

RAN Y&E

30/07/2022

CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN Working Group Meeting

31 May to 1 June 2022, Lisbon, Portugal

Gender-specific approaches in PVE

Preventive work for girls in and around schools

Key outcomes

In recent years, practitioners of our RAN Youth & Education (Y&E) Working Group observed an increase and a normalisation of misogynist narratives and behaviour amongst their male pupils, undermining the democratic rights of gender equality. This is perceived as problematic for the field of preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) because various extremist movements have sexism and gender inequality at the core of their ideology, and thus benefit from the normalisation of such discourses. Moreover, resilience building programmes to meet the specific developmental needs of girls^{1,2}, are still often reported to be a blind spot in preventive youth work. After all, many initiatives are aimed at boys and young men, as they cause more visible trouble when they radicalise or become vulnerable to radicalisation.

On 31 May and 1 June, the RAN Y&E Working Group assembled educators, youth workers and related experts from around Europe for a working session about this topic. The purpose of this meeting was to: 1) exchange insights on the role of misogyny within different extremist ideologies; 2) share tips on how to provide targeted programmes for girls to build resilience (against both misogynist behaviour and extremist recruitment); and 3) discuss how to facilitate dialogue for respect and understanding between boys and girls.

The following key outcomes were identified:

- Understand which **specific ideas about gender roles extremist ideologies have**, and get to know the popular discourses that accompany these ideas.
- Preventive interventions aimed at building resilience specifically for girls are key, but in addition interventions aimed at **fostering gender equality and respecting (sexual) boundaries** for boys are essential when countering and preventing these extremist gender narratives.
- Messages within **recruiting narratives are tailored to very gender-specific needs**, so try to meet these needs within your practice, before extremists do.
- **With your pupils, look critically at gender narratives** that seem rather innocent at first sight but hide a darker and extremist view behind them. Make sure the youngsters recognise when they are being targeted, and pre-expose them to these narratives to protect them against a potential future threat of extremist narratives. This follows the idea of the so-called inoculation theory.
- Be aware that **progressive ideas about gender are not accepted in every family or community**. Youngsters might feel torn between the values of their family and the values outside home, so act carefully and try to engage together with the family or community.

¹A safe space for example, as discussing certain topics is easier without boys around.

See: <https://www.sociaalwerkknederland.nl/?file=17453&m=1559557255&action=file.download>

- **Create understanding between the genders** about their specific perspectives, experiences and challenges related to what it means to be a boy, girl, or neither of these, and how to behave with each other. There are several creative ways to facilitate such dialogue.

This paper will first address the topics raised during the setting-the-scene panel, where the connection between extremism and sexism has been explained, as well as the consequences for recruitment and efforts to counter this. Then, we elaborate on the different challenges and recommendations for teachers and youth workers defined during this meeting.

Inoculation theory

Throughout the meeting, the inoculation theory was mentioned several times as a means to raise awareness and increase knowledge about extremist recruitment. Many narratives and online content appear to be rather innocent but tap into underlying racist or sexist messages. The goal of this inoculation process is to make youngsters acquainted with the malevolent background of the discourses they come in contact with. By deconstructing these narratives, identifying buzz words and making connections, the extremist motives behind certain narratives could be exposed.

In order to act against extremist ideologies, these ideological environments thus have to be understood well. Youngsters can then become aware of when they are being exposed to propaganda by getting to know the vocabulary and arguments, and understand how these messages are meant to play into their emotions. This is especially important now, regarding algorithms on social media that tend to promote gradually more radical content to users.

The need for gender-specific approaches in preventive work with youth

A conscious gender-specific approach in prevention work is perceived as important for several reasons. In literature and in practitioners' testimonies, the following became clear:

- Because terrorism is often viewed as only perpetrated by men, with a perception of women being passive, the role of women in extremist movements and the radicalisation of girls has been for too long a blind spot.
- **Young women, just like young men, need activities to develop positively in life**, which eventually help them not to engage in extremist activities.
- **Youth work activities are often aimed at boys** and young men because they tend to cause more problems in terms of public disorder, while girls' problems might be less visible. The number of initiatives is thus often unequally divided between boys and girls. Also, if there are mixed-gender initiatives, these might not always feel like a safe space for the girls if the boys in the group are more dominant. This needs to be taken into account, and activities for girls-only are needed for such a safe space.
- Initiatives for boys are often aimed at sports, while initiatives for girls are often aimed at art. Stereotypes like this may cause **some boys and some girls to feel like their needs are not being met**, and makes them not want to participate.
- When developing activities or programmes for young people, be aware of stereotypes and try not to reaffirm them. Some gender-specific stereotypes are quite persistent, which may cause some youngsters to feel their concerns and needs are not being taken seriously. There are actual differences between the genders, but take grievances seriously. For example: men can also suffer from body shaming. Not taking such frustrations into account might cause resentment.

