their ideologies. Fears of demographic takeover, never sustained by evidence, is often central to extremist and genocidal thought. For example, the idea that Muslim women must be prevented from reproducing and Muslim men must be prevented from marrying Buddhist women in Myanmar.[7] In another example, right-wing groups around the world fear “replacement” by minorities and blame women for failing to follow their worldview. Inter-marriage, miscegenation, homosexuality, feminism and even women working outside the home are all seen as existential threats.

The internet’s effect of creating homogenous communities that tend to move towards extremes is in large part responsible for popularizing and spreading misogynist views.[8] “Incels” (involuntary celibates) and the men’s rights movement have thrived online and are linked to the far right and white supremacist groups.[9] While dominated by men, some women who have positioned themselves within these movements and occupy key positions, advising women to adopt traditional, hierarchical gender roles. “Their main idea is that there are natural hierarchies with women and minorities at the bottom,” said Cindy Ma, a researcher at the Oxford Internet Institute.[10] Tech companies have largely been reluctant to adopt sufficient safeguards and challenge the ability of misogynist groups to use these platforms.[11]

Domestic violence may also reveal how misogyny works within a society and can lead individuals to support or participate in extremist violence. Globally, at least 50,000 women a year die at the hands of family members, which is 137 women each day and more than half the total of violent deaths of women.[12] But the number is almost certainly too low. Although domestic violence is endemic and violence against women is closely linked to insecurity within states, it receives far fewer resources than counter-terrorism. Nevertheless, extremist violence mostly takes place in states that have very poor records on their treatment of women and girls – starting with sex-selective abortions, the treatment of infants and schooling of girls through to family violence, rape and mob violence.

How the policing of the inferior position of women connects to extremist violence needs to be better understood. Often misogynist violence is explained away by difficult situations in which men find themselves; the very ubiquity of misogyny means the problem remains hidden in plain sight. Policy responses to violent extremism increasingly involve women but very few deal with the toxic masculinity that shapes the actions of many men.[16]

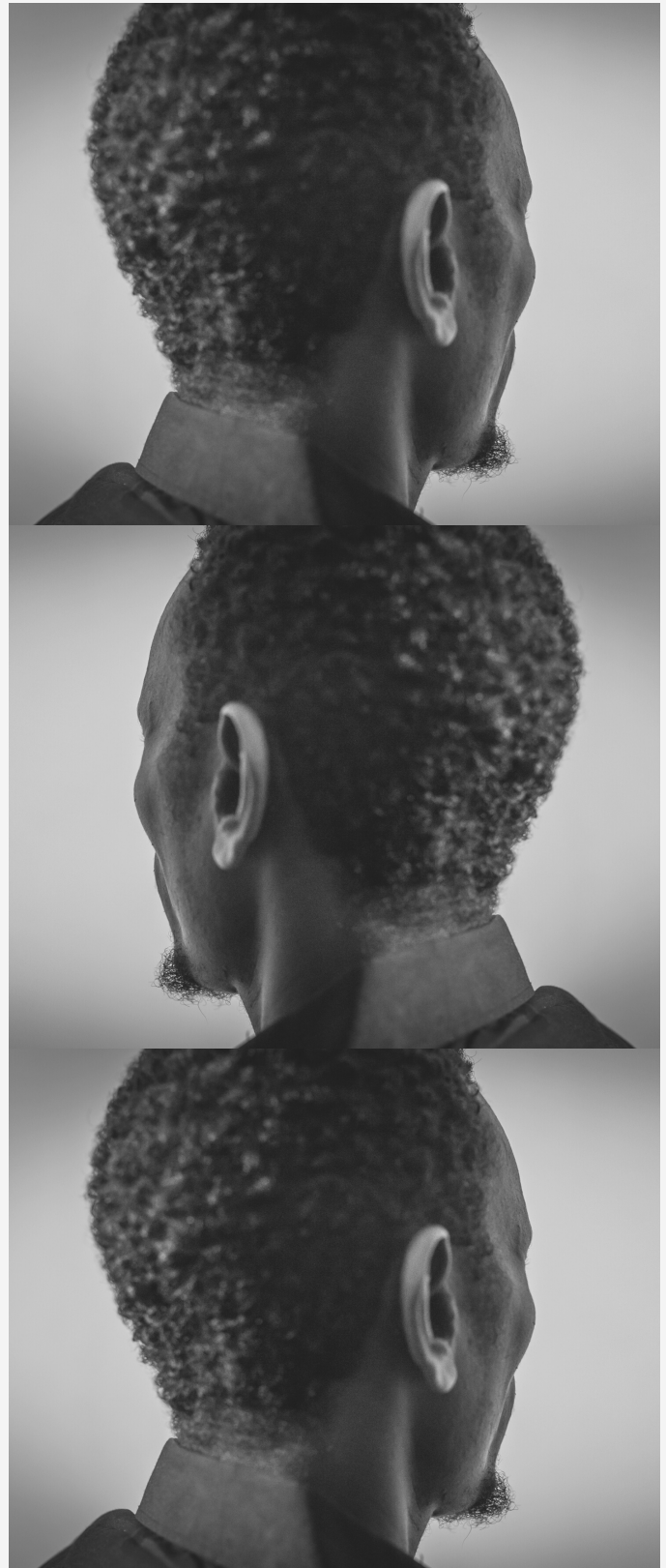


Photo Credit: Journey to Extremism, UNDP, Malin Fazehai



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## RECRUITMENT TO VIOLENT EXTREMIST GROUPS

