



A Gender Approach to Women's Role in the Online Extremist Sphere

Anne Craanen

Did you know...

Maygane Janin

That amongst the Islamic State women detained in the al-hol camp in Syria, some women longing for the return of the caliphate have set up a “justice for sisters” crowdfunding campaign on social media to fund their escape from the detention camp?

Anne Craanen

That's similar to their male counterparts, women who joined IS leverage social media to showcase life in the caliphate and influenced others to join and abandon western societies?

Maygane Janin

That memes and imagery of attractive white women pictured in fields of wheat, also known as the wheatfield trend, are a propaganda strategy of its own amongst far-right violent extremists?

Anne Craanen

This is Tech Against Terrorism. I'm Anne Craanen.

Maygane Janin

And I'm Maygane Janin, in this episode we're discussing the role of women in terrorist and violent extremist online networks, and the influence of gender in said networks.

Anne Craanen

The so-called 'jihadi bride' label that made so many headlines at the peak of the Islamic State, was not only misleading in simplifying the reasons why women might join a terrorist organisation out of a desire of romance, it was also a mainstream and reductionist interpretation of IS's targeted strategy to recruit

women in its ranks. Research has shown that women join terrorist and violent extremist groups for similar reasons as their male counterparts. In the case of IS, these reasons were mostly linked to a feeling of isolation and a desire to help the international Muslim community, which they perceived to be as under attack. Understanding that women can hold multiple roles in a terrorist organisation, and that they can be essential to recruit others and raise a future generation of supporters, the Islamic state, had dedicated an entire plan of its propaganda efforts to recruit women. From manifestos specifically written for women, to a 'sisters of the Islamic State' section in its online propaganda.

Maygane Janin

Women are not just being involved in Islamist terrorism, but are also present amongst far-right violent extremist movements – though the exact percentage of women participating in far-right violent extremism remains a debated question amongst researchers, with some estimating that women make up to 50% of far-right violent extremism participation. In a 2018 article analysing female participation in online far-right communities, Megan Squire, found that most women engaging in far-right violent extremism did so within groups displaying a mostly “anti-immigrant, neo-confederate, and anti-muslim” rhetoric – rather than with groups with a more manosphere ideology. Her study also underlined the importance of groups created for women and made up of a majority of female participants, the often labelled “wheat fields” groups in reference to the imagery of white women in fields of wheat picturing a quote ‘idealised vision of white womanhood’ unquote popular amongst far-right violent extremists.

Anne Craanen

Whilst terrorism and violent extremism are all too often reduced to a man-only phenomenon, the use of online platforms for terrorist and violent extremist purposes is shedding a new light on the participation of women amongst those groups. Women’s involvement in terrorism or violent extremism as such is not a phenomenon that began with the so-called ‘jihadi brides’. Rather women’s presence on social media particularly highlighted their engagement and made it a phenomenon no longer possible to ignore for counter terrorism experts.

Maygane Janin

To help us understand how women’s engagement in terrorism and violent extremism manifests itself online, how the use of internet has shifted women’s role in such movements, as well as how gender is reflected in terrorists and violent extremists online propaganda, we are joined today by Dr. Joana Cook and Dr. Elisabeth Pearson. Joana is an Assistant Professor on Terrorism and Political Violence at Leiden University, and Senior Project manager as well as an editor in Chief at the International Centre for Counterterrorism. She recently published a book on gender and counterterrorism, “A Woman’s Place: U.S. counterterrorism since 9/11”. Elisabeth is a Lecturer at the Cyber Threats Research Centre at Swansea University who specialises in gender, extremism, and counter extremism. Elizabeth notably focusses on offline and online aspect and their intersections.

