

Incel online communities, violence, and the construction of collective victimhood

CONFERENCE PUBLICATION

ECTC ADVISORY NETWORK CONFERENCE



This paper was presented at the 5th conference of the European Counter Terrorism Centre (ECTC) Advisory Network on terrorism and propaganda, 26-27 March 2024, at Europol Headquarters, The Hague. The views expressed are the authors' own and do not necessarily represent those of Europol.

DATE

26-27 March 2024

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INCEL ONLINE COMMUNITIES, VIOLENCE, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF COLLECTIVE VICTIMHOOD

Incel (“involuntary celibacy”) online communities are a collection of online spaces frequented by mostly heterosexual men who construct their identities over the perceived lack of romantic and sexual attention from women. In these communities, misogynist ideology and collective victimhood are central aspects of belonging. It is important to note that not all involuntarily without sex or relationships identify as incels. For most incels, appearance is the number one issue: they believe they are not attractive enough to interest women. For some, mental health issues and social and financial status also play an important role.



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This personal feeling of being unfairly left behind then becomes political; incels’ loneliness is seen as the fault of women being shallow and cruel and rejecting them. Incel misogyny is often justified with pseudo-scientific arguments, naturalising gender inequality as stemming from biology and evolution. Weakening of patriarchal power structures and feminism gaining more rights for women are seen as a negative development, and men are presented as victims of women and feminism in the modern world. An overall idea of most men being left behind and women and the most attractive men gaining all the positive sides of modern society is widespread in incel discussions, and the past is often presented as more connected and humane than the present.

Incel victimhood narratives

Incel victimhood narratives connect to a wider idea of male victimhood and “equality going too far”: many conservative populist and anti-feminist movements and figures promote the idea of masculinity being in crisis, and a return to patriarchy as a solution to this gendered uncertainty. In these narratives, masculinity becomes victimhood, and therefore an effective antagonistic political claim.

In addition to general ideas of male victimhood, incels also identify with a more specific incel victimhood in relation to society, women, and other men. Together with my colleague Shane Murphy (Dublin City University), we studied the way the 2021 Plymouth shooting was discussed on different incel online forums. The shooting was widely reported in the media as an incel attack, even though the perpetrator’s motives were unclear. In the first, confused moments after the attack, there was uncertainty on several incel forums on whether the attack truly was motivated by incel ideology, and how it should be interpreted. The discussions quickly grew into negotiations and disagreements over the role of violence and revenge in incelism: should political

violence be considered a valid way of either trying to change the world, or just revenge, or should it be condemned?

Those who viewed violence as a justified response to incel suffering were applauding the attack and hoping it would inspire other acts of violence. Those condemning incel political violence had several different reasons for their stance. For some, it was a practical one: incel violence would make other incels' reputation, and therefore situation, even more difficult. Many painted dystopian images of surveillance and control, mass arrests, and censorship. For others, mass violence was condemnable because it targeted people randomly, and especially one of the victims being a child was difficult to justify for many posters. Some stated that incel victimhood was in irreconcilable contradiction with victimising others; for them, incels and violence simply did not connect. In short, we saw that arguments relating to mass violence and its justification varied considerably, and differed between forums, but all of them centred around the idea of incels as victims.

This victimhood identification is central in my ongoing interview research with current and former incels, too. In these accounts, not fitting the ideal of masculinity isolated them from others. For many, incel identity connected to a wider feeling of being left out, and lacking intimate or romantic relationships was just a part of this loneliness. However, it became the most powerful symbol of being invalid and rejected by others. Incel ideology gave them an explanation and an object of blame: women and feminism. Even when the ideology made them hopeless and anxious, it also helped locate the blame outside of themselves.

Many of the former or current incels I interviewed told me they regret adopting the incel worldview, as it had been harmful to their own mental health. They believed their lives would have been much easier had they not come across incel communities at all. But despite this, they were struggling to change their thinking. Ideology proved to be sticky; even with considerable effort, changing social circles, and improving their lives, they still noticed that the unwanted misogynistic thoughts would rise to the surface. This highlights the need for expert help beyond individual therapy approaches to address hostile ideology.

While both interview and online data presentations of victimhood and suffering can be considered performative and strategic, and should not be taken at face value, it is also clear that identification to collective victimhood is a strong political force and a powerful experience. This experience should be understood better. It should also be critically approached: how is this victimhood constructed? In the victimhood experiences incels talk about, who or what are they exactly victims of? For example, in my interview data, many current or former incels talk about not fitting masculine ideals, being "too soft", and being bullied for this by their peers and their fathers, boys and men. Still, women became the enemy and the target of hate. Clearly, both existing misogynist narratives and the specific form of bitter misogyny in incel communities came in to explain these grievances and to provide ideology to attach to.

We should be able to understand this experience of victimhood, to acknowledge both the actual grievances and the *feeling* of injustice, while also critically examining the structures these narratives are situated in. We need to advance equality and challenge existing gendered power structures, while not validating and feeding into the affective idea of male victimhood.

Preventing misogynist violence requires understanding structural misogyny

When it comes to prevention of incel violence, it is important to acknowledge different forms of violence, and other harms caused by incel communities and male supremacist ideologies in general. Focusing only on the spectacular forms of mass violence leaves out other forms of violence, and also the ways these different forms of violence connect to each other. Where we draw the line between normal and worrying talks as much about ourselves as it does about the phenomena we are examining. Misogyny is a continuum, and focusing only on the most extreme forms of it obscures its structural nature and prevents us from effectively tackling the root cause.

All of the former or current incels I have interviewed have, at least at some point, had hostile, misogynist ideas about women. But there is a wide variety in how extreme and violent these beliefs are: some had violent revenge fantasies, whereas others' sexism does not differ considerably from basic, mainstream conservative gender ideology. All of them had at some point identified as incels. Should all of them be considered extremists? Should some of them? As far as I know, none of them ever committed violence. Most of them engaged in some form of hate speech online. Some just read online material and never even spoke about it to anyone else. Definitions guide the way violence prevention is approached, and especially when it comes to loose online communities, definitions are difficult. Instead of trying to define incels as a whole as extremist or not, I think taking a look into what we understand as extreme in the first place can help.

Often, violence against women is seen as belonging to a private sphere, whereas mass violence is connected to the public and political. In many cases, though, similar misogynist narratives feed into both. Misogyny is very much political, as we are seeing in the global backlash against women's rights and in the rise of 'anti-gender' politics. Vocal women and minorities are actively silenced and harassed online. When it comes to physical violence, misogyny, violent masculinity, and extremism are often connected. Violence against women often precedes and links to violent extremism. This gender aspect is often not recognised in policy work, and it is becoming more acknowledged in research only recently.

Strictly differentiating forms of violence conceals this important connection that should be taken into account in P/CVE work. Gender perspectives need to be acknowledged across different violent extremist ideologies, not only when it comes to incels. Here, different actors in the field of violence prevention would benefit from cooperation and learning from each other; for example, involving NGOs working in preventing violence against women and helping the victims of it could be beneficial.

It is important to note the connection incel misogyny and male supremacism have to mainstream ideas about gender. Misogyny is structural and present on all levels of society; it cannot, and should not, be isolated to fringe online movements. Considering misogyny as something happening somewhere else, or done by 'others', is exceptionalising incel misogyny and ignoring the strong connections it has to mainstream gender narratives and a long history of misogyny. Incel ideology is not created in a vacuum. Instead, mainstream structural misogyny enables it and feeds into it.