Recruitment to violent extremist groups around the world takes places in many ways from joining religious meetings or education to family links to recruitment through social media.[17] The pathways are many and various as are the backgrounds of those who join groups.

A frequent commonality is misogyny.[18] It is striking that misogyny persists to a high degree even in those countries that have shed many unequal practices. Hatred of women and violence against them – real or imagined -- links many of the men who embrace violent extremist ideologies or join such groups.[19] Research in Southeast Asia and North Africa has shown that a misogynist world view aligns closely with support for extremists.[20] Far-right parties and organisations with racist agendas – from the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) to Hungary's Fidesz, India's RSS/BJP to the Front National in France – draw in men with the promise of the subservience of women in domestic roles.[21] For those buffeted by globalized economies, unemployment and increasing precariousness, a return to a past of female subjugation holds much appeal.

Recruitment to a group like Boko Haram in Nigeria shows how misogyny plays a significant role. People joined the group for a variety of reasons, some religious, some financial, but it is clear from recruitment materials that the promise of a traditional and obedient Muslim bride drew many men. Boko Haram has kidnapped women to become wives of jihadi fighters or servants to men within the group. Misogyny as the aggressive policing of gender roles clearly attracted many fighters.

Sexual violence and rape have long been part of the economy of war.[22] Studies have shown for example that gang rape is more common in war than peacetime, creating bonds of loyalty and esteem.[23] Since UN Security Council Resolution 1820 in 2008, rape has been considered a weapon of war and a threat to international security.[24] Under the Islamic State, however, sexual violence in war took on new extremes, resulting in the enslavement of 6,000 women from the Yazidi minority and establishment of markets in which they were sold.[25] IS appealed to hyper-militarized and hyper-sexualized men, with many drawn in by misogyny.[26]

Unsurprisingly, there are some extremist groups that have strongly policed gender boundaries and embrace highly militarized masculinity in which women are mostly relegated to the roles of caregiver, wife or admirer. Some women however are allowed to take on other positions and indeed extend the frontiers of their lives by becoming fighters, planners and propagandists. For example, a number of Saudi women said that one of the reasons they joined IS was that they were allowed to drive, something banned at the time in their home country.[27] Women who join violent extremist groups have agency; they are not just victims. But in many cases, they are choosing between two patriarchal extremes and often picking one with profound consequences for others.



Photo Credit: UNDP Pakistan

## GAPS AND CHALLENGES

UNDP's report *Journeys to Extremism in Africa* showed how security responses to extremist attacks can backfire and encourage extremism.[28] For some of the sampled young men, encounters with harsh and unfair policing and military action triggered recruitment into extremist groups. This influential report and many other studies of violent extremism however do not tackle issues of misogyny.

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Misogyny, by dehumanizing women, may prepare men to accept a violent ideology and to carry out attacks in its name.[29] Moving towards violence requires processes of distancing oneself from the humanity of the victims and the moral norms that restrain our behaviour. There has been very little investigation into whether misogyny is a key part of these processes.[30]

**Securitization:** Although misogyny needs more attention from policymakers and programs focused on preventing violent extremism, there are risks. Securitization tends to have a harmful effect on human rights, on women as a group, and is unlikely to improve responses to misogyny.[31] Police however would benefit from connecting the dots between violent crimes against women and the involvement of extremists in misogynist violence.[32] While police forces are increasingly looking at some counter-terrorism tools in dealing with violence against women, there is a risk that women may be even more reluctant to report domestic violence if responses are increasingly securitized. Yet addressing domestic violence and misogynist violence from the perspective of preventing violent extremism may bring more attention and resources to these issues.

**Taking on the “manosphere”:** Online misogyny is all about provocation. But at the same time, it has many deleterious, real-life effects on women: it risks excluding them from an ever more important public space; it deprives them of economic opportunities; and it generates considerable fear due to cyber-bullying and doxing. In some countries, legislation against hate speech is available and organisations such as Trollbusters[33] aid women in tackling abuse. Social media companies however have been slow to respond and the problem will not be addressed unless they take it more seriously.

