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## THE ALLURE OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM AS A PATHWAY TO MANHOOD

## Daniel IONIŢĂ\*

#### Abstract:

This article emphasizes the growing number of disenfranchised young men who turn to radicalization and extremism to attain and maintain certain hegemonic masculinities in a world of widening inequality and volatile future perspectives. Often, socio-economic grievances that affect achieving said masculinities are making individuals more prone to ideological indoctrination. Adopting extremist ideology may compensate for the perceived loss in maleness and androcentricity. In addition, the changing of gendered roles within the workforce is ushering in constant societal renegotiations on the idea of masculinity and its implied breadwinner role.

Consequently, another point of interest is how multiple extremist entities use this dynamic to promise and facilitate rites of passage into Manhood as a recruitment strategy in strict accordance with their own beliefs based on violence and misogyny. Starting from the use by the Far right of the "Crisis in Masculinity" and "Male Victimhood" narratives based on so-called wounded male role and ego by the various emancipation movements and continuing to Islamic State visual depictions of masculinity and tactics of gender-based violence manifested though a visual spectacle violent propaganda. No matter the ideological background, using violence offers a sense of security, in its narrow anachronic gender norms, to those who seek a model of masculinity via the use of violence.

This paper seeks to make use of the current understanding present in literature to offer another perspective on (1) the appeal of violence and radicalization among vulnerable young men who experience feelings of inadequacy and alienation and on (2) the mechanisms behind the co-opting of concepts such as "manly," "manliness" and "manhood" in the extremist meta-narratives.

The current understanding regarding the significance of gendered issues related to the rise of extremism in the world is limited and does not offer a one-size-fits-all solution to grasping the complexities of such a dynamic phenomenon. Therefore, this article aims to introduce the importance of further analysis of the relationship between gender and extremism as a path to understanding and ultimately finding effective exit strategies for those radicalized.

**Keywords:** *Violent extremism, masculinity, terrorism, misogyny, exit strategy.* 

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#### A man's world we fail to see: Violent extremism

At present, when it comes to countering violent extremism (CVE) and counterterrorism (CT), the concept of "gender" has little to do with men as a group and their specific traits and needs. Instead, in the literature, gender is often equated solely with women, women's rights, and their roles within the ecosystem of CVE.

The shortcomings in the field of gender aggravating factors of violent extremism can be summarized along two main lines. Firstly, for the longest time, in both areas of gender and security studies, the presence of women was neglected regarding their actual role within the extremism and terrorism context. They were mostly seen as victims and peacemakers and not as perpetrators or members of public institutions or NGOs. However, they represent a small percentage of that ecosystem, and their presence, seen mainly as a novelty or exception, draws most of the attention.

Secondly, numerous authors (such as Kimmel and Seidler) argue that limited attention has been attributed to men seen as men without having the conception that all men's lives are generic and normative, leading to a lack of knowledge regarding the male experience and male identity in the context of motivations and gender-related struggles.

We acknowledge that political violence is by no means an exclusively male prerogative; however, the participation of women is limited yet disproportionately present in analyses and CVE strategies, overshadowing the aspects regarding masculinity in the context of violent extremism (VE).

As a result, all elements that form the male experience, ranging from identity, status, and bonding within the broader context of radicalization, extremism, or terrorism, are left out of most policies addressing political violence.

It is challenging to tackle the extent of gender-related issues in the literature when many are overlooked or misstated. For example, opinions in the literature argue that "although most violent extremists are young men, there is little convincing research to suggest that ideals of masculinity and honor play a significant role in causing violent extremism" (Allan et al., 2015). Not only is the aspect of male experience unnoticed in the literature, but also discredited and made insignificant, leaving room for no further exploration.

The main research question that the present analysis focuses on is: if the *ideals of masculinity* were not an impactful part of politically-

motivated violence, what explains the presence of idealized types of masculinities in far-right narratives and jihadist propaganda?

As we will argue in this paper, masculinity is being instrumentalized by numerous extremist ideologies to attract and maintain the membership of the young male segment. We will explore the usage of the so-called *crisis of masculinity* and the male victimhood narratives that help instill the urgency of taking action and joining the extremist fight.

