Y&E

02/08/2023
CONCLUSION PAPER
Working Group Meeting
12-13 June 2023, Berlin, Germany

How can youth practitioners deal with current polarisation around masculinity?

Key outcomes

The past year, practitioners in the RAN Youth & Education (Y&E) Working Group repeatedly flagged the need to discuss the challenges they face regarding increasingly worrisome behaviour of their male pupils towards their female peers. In the classroom and youth organisations, as well as online, debates about masculinity and gender are omnipresent and often very polarised up until the point that concerns have risen about radicalisation in the so-called manosphere online environment. Many young men are seeking self-improvement and find support in the narrative that promotes 'hypermasculinity'. However, there are extreme fringes of this narrative, which are said to promote misogynistic and even anti-democratic values, ideas and actions.

On 12 and 13 June, RAN Y&E convened a Working Group meeting in Berlin for practitioners in youth work and education to get more insight into this phenomenon, so they can get a better understanding what causes the worrisome behaviours they see, and discuss whether and to what extent this hypermasculinity narrative is a concern for preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE). Some of the key outcomes were the following:

- We are looking at a relatively 'new' phenomenon: harmful excesses of the manosphere, an online environment focusing on men's issues, often promoting a hypermasculine narrative. Teachers and youth workers need more awareness, understanding and knowledge to recognise excesses within that narrative and deal with them. Perhaps it is better to say that heated discussions about masculinity have been re-contextualised rather than that they are new, as gender roles have been a topic of discussion throughout history.

- There were various reports of situations with problematic or aggressive behaviour by boys, individually or in groups. A better understanding of harmful anti-feminist, anti-gender narratives and influencers puts these incidents in a broader societal context. With this knowledge, youth practitioners can contextualise such incidents, act upon them better and understand that it is not personal per se. However, such incidents can take violent and extremist proportions, so attention is needed.

- By far not all young men who are interested in manosphere-related narratives radicalise. It is important to note that there is a large amount of superficial content sharing, edgy humour, provocation and even inspiration for positive personal development like physical health. However, these innocent aspects could function as entry points for more fringe content, ideas and eventually even recruitment.

- There is a 'radicalisation potential' in some parts of the hypermasculinity narrative. There are potential overlaps between known extremist ideologies such as the far-right, Islamism, incel ideology and new hybrid ideologies such as anti-institutionalism. This overlap concerns topics including anti-feminism but also anti-democracy, xenophobia and anti-Semitism.

- Masculinity, in all forms, good or bad, is related to our culture and society. So, parents, media, popular culture and youth professionals are all embedded in the problem and can be part of the solution. Early prevention is where society can foster individual and group resilience towards radicalisation and extremist recruitment. Professionals in youth and education can secure a positive social environment for youngsters where resilience can be strengthened and vulnerabilities can be mitigated.

In this paper, we will first share some main aspects of hypermasculinity and the manosphere that were presented in this meeting, including several principles and dynamics of the hypermasculinity narrative, constituent groups and ideological influences. Then, we will elaborate on the challenging cases practitioners have faced regarding this topic, and the discussion that followed about which attitudes and actions are a concern for P/CVE. Moreover, to understand the extremism coming forth out of parts of the hypermasculinity narrative, we have discussed the current social and emotional struggles of young men as well as their needs and grievances. Finally, we formulated recommendations and approaches youth practitioners can consider.

Highlights of the discussion

1. Hypermasculinity and related concepts

During the explanatory presentation on the phenomenon, practitioners learned about several aspects of the hypermasculinity narrative, the bigger societal context wherein that narrative proliferated, and how it has become popularised so quickly among youngsters. This presentation was given by a researcher who also educates youngsters and practitioners on this topic.

Discourse on men and women
Within the hypermasculinity narrative, people promote strict traditional gender roles, which according to them have been undermined by feminism. Men are said to be the victims of feminism, which has given women too much freedom and power, and has led to the oppression and 'feminisation' of men in Western society. To restore the 'natural order', women should thus submit to men again, and men should be providers that are dominant, stoic and ready to fight.