**Placing the burden of change on men:** Misogyny is a male problem and it hurts men too. Those nations with patriarchal systems perform badly on most measures of stability and wealth: nations become rich and peaceful because they treat women well, not the other way around. Misogyny also plays into power structures, violence and human rights abuses that hurt men: there is a notable overlap between authoritarianism and misogyny.[34] Men need to step up and change it. One

place to start is within the family. Women who thrive often point to supportive fathers as key to their success.[35] Identifying problems with parenting and family life, as well as a greater focus on domestic violence and traumatic childhood events would provide a vast array of societal benefits.[36] While good parenting reduces risks of radicalization at an individual level, there is almost no research on fatherhood and its impact.[37]

## CONCLUSION

Misogyny is growing even as efforts to address sexual and gender-based violence have strengthened globally and women are making strides political and economically in many countries. But it is clear that there is pushback to this progress, even in the least patriarchal societies. There is a risk that misogyny has been normalized and will only become harder and harder to reverse. Highlighting misogyny and the connections with domestic violence, extremism and conflict could help to turn the tide.

Worryingly, increased political representation in some countries such as Afghanistan has done little to raise the quality of life of many women. Women do well when they not only have economic and education opportunities but also power in the public and private realms. If any of these are missing, they are unlikely to gain equality. Misogyny clearly acts in all these areas: to tackle it, there must be action in family life, legal protection and in access to the public sphere.[38] The challenge is to promote a holistic approach that ensures that gains in one arena – such as education – are not undermined by exclusion in the private and public spheres. There is a need for a greater understanding of the role of misogyny and what can be done to counter it – in and of itself, and because of its connections to violent extremism.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Prioritize tackling misogyny as a key component of preventing violent extremism. Enhance the protection of women from harm by devoting more resources to the education of men and boys, improving the behavior of fathers, and services and justice for victims of violence.
- Bring together those involved in issues around technology and hate speech and those who work on PVE to increase attention to those who propagate misogyny online and may encourage and incite others towards violence.
- Develop tools for responding to misogyny as part of policing, for example examining ways in which misogyny can signal a progression towards more violent action, including potentially extremist violence.
- Focus on the behavior of men and boys as part of gender-sensitive responses to conflict and find ways to include the reduction of gender-based violence in all aspects of peacemaking and peacebuilding.
- Assess the effectiveness of existing programmes that aim to prevent men and boys from developing misogynist attitudes and/or provide them with off-ramps from these positions.

# ENDNOTES

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- [11] Action by social media companies is mixed. Some, such as Reddit, have tried to control online hate speech, which sparked a backlash against then CEO Ellen Pao. Some gaming companies have recognised that profitability lies in bringing more women and girls into the area as clients and have therefore started to change some of the culture. However online hate speech is still commonly directed against women on the major social media platforms with many being slow to respond. See Azmina Dhrodia. (2017) Social Media and the Silencing Effect. Why Online Misogyny is a Human Rights Issue. *The New Statesman*. Available at: <https://www.newstatesman.com/2017/11/social-media-and-silencing-effect-why-misogyny-online-human-rights-issue>
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- [14] Valerie Hudson, Donna Bowen and Perpetua Nielson (2020) *The First Political Order: How Sex Shapes Governance and National Security Worldwide*. Columbia University Press. New York.
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- [27] Interview with Saudi researcher. April 2020.
- [28] UNDP. *Journeys to Extremism in Africa*. (2017) Available at: <http://journey-to-extremism.undp.org>.
- [29] Kate Manne challenges the notion of misogyny being a form of dehumanization, rather it is the policing of the "correct" roles for women as nurturers and carers. They are punished for stepping out of these very human roles but are not dehumanized in the way that ethnic or racial minorities often are. See: K. Manne (2017) *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*. Oxford University Press.
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- [31] Interview with UN Special Rapporteur. April 2020.
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- [33] Trollbusters is at: <https://yoursosteam.wordpress.com/about/>
- [34] Fish, M. (2002) Islam and Authoritarianism. *World Politics* 55), 4-37 Fish contends that predominantly Muslim societies are less democratic than others. Although they are not more prone to political violence, less secular or have less societal trust, the key difference is how they treat women. "Individuals who are more accustomed to rigidly hierarchical relations in their personal lives may be less prone to resist such patterns of authority in politics. The generalization applies to the wielders of authority as much as to the objects. One of Martin Luther King's favorite sayings was that in order to hold a man down, one needed to stay down there with him. One might reformulate the adage as, in order to hold women down, a man needed to stay down there with them—meaning, of course, that oppression as a habit of life blocks the oppressor's own advancement and freedom."
- [35] UNICEF has run some campaigns on fatherhood but these have mostly been in the realm of public awareness rather than practical measures to improve the behavior of men. The issue tends to come up once a year around Fathers' Day. The UN has tackled the issue in some ways but mostly without considering misogyny. The UN Book Fatherhood and Family does not use the word in its 211 pages. Available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/301685445\\_Fatherhood\\_and\\_families/link/572200ef08ae586b21d3b847/download](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/301685445_Fatherhood_and_families/link/572200ef08ae586b21d3b847/download)
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