

**cve**

Center mot  
våldsbejakande  
extremism



# **Men, Masculinity and Violent Extremism**

*A Summary*

## **The Swedish Center for Preventing Violent Extremism (CVE)**

**– Collected knowledge. Collaborative efforts.**

CVE strengthen prevention against violent extremism in Sweden, and ultimately prevent ideologically motivated crimes and terrorism. CVE is an independent national centre within The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå).

Author: Lucas Gottzén

Cover photo: Swedish Police Authority

©The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention, Brå 2024

[www.cve.se](http://www.cve.se)

# Preface

The Swedish Center for Preventing Violent Extremism (CVE) and the Swedish Gender Equality Agency (Jämy) appointed Professor Lucas Gottzén at Stockholm University to examine the research field on men, masculinity and violent extremism. Gottzén analyses research published between 2000 and 2022 on masculinity relating to the Swedish Security Service's definition of violent extremism: violent left-wing extremism, violent right-wing extremism and violent Islamist extremism. Gottzén also introduces a new concept – violent misogyny – to highlight how hatred against women could be a driving force in extremism. Currently, the Swedish Security Service does not define violent misogyny as an independent extremist environment.

Please see the [Swedish version of the report](#), for a full reference list.



Scan to read or download the  
Swedish version of the report.

# What is masculinity?

In the social sciences, masculinity is commonly understood as culturally and historically contingent ideals and practices related to what it means to be a man. These various masculinities are affected by material and organisational factors, such as modes of production, economic policies and globalisation processes. Social background, including ethnicity, class, sexuality and age, also influences how men enact masculinity. Some scholars argue that masculinity can be enacted by women. Importantly, masculinity is relational; it is always enacted in relation to women and other men.

# What is the role of masculinity in violent extremism?

Research on violent extremism with a gender perspective has mainly focused on women, but in recent decades a small field has emerged focusing on men and masculinity. Most research has centred on right-wing and Islamist extremism and terrorism. Studies on masculinities within left-wing extremism are scarce. Research on misogynist extremism is growing, particularly regarding misogynist incels (involuntary celibates).

Violent extremist groups may differ significantly on political issues such as race and nationalism, but they often share similar views on masculinity. Most groups embrace conservative views on men and their role in society. These views and practices exist on a continuum: many groups endorse traditional views of men, while others are open to men expressing softer traits. Some groups even hold positive views on gender equality.

# Violence and masculinity

Violence is idealised within extremist groups. It is often seen as proof of masculinity, and a violent lifestyle serves to distinguish oneself from others. This violence typically targets other men, political opponents or symbols of opponents. Violent extremists may further encourage or accept violence against women. Notably, lone actors have often engaged in intimate partner violence prior to their terrorist attacks.

Violence frequently appears in extremists' propaganda, fostering a militant masculinity. Both right-wing and Islamist extremists feature their male activists dressed in black uniforms or military apparel, using visual techniques that depicts them as threatening and dangerous. Politically and religiously motivated violence may be a way of defending one's manhood or restoring one's status as a dominant, hypermasculine man.

Violence may also be used to portray the enemy as morally inferior. Far-right militias view patrolling national borders, neighbourhoods or asylum centres as justified responses to sexual violence allegedly committed by migrants or human traffickers against women.

In Islamist extremism, violent jihad is seen as a justified means of avenging the Muslim world – particularly its men – from the perceived emasculation inflicted by the West. The violent defence of one's honour is considered a male responsibility.

## **How does masculinity contribute to radicalisation?**

Radicalisation processes are relatively similar in different violent extremist groups. Individuals often move from exposure to controversial opinions to more extreme versions of these notions through processes of normalisation, acclimation and dehumanisation. Young men do not necessarily engage in violent extremism for political reasons. Often, it stems from a search for community, excitement, identity and similar personal needs. These can be linked to masculinity; violent extremism becomes a way of expressing masculinity. Engaging in violent extremism may be a way of coping with shame stemming from a sense of 'having failed as a man'. Once within extremist groups, young men develop extremist ideas.

Similarly, deradicalisation might not primarily be ideologically motivated but may be affected by other structural or personal changes, such as becoming a father. Radicalisation into violent Islamist extremism, however, seems to be more driven by ideology than, for example, violent right-wing extremism.

## **Violent extremism and anti-feminism**

Violent extremist ideologies often include anti-feminism. Feminism is frequently regarded as having gained excessive influence in society, threatening the traditional heterosexual family, undermining white men's privileges and hindering men's access to sex. Violent Islamist extremists see feminism, along with sexual liberation, as a Western idea that risks leading Muslims in the West astray.

## **Violent extremism and misogyny**

Misogyny is central in much violent extremism, which can be linked to conservative understandings of gender evident in extremist groups, where men and women are seen as fundamentally different and are expected to have distinct roles in society and activism. In violent extremism, misogyny is not just about being 'against women' but encompasses various views and values, including seeing women as inferior, asserting men's right to sex, objectifying women, accepting rape, praising traditional gender roles where women are assigned specific tasks and need 'protection', and believing

that gender-equality and women's rights have gone too far. These points relate to fundamental perceptions of both women and men and their place in society. Misogyny may take various forms but often aims to control women's sexuality and to restore male supremacy in both public and private spheres. Violent extremism thus intersects with issues of gender equality and gender-based violence, not least since political violence and violence against women often overlap. Among right-wing extremists, a professed acceptance of women's rights may be viewed as a distinctly Western cultural value and used to criticise Muslims.

Misogyny is particularly central to manosphere ideologies. According to misogynist incels, women are inferior and only attracted to high-status men. Incels see themselves as especially unattractive and genetically disadvantaged, convinced they will never succeed on the sexual market. This worldview may lead to the endorsement of deadly violence against women.

## Restoring masculinity

Many violent extremists are united in the belief of a restored manhood. Men drawn to violent extremist groups often seem to suffer from a feeling of having 'failed as a man' on a personal level, having faced challenges living up to cultural standards of masculinity, particularly financial success. In this context, political violence may serve as a way of coping with social marginalisation. This feeling of failure appears to be particularly present among lone actors. Radicalisation into violent Islamism can sometimes constitute a shift in status in relation to other masculinities. Becoming a militant jihadist may represent a transformation from perceived inferior masculinity in the West to a masculinity with high status in Islamist environments.

According to many violent extremist ideologies, masculinity in society is threatened by feminism, non-white men, Western culture and women's sexual liberation. In response, these groups call for 'remasculinisation' – the idea of restoring supposedly lost masculine traits or social positions. Political and religious violence thus becomes not only a means by which individuals can reclaim their status as hyper-masculine men but also a political strategy to secure male supremacy and men's (or the extremist group's) threatened dominance in society. Remasculinisation efforts may also include a healthy lifestyle, exercise, abstention from pornography and spending time with other men.

In violent left-wing extremist environments, violence is not a societal project of remasculinisation largely because antifeminism and misogyny are not central to their ideologies. For individuals, however, engaging in political violence may serve as a way to prove one's masculinity.

# Masculinity and the prevention of violent extremism

Methods used to prevent men's violence against women may be useful for combating violent extremism. Since sexism, misogyny and traditional gender perceptions often feature in violent extremism, gender-transformative approaches could prove fruitful in countering violent extremism efforts as well.

**cve**

Center mot  
våldsbejakande  
extremism

+46 8 527 44 200 • [info@cve.se](mailto:info@cve.se) • [cve.se](http://cve.se)