Ideological influences
Certain aspects of the hypermasculinity narrative overlap with various fringe ideologies that are of concern in P/CVE. For example, various far-right manifestos have referenced the alleged 'feminisation of men' and malicious influences of feminism. Moreover, there is also crossover between this narrative and Islamist discourses that promote ultraconservative gender roles, and praises to extremist Islamist movements on how they treat and impose laws on women, for example in Afghanistan. Finally, there is also a significant overlap with more recent anti-establishment movements, as the hypermasculinity narrative often opposes 'the Matrix', entailing the current system of economy and government, which is said to be detrimental for the prosperity of (men in this) society. This can range from mainstream media to welfare, the education system and liberal democracy.

The online dynamic
Various social media influencers have been smartly tapping into the hardships and insecurities of young men in today's society. Due to a high prevalence of manosphere ([1]) content on platforms such as TikTok and YouTube, the hypermasculinity narrative has become widely popularised in recent years. Main voices within this online environment range from (pseudo-)academics on the 'intellectual Dark Web', to people who promote schemes for financial independency and content creators commenting on current events. They have often built a career by using this discourse in their financial favour and, in some cases, presumably even (intentionally) share misogynistic discourse in order to provoke, 'go viral' and grow their following.

([1]) Institute for Strategic Dialogue: The 'Manosphere'

European Commission

2. Experiences from practitioners and discussion

2.a. Cases

Participants in this meeting were challenged to share and discuss their experiences with (perceived) hypermasculine behaviour. The following examples come from their experiences in their daily work, and they show a range from seemingly innocent incidents to more severe cases with violent and extremist indicators:

- young men who are making, sharing, consuming and/or commenting on online hypermasculinity content;
- young men who (vocally) refuse to respect or listen to female youth practitioners;
- young men who are bullying and excluding peers when they are perceived as not masculine enough;
- young men who harass women and girls in online spaces;
- young men who self-harm;
- in-person harassment and abuse of female peers, teachers, siblings and family members;
- ideologically driven partner violence;
- homophobic incidents towards peers and refusing to come to school when the topic of LGBT is addressed;
- unhealthy(!) fixation on physique, poor mental health and suicidality in men and boys;
- extremist pupils who glorify mass shooters or encourage using violence towards women and others who don't fit their norms;
- extremist attacks of known lone actors and groups referring to aspects of the hypermasculinity narrative.

2.b. Concerns for P/CVE

Using a generally utilised definition for 'extremism', the participants discussed a possible application to their experiences with hypermasculine behaviour. They agreed that this type of extremism concerns:

- harmful ideologies or movements, with narratives that define **men (in-group)** with a supremacist ideology *(e.g. men are superior to women, men are feminised by narratives such as LGBTQI+, women, BIPOC emancipation efforts, etc.)*;

- everyone who is against their ideology *(e.g. women, feminists, gender activists, men who are seen as non-masculine, etc.)* as the **out-group**;

- a portrayal of the outgroup as **an existential threat to the in-group** *(e.g. "the emancipation of women has led to declining birth rates, and thus the extinction of our race")*;

- the perceived existential threat **justifies and incites intolerance, intimidation, hatred, aggression** and even **violence against the outgroup** *(e.g. Utøya, Christchurch, Bratislava)*.

The participants labelled extremist manifestations of the hypermasculinity narrative as 'extremist misogyny' or 'male supremacy'. The group concluded, according to the definition and examples above, that in some cases manifestations of this narrative could thus be considered of concern within P/CVE. However, it is essential not to stigmatise the young men who are drawn to the hypermasculinity narrative. Many young men might find support in that narrative and get inspired to improve their lives, without it becoming problematic towards others. Participants argued that it is rather difficult to label certain non-violent behaviours of their pupils as extremist (hence the debate about non-violent ideologies ([2])), and emphasised that as a practitioner it is essential to make sure to keep being there for the youngster in order to divert them from violent radicalisation.