Furthermore, far-right narratives, as we will make the case, frame masculinity in terms of the traditional family and nation, appealing to idealized, traditional, hetero-normative forms of masculinities. The same applies in the case of the Islamic State propaganda that equates forms of masculinity and brotherhood with its religious and political aims and uses such depictions of masculinities models to attract recruits and motivate a form of moral superiority to the decadent West.

Another dimension that overshadows the role of masculinities is the focus on ideology when it comes to an understanding of the motivations that lead men on a violent path of extremism or terrorism. However, ideological tenets are not the (only) ones responsible for men joining and staying in extremist groups. The first to theorize this was Tore Bjørgo, who proposed that the main motivation for joining violent extremist groups is not ideology but "the offer of a visceral experience of male camaraderie and belonging" (Bjørgo, 2009, as cited in Kimmel, 2018 p. 7). The male aspects are involuntarily hidden through wording such as "individuals" in the strategic documents aimed at addressing VE, having the male component left unaddressed when the percentage of men involved in violent extremism or terrorism is a majority.

We do not argue that CVE practices or academic discussions should solely be seen or done through a masculinity perspective or that this perspective would offer a fits-all solution to radicalization. Radicalization and its drivers are a complex mechanism that cannot be explained through a simplistic approach overlooking root causes such as systemic inequality, political and socio-economic grievances, and many more. We only argue that amongst those grievances, there is a gendered component of emasculation and a need to restore lost Manhood that drives young men towards a radicalization path in the hope of a solution to disempowerment, exclusion, and alienation.

# Towards contemporary *manhood* and its (missing) rites of passage

To properly explore today's meaning behind *manhood* and the ways of *attaining* it, traditionally through cultural sanctions, ritual, or trials of skill and endurance (Gilmore, 1990), we must analyze what the modern day idea of masculinity is based on and what different fringe groups are trying to emulate.

We will use Schrock and Schwalbe's definition of manhood as membership within the gender group of men. This membership has to be constantly proven through efforts to show possession of a masculine self through the use of multiple socio-cultural signifiers. These efforts take the form of what has been conceptualized as *manhood acts*. In their view, all manhood acts are about claiming privilege, eliciting deference, and resisting exploitation.

From an anthropological perspective, *manhood* had always been tied to social proof, whether through feats of strength, bravery, or skill. Becoming a man has been, in many cultures, a clear, socially accepted milestone in the life of a young boy that could be pinpointed to an exact moment.

It is essential to mention that in such cultures, there is an underlying androcentricity that comes with clearly defined gender roles and hierarchies. However, in today's world, especially in the west, androcentricity is renegotiated with every societal change.

As Gilmore observed, manhood is based on three pillars: procreating, providing, and protecting in most societies. The inability to perform these roles lessens or invalidates the identity of men. Considering that gender is performative, it cannot be a taken for granted (Butler, 1990). Manhood has been, historically, in numerous societies, fragile in nature, as it requires constant reiterating.

Having no longer clear modern-day rites of passage, young boys are faced with finding their coming-of-age milestones under the gender role norms, either through copying existing societal models from their peers or complete reinvention. The media provides a set of signifying enactments that can offer examples of manhood acts that are not always viable from a socio-economic standpoint.

We argue that the current outlook on masculinity is deeply rooted in archetypal representations of the past that are left without a proper place within the ever-changing modern world. Thus, the failure of "attaining masculinity" becomes a source of alienation and unfitness for the young boys by creating the breeding grounds for alternative forms of masculinities and ways of achieving them.

In this void of viable and attainable masculine models, disenfranchised youth adopt the models provided to them by violent extremist entities whose recruitment strategies are aimed precisely at their vulnerability. This example is not the only modern-day alternative masculinity; masculinity has softened and become more egalitarian (Anderson and McCormack, 2014). Modern day examples of masculinity offer socially enriching typologies, such as the *Caregiving Father and Husband* and many more that do not imply violence.