Anne Craanen

Just before we dwell into the heart of today’s podcast, we want to note that our discussion on women’s role in the online sphere of extremism will adopt a gender approach. Namely, gender describes hierarchical relationships of femininity and masculinity and the meaning produced through these

discourses. Whereby one often attributes characteristics of rationality, agency and a political, public nature to men, emotion, passivity and the apolitical, domestic sphere are associated with women. Therefore, when women join terrorist or extremist organisations, it is often deemed to be for reasons such as romance, or because they were groomed into extremism following their feminine, apolitical nature. This denies women the agency in joining a terrorist organisation and presumes them innocent. Similarly, this also holds consequences for men who join terrorist organisations, as they are deemed political and therefore solely culpable for their own actions. By taking gender into account, one can look beyond these discursive constructions around women and men who join terrorist organisations, to come to the real reasons, roles and threat levels of men and women when having joined an extremist group. Therefore, for this podcast we will be adopting a gender lens when analysing women's involvement in the online extremist sphere.

Maygane Janin

Okay. So the first question to set up today's discussion a bit: when discussing women in extremism, the term gender often comes up. Could you tell us what gender entails and why it is important to study it when considering terrorism and violent extremists?

Dr. Elizabeth Pearson

When we're talking about gender and women, often the two terms are confused. People talk about gender and they actually mean women. But when we're thinking about gender it's about gender as a social construct. We are thinking about the values that terrorist groups attach to being a man or being a woman. And we're also talking about power dynamics, which is really important to understand in the context of violent organisations, because power is what they're after and power within those organisations is very often what tells us what roles men and women within those organisations will have. So from my perspective, it's absolutely crucial to be thinking about gender, thinking about power relations and dynamics between men and women and how groups interpret those to understand what it is that they want men and women to do, and the roles that they'll have in that organisation.

Dr. Joana Cook

Just to expand on it even a little more here, it's socially constructed and there's so many different kinds of attributes that can be socially constructed as well, that really intersect with gender. So you think about things like class or race or ethnicity or poverty level. All of these become related to how gender is interpreted and understood and those relative roles of men and women in a society. I think when you're thinking about gender, you do have to go beyond just looking at males and females. You really have to consider the broader socio-cultural context in which a gender is being deployed and how it's being analysed. One of the things that I teach in my course are really useful tools; gender analysis. And so what gender analysis can give us, in terms of how we understand or look at violent extremist groups, it allows us to systematically gather and identify information on those gender differences and on those social relations. And so it allows us to think about things like the roles that men and women may have in a group. How are labours divided, the opportunities or the constraints that are associated with being a man or a woman, and frankly, what kind of interests or opportunities, men and women, boys, and girls, and those of different or diverse gender identities perceive in adhering to a group or an ideology and

their participation in it. So gender gives us a really incredibly useful lens or tool by which to better understand these groups as well.

Dr. Elizabeth Pearson

Basically, if you don't look at gender, you don't think about gender, you're only seeing part of the picture of what's going on in these groups.

Dr. Joana Cook

Bingo. Yes, exactly.

Anne Craanen

Okay. Well, I think that sets the scene very, very well. To go into that, what does gender tell us about women who join violent extremist groups and particularly their reasons for joining?

Dr. Joana Cook

So I think when you look at any individual who joins a violence extremist group, there's a number of ways you can look at it, kind of based on academic approaches. So the first way I think is looking at what we call push and pull factors. So what that means is what are the factors in an individual's life that push them out of what was their kind of life before and towards this new ideology, this new group to go join something like ISIS or a far-right group or another kind of violent extremist organisation... But simultaneously pull factors. What are the aspects or the ideology or the rules or the benefits that the group has offered them that pull them towards that. And so when you look at how individuals join a violent extremist groups through push and pull factors, and you look at that through a gender lens, you could see how a woman's route, her pathway into an organisation might be distinct from that of a man or the factors in her life that draw her towards an organisation or push her out of her previous position might be different than that of a man or an older woman or a younger woman, as well. So when we look at gender in terms of recruitment, for me, it's really looking at how gender informs those push and pull factors and those factors and pathways into an organisation.