Highlights of the discussion

To start off the meeting, during a setting the scene panel, three speakers shared their views on how gender is ingrained in the ideology of various extremist movements. This overlap between the violent Islamist, violent right-wing and incel ideologies was discussed, as well as the consequences of these movements' ideas on gender for their recruitment methods. Participants stressed that **the normalisation of misogynist and sexist narratives in mainstream society feeds the breeding ground of radicalisation**, as these normalised discourses make it easy for recruiters of various extremist ideologies to tap into primed sentiments. Therefore, P/CVE practitioners should be aware of the connection of sexist narratives to radicalisation, and work on resilience building interventions to prevent and counter misogynist narratives.

During the discussion, the following key questions were addressed: 1) What is the role of women and the prevalence of misogynist views in different extremist ideologies like far-right extremism, violent Islamism and the incel movement? 2) What is the role of masculinity within these movements and how does this relate to misogyny? 3) How do extremist movements relate to gender narratives in their recruiting?

The role of women in extremist movements

- **Salafists promote a patriarchal system** where women are expected to always be obedient to their husband, devoting themselves to the upbringing and care of future jihadists. Also in the **far-right there is a preference towards women in the role of so-called 'trad wives'**, accompanied by a severe resistance against modern-day feminism and emancipation.
- Despite favouring a patriarchal system, both these ideologies claim to have a sense of empowerment in their views. They argue that gender equality is putting a double or triple burden on women, having to work on top of being a mother and a wife. These conservative views, and within these movements already extremist views, propose a simpler life for women within a complex reality.
- The role of women is slightly different within the **incel ideology, where hostile misogyny is at the centre of the ideology**, rather than the desire for a patriarchal society where women have a supporting role.
- It is however important to not merely focus on women as being the victims of these ideologies, as **plenty of women support these gender roles** and therefore contribute to the rise of these narratives. In addition, it was highlighted there are female leaders too, who often recruit other women.

Images of masculinity in extremist movements

- Within these extremist ideologies, the **recruiting narrative often uses idealistic and simplistic images of masculinity**, thereby tapping into insecurities and frustrations of young men. These images include, for example, physical strength, stoicism, confidence and being a breadwinner/ provider. The masculinity of disenfranchised men could then increase by joining the group.
- This **focus on hypermasculinity is often accompanied by misogyny**, anti-feminism or adverse behaviour towards "non-masculine" men. This tendency fits in the narrative of "rejecting modernity" and its fallacies such as feminism and emasculation of society.

The role of gender in recruitment

- Extremist movements like Islamic State, for example, have specific communication strategies towards women and girls. It is thus **important to know what about this narrative is attractive for young women** and why they go along with it to be able to design effective P/CVE interventions for girls.
- The extremist propaganda is being sold as empowerment for vulnerable youngsters. These vulnerabilities play out differently for boys and girls.

Challenges and recommendations

During the breakout sessions, participants discussed several challenges when it comes to preventive work for girls and resilience building against sexist and misogynist narratives. Three main challenges and recommendations are shared below:

1. How can you create a safe space for constructive and empathetic dialogue between boys and girls about gender issues?

If there is no safe space to discuss sensitive topics, such as gender roles and sexuality, youngsters will look for answers elsewhere. This creates an opening for on- and offline recruitment by extremist milieus. Society should therefore provide a safe space to discuss these sensitive topics.

- Participants argued that in order to facilitate an environment where youngsters feel free to share their experiences and opinions on these topics, it is important **to set up clear rules and boundaries** for the discussion. These rules, as well as the consequences of breaking them, should be constructed in a participatory way. The youngsters should determine these rules themselves so they have a sense of ownership and responsibility to abide.
- Moreover, participants suggested the idea that these discussions could be moderated by a slightly older peer who can relate and create an older brother/sister dynamic.
- Also, discussions about these topics should be announced and contextualised well enough, in order to assure cooperation from the group. This could be done by relating the topic to current affairs. If a sensitive topic like this is being raised out of the blue, some pupils might feel surprised or targeted, causing resistance.
- Lastly, it was also recommended to **actively proclaim the democratic values of gender equality** and respectful dialogue within the policy of the organisation or school. For further information regarding this challenge, we refer to two previous RAN papers ^(3,4).

Relevant practice on creating safe spaces

Ey, schatje! (NL) is an educative game to play with youngsters. Throughout the game, various questions related to relationships and intimacy are discussed in groups. The purpose is getting the participants to open up and take perspective of the others. Eventually, the goal is to reduce sexual harassment by increasing understanding and positive communication between peers. Also, before the game starts, they set their own rules based on their consensus.

GO! Atheneum Antwerp (BE) is a large high school that has dealt with radicalising youngsters during the period when many of them travelled to Syria to fight. Ever since, this school has committed itself to develop and practice an effective everyday approach to prevent and counter any kind of radicalisation. During this meeting, a video was shown with a series of testimonies of various teachers, who explained why and how gender equality is at the core ethos of the school and shared their challenges and approaches on how to address this sensitive topic.