([2]) RAN Overview paper (2021): Between extremism and freedom of expression: Dealing with non-violent right-wing extremist actors

3. Breeding ground and consequences for prevention

During this meeting, one of the youth workers presented his approach towards young men along the iceberg model. Above the waterline of the iceberg, we see the behaviour and attitudes that young men show. However, just as with every person, the bottom of the iceberg consists of emotions, grievances, self-image, expectations and insecurities that influence behaviour and attitudes. When behaviour is problematic and concerning, it is important to take the breeding ground into account and act upon those factors. These can be either internal or external push and pull factors. Ideally, the environment of the young person can already meet and mitigate these needs and grievances in primary prevention. During this meeting, the following risk factors were formulated:

- Having a sense of **identity threat** (see our previous conclusion paper ([3])) in the context of increasing public debate about gender and sexuality. New conceptions about masculinity might leave some young men feeling confused, unappreciated or even threatened in their identity, which can make them react defensively.
- Issues with establishing social, romantical and sexual **relationships**. High expectations and inability to deal with **rejection** might cause frustration and resentment. This frustration can be directed towards others (women with unreasonable standards or relationally successful men) or towards themselves (low self-esteem and self-pity). Moreover, unhealthy family situations, including frustrations about single parenthood, domestic violence or abuse, can create bad examples for one's own relational expectations.
- Worries and **pessimism** about one's own **future**; isolation, economic instability, having a lack of purpose, inability to start a family. This is related to personal or (perceived) societal **expectations**; the need to be a 'high-value man', physical presence, manliness and concerns about decreasing testosterone levels. Social media plays an important role in establishing these expectations. This discontent and pressure can create or amplify **mental health** issues.
- Black-and-white thinking, a **lack of empathy** and unwillingness to take perspective contribute to a mind state of intolerance towards others.
- Moreover, feelings of **not being included** or acknowledged **in a democratic society** also foster alienation from and resentment of this democratic mainstream.

Consequences for P/CVE

After discussing the breeding ground that underlies possible problematic behaviour inspired by hypermasculinity, the participants in this meeting have concluded some main take-aways to consider when addressing the topic of hypermasculinity with young people in primary prevention, both in youth work and education.

- A large part of the hypermasculinity narrative taps into **mental health** issues of young men in today's society, and this attention to mental health is essentially a rather positive development. However, it is essential to approach mental health issues positively, increase **emotional resilience** ([4]) and learn how to deal with failure and rejection instead of nurturing resentment. **Therefore, youth practitioners should engage the mental health sector in prevention work, and create a safe space for young men to share about their challenges.**
- It is important for young men to **find purpose** in life and have faith in the future. Youth practitioners can **create opportunities** for their pupils to experience success, develop prosocial skills, have meaningful roles and find something to excel at.
- As a large part of the hypermasculinity narrative proliferates online, **digital literacy and critical thinking** are essential. Youngsters should be aware of the business model of influencers, who often exaggerate to go viral and who profit from young men's misery. Moreover, alternative narratives are needed that can counter toxic social Darwinism.
- The approaches in primary prevention should be adequate for the preventing and countering eventual radicalisation process of the youngster, and address the aspects of life where frustration takes place. Therefore, approaches should be able to work long term and yet be **tailor-made**. Bottom-up and youth-for-youth projects can contribute to such approaches. To be able to address different aspects of life, different sectors should be able to work together in a **multi-agency** manner.

([3]) RAN Y&E Conclusion paper (2023): [Tools for post-lockdown resilience building in youth](#)
([4]) Ibid.

- Youth **practitioners** should be aware that they are **part of the solution**. They can function as **role models** who can break stereotypes, and promote an ethos of acceptance. The actions of these practitioners then have to be in line with the values and ethos of the school or youth work organisation. Moreover, practitioners should be able to **properly assess situations** to avoid overreacting or ignoring something important. At last, educators should be reflective of their own approach to be aware of whether they themselves are pushing an agenda.
- In various cases of schools and youth work organisations, **contact between boys and girls** is relatively low. This poses few opportunities to form meaningful friendships that can improve mutual understanding. Participants in this meeting argued that such a lack of contact can lead to unrealistic images of the other gender, and makes them only being perceived as potential romantic or sexual partners. Besides contact, it is essential to take time to deconstruct and discuss stereotypes and prejudices.
- Primary prevention should always safeguard a positive environment for young people, which includes the continuity of **emotional presence** of a supportive adult, especially for youngsters who struggle with attachment disorders.
- It is important to **include women** in discussions about (hyper-)masculinity, to clarify the effects of certain problematic behaviours on women, but also to explain how men can profit from a feminism where equality between genders is the priority, rather than that it favours women over men. Moreover, male role models can help to **reconceptualise masculinity** for young people in a way that diverts from radicalisation.