Situations of failure to reiterate masculine performance imposed by society lead to adverse psychological effects such as gender role stress (Eisler, 1988). The psychological distress is caused by the perceived violation of traditional gender roles norms. Often, grievances that affect achieving manhood leave youngsters more prone to feelings of shame, guilt, and inadequacy. Moreover, needing a way to shift blame outward for adverse events as a way of dealing with guilt and shame, they can become prone to ideological indoctrination (Efthim et al., 2001).

Adopting extremist ideologies compensates for the perceived loss of maleness and androcentricity and offers a purpose and identity. In addition, the changing gender roles within the workforce are ushering in constant societal renegotiations on the idea of masculinity and its implied breadwinner role.

### The political-economic perils of perceived emasculation

In *Healing from Hate*, Michael Kimmel writes, "Young men often come into extremist movements because they experience downsizing, outsourcing or economic displacement in specifically gendered ways: they feel emasculated" (2018, p. 19). As we previously mentioned, the western idea of masculinity implies the ability to fulfill the breadwinner role – the powerful provider. The concept of power is often equated to financial potency or the ability to provide in broader, more gender normative terms. Being stripped of this power, men find themselves, as Kimmel highlights, aching to prove their masculinity in other ways. Consequently, without other *opportunities* to assert their masculinity, disfranchised young men may find themselves involved in jihadist or right-wing extremism to find their masculinity and be accepted as real men by their peers.

Socio-economic changes happen faster than the cultural norms can catch up, leaving space for sentiments of confusion and inadequacy among young men. Moreover, in a world of widening inequality and volatile future perspectives in the workforce, it is easy to fall prey to community ideas, camaraderie, and the purpose offered by violent extremist organizations (VEO).

### Appealing to manhood as a recruitment tactic

There is a growing body of research into gendered messages aimed at men and the use of pejorative and submissive notions of womanhood to reinforce ideas about masculinity. The far-right makes use of self-victimizations tactics in order to promote extremism ideas of masculinity whereas "ISIS notably employs hypermasculine images to portray its fighters and promises access to sexual gratification, marriage, and guaranteed income as a reward for fighting" (Nowak, 2018 p. 190). These promises of masculinity-making experiences and objects are what draws marginalized men who cannot otherwise attain such status in their communities.

While recognizing the importance of analyzing the role of masculinities, most of the research on the topic looks predominantly at how women experience and are impacted by extremism, terrorism or the justice system's response to terrorism, overlooking the masculine perspective or the male experience as a whole. This situation could be caused by the implicit assumption that terrorists, victims of terrorism, and counterterrorism agents are primarily or exclusively male. Manhood as we will argue in the next parts, does play a significant role in extremist recruitment both in the right-wing and jihadist tactics.

# The crisis of masculinity and the instrumentalization of male victimhood in far-right narratives

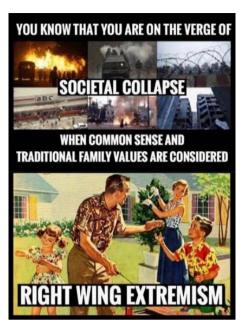
The world we live in has been dramatically and systematically changed regarding human dynamics. There were crucial change moments such as the Industrial Revolution – with its high population growth and rapid urbanization, women's rights movement – that questioned and renegotiated women's role within the society, the sexual revolution – with its liberation and revamping of sex and gender and the internet revolution that brought communication and information to the front of society, the rise of globalization, deindustrialization and recessions. All these changes fractured the traditional notions of masculinity and the position of men and led to what has been conceptualized as a crisis of masculinity. The crisis of masculinity is to be

seen as a crisis of the status of men in relation to femininity and the *unwanted* renegotiations in terms of the culturally accepted terms of hegemonic masculinity. The upward mobility of women in the labor market and their gaining of economic power and status is a shift in human power dynamics in human relations (Lemon, 1992).

Furthermore, the crisis implicates not only the binary gender perspective but also an economic inequality between men as some achieve wealth and prosperity, and others face poverty leading to polarization (Connell, 2005). As Barker (2005) states in *Dying to be Men: Youth, masculinity, and social exclusion*, young boys are under immense stress to be recognized as real men, and at the same time, they are struggling with equal opportunities regarding education, employment, and pay that render their efforts lacking. This idea is also present in *Narratives of Contemporary Male Crisis: The (Re)production of a National Discourse*, in which Walzer (2002) argues that middle-class men (the segment most affected by economic and cultural changes) are negatively reacting to the inclusion of women and other previously marginalized groups into the center of society. This reaction enables extremist ideologies based on anger and fear to propagate.