2. How can you work on resilience to sexist narratives in and around schools?

As sexist narratives are part of several extremist ideologies, it is essential to work on resilience to prevent and counter them. This includes both knowledge development on these type of narratives and how extremists use these in their recruitment tactics, as empowerment efforts focusing on positive identity development, increasing self-esteem, and acquiring social and life skills.

- Participants underlined the importance of **educating legal literacy, as part of citizenship education** to our youth. Many young people are not aware of laws on human rights or gender equality, and what these mean in terms of behavioural boundaries. They do not know what their own rights are, and what the rights of the other

⁽³⁾ [RAN YF&C: Discussing Taboos and Controversial Issues: Practical guidelines for youth workers](#)

⁽⁴⁾ [RAN YOUNG: Holding difficult conversations](#)

person are, meaning how the law protects them, and also others. Being legally educated makes boys and girls more resilient to sexist and misogynist narratives.

- The extremist propaganda is being sold as empowerment for vulnerable youngsters. These vulnerabilities play out differently for boys and girls. For example, **feelings of power, pride and community thus have to be adequately addressed**, with gender taken into account, in order to not leave that space open for extremists.
- The **inoculation theory** was highlighted as an important method for teachers and youth workers to use, to make the youth resilient against extremist narratives, in the same manner we become resilient to diseases by using vaccines. Please find an elaborate explanation of this theory in the box on page 2 of this paper.

Relevant practices on resilience building

Elnace Academy (NL) is a buddy project for young girls in vulnerable situations. The buddies function as “big sisters” and help the girls in various aspects of their life. Themes these coaches assist with are education & work, resilience & self-awareness, culture & identity, or talent development. The goal is to give every girl the opportunity to develop their qualities, nurture their ambitions and prepare them for the future.

MoveIn (ES) is an NGO that provides sports and play programmes to various schools, sports clubs and youth work organisations to foster protective factors against radicalisation. They have many different exercises to play with the pupils, and each of these exercises has an educational component. Several of those exercises are specifically focused on the value of gender equality, and they were presented during this meeting.

3. How can you reach girls for your activity who are rather isolated and held inside at home?

Participants stated that not allowing girls to develop and express themselves and get educated is a form of soft violence. Therefore, it is key to reach these girls. Some families prefer to keep the girls inside the house as much as possible. Girls who live that isolated could be very vulnerable to (online) extremist content and recruitment. Other families are not very keen for their daughters to discuss topics like gender and sexuality or to participate in empowering activities outside school. This causes a dilemma for the girls between the opinions at home and the values within the school or wider society.

- When trying to engage difficult-to-reach girls, it is key to **involve the families**. Involve and inform the family and community about your activity. This means you should explain them what the initiative is for, take away their concerns and highlight the value of the participation for the girls.
- **Send the right people**: when trying to engage difficult-to-reach girls in your activities, make sure to bring in peers (girls), or women, to be in continuous contact with the family, about the initiative and the participation of their daughters. These girls and women are in the best place to explain to them what the activity is about, and take away potential concerns they might have. It could also help to always bring someone from the school, as this is an institution that is easier for them to trust.
- Involving and contacting the family is not a one-time effort; you need **to spend time with them** in order to build trust. This could mean you come back on a weekly basis, ring the doorbells, make contact, listen to them and engage with them, and be patient.
- Be aware that progressive ideas about gender are not accepted in every family or community yet. Youngsters might then feel torn between the values of their family and the values outside home, which might eventually cause identity crises.

Relevant practice on engaging difficult-to-reach girls

Hijabs & Hat-tricks (IE) is a project of the organisation Sport Against Racism Ireland, which has many different initiatives. This is a football team specifically for young Muslim girls, where they have a safe space to practice their hobby. Besides this, the organisation has various initiatives contributing to the empowerment of its pupils, integration and social cohesion. By integrating in this apart, the participants have an entry to the organisation as a whole.

Follow-up

- This meeting was largely focused on preventive work for girls and preventive work for boys and girls together. But the need for a gender-specific meeting about boys was repeatedly stressed. Participants indicated that misogynist behaviour from boys might often come from insecurity, discontent, and being uninformed and unaware of the impact of their behaviour. How can we then educate and empower boys to be more confident in a positive way, instead of being resentful?
- The connection was made between social media behaviour, sexual transgressive behaviour and its effect on gender issues. Think of porn, revenge porn, exposing or self-harm trends, and more online expressions and issues related to radicalisation on incel forums, for example. A follow-up on what this means for P/CVE programmes should thus be organised.

Further reading

- RAN YF&C (2018): [The role of gender in extremism and P/CVE](#)
- RAN YF&C (2019): [Discussing Taboos and Controversial Issues: Practical guidelines for youth workers](#)
- RAN YOUNG (2020): [Holding difficult conversations](#)
- RAN Small-scale meeting (2022): [\(Young\) Women's Usage of Social Media and Lessons for Preventing Violent Extremism](#)
- RAN Issue paper (2022): [Extremists' Targeting of Young Women on Social Media and Lessons for P/CVE](#)