Recommendations

Recommendations for practitioners in youth work and education
- Organise activities that deconstruct harmful norms and facilitate discussions about difficult topics.
- Involve mothers and especially fathers in parenting programmes.
- Allow youngsters to disagree and challenge you. Friction is also a part of a trustful relation.
- Make sure that youth practitioners are informed about the topic that their pupils are concerned about. Training, toolkits and dissemination between colleagues are thus essential.
- Make youth practitioners aware that they have influence on the factors 'below the waterline' that cause behaviour above the waterline.
- Include programmes about healthy sexual relationships and ongoing societal developments.
- Engage the mental health sector in prevention work, and create a safe space for young men to share about their challenges.
- Ask what makes youngsters attracted to these narratives. Show interest and go deeper into the root causes.
- Create opportunities for pupils to experience success, develop prosocial skills, have meaningful roles and find something to excel at.
- Ensure and normalise contact between boys and girls. Facilitate opportunities to form meaningful friendships that can improve mutual understanding. Let them take time to deconstruct and discuss stereotypes and prejudices. There exist various original approaches to do this, as was presented in the previous RAN Y&E meeting on gender-specific approaches ([5,6]).

Recommendations for policymakers
- Get on board with urgent issues at practitioner level.
- Facilitate high-quality training for practitioners to act in this field.
- Include or maintain critical thinking skills and digital literacy within teacher training courses.
- When students get into counselling programmes, do an evaluation of this process together with the students.

We would also like to refer to the publication of the Violence Prevention Network 'Anti-feminism: Why sexist ideologies are a task for extremism prevention', where the authors give recommendations on the three levels of prevention when addressing this topic.

([5]) RAN Y&E Conclusion paper (2022): Gender-specific approaches in PVE – Preventive work for girls in and around schools
([6]) Ey schatje!, an educative game from Qpido, presented in the above meeting in 2022.

Relevant practices

Groundswell (UK) visits schools to facilitate class discussions in an open and safe environment about topics related to the hypermasculinity narrative, in order to foster critical thinking and understanding of extremist influence (according to the inoculation theory ([7])), dissect some of the arguments that are propagated in the discourse and show alternative narratives.

Emancipator (NL) gives workshops in schools and youth work organisations to discuss variation within 'masculinity' as a concept and the encompassing stereotypes. For example, they differentiate between 'caring' masculinity and 'violent' masculinity, and explain how men can be victims of 'hypermasculine' behaviour. Moreover, they challenge young men to open up emotionally and seek and give support. They are convinced that "it takes a village to raise a child – a child who is not embraced by his village, will burn it down to feel it's warmth" and implement this in the environment of young people.

Follow-up

- As many people are radicalising in fragmented hybrid ideologies instead of big coherent narratives, people might be more polarised because of emotions ([8]). Therefore, more knowledge on mental health, emotion regulation and emotional resilience related to radicalisation and P/CVE is essential. This counts for young men but in extent for all youth.

- Continue the dissemination of methods and tools among practitioners in the EU.

- Training for practitioners is needed on current topics that are relevant for young people.

- Facilitate education for youth practitioners around topics of masculinity, gender and healthy relationships.

- There is a need for further investigation on the link between hypermasculinity narratives and actual extremism, and also more clarification on innocent manifestations without extremism.

Further reading

- Institute for Strategic Dialogue: The 'Manosphere'
- RAN Y&E Conclusion paper (2022): Gender-specific approaches in PVE – Preventive work for girls in and around schools
- RAN Y&E Conclusion paper (2022): Integrating the online dimension into offline pedagogical practices
- The EUROGUIDE Project created an extensive handbook and online training for teachers about dealing with religious and socio-political arguments in schools. It provides concrete examples of different ideologies, topics and possible ways to act. The handbook is available in Dutch, French, Hungarian, Italian and Swedish.
- Violence Prevention Network (2022): Anti-feminism: Why sexist ideologies are a task for extremism prevention

---

([7]) RAN Y&E Conclusion paper (2022): Gender-specific approaches in PVE – Preventive work for girls in and around schools
([8]) RAN Overview paper (2021): Between extremism and freedom of expression: Dealing with non-violent right-wing extremist actors

Product of the Radicalisation Awareness Network **(RAN)**,
Paper prepared by RAN Y&E Staff.

European Commission