In its most benign forms, the concept of the crisis of masculinity spells out the end of a male-centric society favoring a more egalitarian gender paradigm. However, its malignant counterpart accuses systemic oppression of males and vilification of feminism as the source of evil towards the male identity and prosperity. This latter view is being used in the far-right narratives that decontextualize and exaggerate men's gender stress and strain to offer a possible ideological solution for endangered masculinity accusing male victimhood.

Far-right narratives center around the nation, heterosexual nuclear family concepts, and the traditional expectations that men are family patriarchs. These breadwinners are in constant competition with their fellow men to outperform them in the social position, affluence, and masculinity. In the far-right narratives, any mismatch between cultural expectations and social realities innately calls out for victimhood and a solid need to compensate for any loss of masculinity generated by socioeconomic inability. Moreover, such ideologies offer disfranchised men a way to validate their masculinity through performative acts of violence.



The far-right has inserted itself within internet culture and the usage of imageboards and memes in which the decline of traditional values is also victimizing masculinity (picture). The far-right frames through its narratives the patriarchal family as the center of the nation, shifting the public discourse toward causal connection between emasculation and male victimhood and the decay of Western values. Within the far-right ideology the roles of men and women are strictly and clearly defined. Failure to fulfill gender roles is being treated as a threat to the nation, capitalizing on

individuals` feelings of inability and inadequacy to incite political violence.

### The masculine aesthetics of the Islamic State/ISIS

In this section, we will reference the masculinities present in ISIS propaganda videos to identify the motivations behind the allure of joining jihadist groups. It is essential to highlight that, as Friis (2015) points out, the videos that the western world gets to see are mere screen grabs that do not convey the entirety of the visual message due to the violent nature that cannot be portrayed on mainstream media. Moreover, the screen grabs do not offer insights into the motivations behind them, and it is often reinterpreted by the worldview of the broadcaster – either in the form of a state actor or media. Furthermore, we must remember that any visual depictions constitute a frame through which the world is not represented but interpreted.

The choices made in the visual communication of the Islamic State and, consequently, the western media portrayal of, make up a new reality. This reality is defined by contrasting perceptions, based on said visuals. The realities depicted may be inspirational and heroic to some and vicious and despicable to others. We will use Manni Crone's (2020) contributions to the subject to highlight how terrorist organizations such as the Islamic State *play and pray* on the traditional western (but not limited) expectations of Manhood via aesthetics of violence. By aesthetics

of violence, we mean the amalgamation of sensations produced by the visual media, primarily via video content, that communicate ideological and cultural messages to a predominantly male-centric audience. In her book "Frames of war: When is life grievable?" Butler further explores how frames of violence use narratives, sound, and visuals to convey their message.

Previously, Susan Sontag talked about the shock value present in modern-day photography; we argue that it holds for today's visual mediums that "aestheticize human suffering to satisfy a consumer demand" (Sontag, 1977 as cited in Butler, 2010, p.69). The virality of aestheticized violence is seen in the terrorism propaganda starting in the 2010s and the rise in the notoriety of the Islamic State, and the instrumentalization of images of masculinity, brotherhood, and violence. Crone argues that ISIS visual communication produces not only a gendered perspective but also a gendered aesthetic interaction with gendered viewers. Crone suggests that the "ways in which gendered bodies are made visible or invisible in ISIS videos can enable gendered audiences to dream, feel pleasure or imagine themselves inhabiting those images." (2020, p. 574).

As depicted in propaganda videos and images. iihadist masculinity is hyper-masculine and presented in highly staged power stances that assert domination and power. It is highly adorned with objects of strength and control - military gear, AK-47 rifles, cartridges, and tactical knives – to impose their righteous masculinity (picture).



Crone argues that "weapons are only passive instruments, but things endowed with agency and capacity to rouse desire." (2020, p. 583).

The videos do not depict any presence of women and center only on men, their gear, and their interactions. The jihadist masculinity revolves around brotherhood, camaraderie, and gender role restoration. Men are presented in close groupings suggesting the enjoyment of male bonding without the disturbing presence of women.

Crone reinterprets the video and the previous focus on its contents and argues that the interaction between the viewer and the videos goes beyond rational and emotional and resides to the carnal too.

She suggests that through the lens of the carnal, we can see the pivotal role of the aesthetic recruitment to violent extremism. We fully agree and argue that this gendered aspiration for violence and domination present in online propaganda is not sufficiently explored in combating recruitment and radicalization.

This alluring gendered fantasy is present in Brown's (2018) theory regarding using archetypes such as *Muslimwoman* and *Wariormonk* in ISIS propaganda. The *Muslimwoman*, as Brown puts it, offers a symbolic embodiment of home *life* through the servitude of women and strict dependence on male counterparts. The *Muslismwoman* tends to define the role of both women and men outside the battleground. The main characteristics of this archetype reside in purity, modesty, and non-violence. The latter is compensated by the *Warriormonk's* skill and determination on the battlefield and the subsequent glorification of the war effort reinforcing the status of men as protectors worthy of praise and rewards – by protecting the *Muslim woman's* way of life; the *Warriormonk* is entitled to compensation and reinforcement of his masculinity.

#### Conclusion

The present research focused on identifying reasons why a growing number of male youths choose violent forms of proving their manhood and why violent extremist and terrorist groups are capitalizing so efficiently on this gendered vulnerability. First, we explained that masculinity was never something that, once socially proved, was there to stay, as it needed constant acts of proving, known as manhood acts.

Secondly, we made the point that in the absence of clear rites of passage, those acts of manhood, under economic hardships, changing gender norms, and performative gender role stress, could take on alternative forms of violent masculinity provided as models by extremist and terrorist ideologies.

Numerous forms of extremist and terrorist propaganda weaponize masculinity in the so-called decay of western values and reinstate anachronistic ideals of masculinities that no longer fit within the globalized socio-economic context and come against the numerous emancipation movements that pave the way to a gender-egalitarian society.

These fringe alternatives come from a highly complex mechanism of deconstruction of the current state of the gender relationships and reinstate the *lost* world centered around the man. These models of

masculinity are made into central ideological building blocks as they are what form the *traditional family* and, by extension, the *nation* in far-right ideology. The same is to be said about jihadist propaganda. The alternative masculinity in the form of the *warriormonk* archetype represents the ideological fundament that defines women's roles and human interactions.

As iterated in extremist and terrorist talking points, the role of women is to be set back to whatever past form that allows for the man to retake his central part in procreating, providing, and protecting. Any failure, no matter the cause, whether systemic or at an individual level, will be attributed to the *victimization* of men and will be instrumentalized further to coagulate new supports and mainstream the extremist ideology.

Briefly and by no means exhaustively, this article explored the subject of manhood and how masculinities represent a crucial element in the propagation of violent extremism. We argued that the feelings of inadequacy, alienation, and powerlessness young men feel due to socioeconomic change, and gender hierarchy renegotiations are part of the radicalization process that leads to violent extremism. We also offered arguments for co-opting concepts such as masculinity and manhood in the extremist meta-narratives.

We argue that the current understanding regarding the significance of gendered issues related to the rise of extremism in the world is somewhat limited, tends to overlook the male experience, and does not offer a one size fits all solution to grasp the complexities associated with such a dynamic phenomenon. We state that additional attention to extremist portrayals of virile masculinity, brotherhood, and gendered fantasies of dominance could better clarify why young males find violent extremism appealing.

We conclude by reiterating the importance of further analysis of the relationship between gender and extremism (focusing on the previously ignored male experience) as a path to understanding and ultimately finding effective prevention and exit strategies.

#### **Acronyms:**

**CT** - Counterterrorism

**CVE** - Countering Violent Extremism

**NGO** - Non-Governmental Organization

**PVE -** Preventing Violent Extremism

**VE -** Violent Extremism

**VEO** - Violent Extremist Organization

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