Dr. Elizabeth Pearson

Building on what Jo just said, it doesn't mean that your reasons are going to be vastly different, but it does mean that it's important to think about these things. Because I think for a long time, people were trying to understand extremist groups and since I've been studying this, most of the focus has been on the violent jihad. And there was always this assumption that we're talking about men. So we're only thinking about the push and pull factors for men and women were always kind of trying to say, "look, there's women here as well". And I think that some of the complexity in the push and pull factors was missing. There was not much discussion around, how they might vary. So for instance, something that people talked about a lot like spaces of radicalisation, there was a lot of discussion around mosques or gyms when we're talking about violent Islamist groups and no real kind of thinking around what the gender norms in those spaces might be, who they were populated by and why, and how that might impact men and women differently. When we're coming to think about talking about online radicalisation, which we'll talk about in more depth later, these things really matter. And I think this sort of became apparent to me and some research that I was doing with RUSI where we were talking to

communities with experience of losing both men and women actually to Daesh. And they were explaining the kind of different social pressures that were on men and women. So young men struggling to be resilient in the face of unemployment being offered money to join Daesh, young women facing different pressures. And so the reasons were not vastly dissimilar that people were pulled by the ideology. They were pulled by a sense of adventure, but there were nuances to the way in which the gender dynamics of those push and pull factors worked. And that depended on people's personal circumstances, how they understood their gender identity within a particular gender context in their family, in their school, in their community. And then that overlaid with what messages, what gendered messages groups, like in this case Daesh were sending out about what they wanted from people. It gives a lot more thinking about gender. The gender lens that Jo talked about is a way of seeing him in much more minute granular detail, what is happening in people's lives and how gender is impacting those different stages of that process. So to not have that really sort of misses a lot.

Anne Craanen

So jump into the kind of the women in ISIS, in the mainstream discussion on the reasons for why women join IS we often heard the contentious term 'Jihadi brides'. Elizabeth, could you tell us a bit more about what it means and its actual relevance in explaining women's involvement in terrorist groups, such as ISIS?

Dr. Elizabeth Pearson

It's a red herring, it became a sort of media term for thinking about... these few cases initially took people by surprise of young women going off to join Daesh. They probably shouldn't have taken anyone by surprise because women were all always active perhaps in support roles and therefore less visible in groups that supported violent Jihad. Groups that wanted the imposition of Sharia and it just becomes this kind of Monica that, that misses a lot because 'Jihadi bride' doesn't really tell us anything about the situations that young women or older women, as was often the case, we're leaving behind - all the reasons where they were going. There's a lot of discussion, obviously when you're talking about gender about this important word 'agency', about not just recognising that women participate, but recognising that they choose often to participate in volunteer extremist groups. And it was a phrase that kind of missed the agency here. Women are very often thought of as just only getting involved because men get involved. But to sort of caveat that a bit, it is the case that a lot of young women and young men for that matter, one of the attractions and one of the selling points from the Daesh perspective of traveling to join Daesh was the idea of marriage, the idea of marriage, not as something trivial, but as part of the fulfilment of your faith as a Muslim as part of the Deen of Islam involves getting married, having a family. And that that's part of being a good Muslim. So there's a time that you had a bride is a misnomer. I don't like it. And I wish that people wouldn't use it. There is something more complex to this idea of being a bride and marriage. When I was doing my PhD research, I was talking to a couple of young women who had been Daesh supporters online. And this idea of being a good Muslima of finding the right sort of Muslim man was actually extremely important. And it wasn't something trivial. It was to do with political engagement. It was to do with a religious engagement and they took this, they didn't like the term, but they took the idea of marriage very seriously. So I think that, while I don't like the term, I do think that there is something more to that term that is interesting to explore in terms of why

young women were, for a period, attracted to Daesh and traveling to join Daesh. So that it's more complex than the media would use it to convey. I think

Dr. Joana Cook

Liz captures that quite well. And I guess the only thing I'd say is that when you think about gender, we often think about gender binary. So the very different roles and attributes and such are associated with being male or female. But again, men also joined ISIS or one of the attractions of joining ISIS for some men was that idea of marriage. If you came from a very difficult background, where you could not afford the dowry for a marriage, ISIS offered you a chance to get married. And, also things like slaves as well. By focusing on only Jihadi brides. It also, I think, negates from that understanding of why some of those men, joined this wall for very complex reasons.

Anne Craanen

And in terms of the sort of the stereotypes around women and extremism and the potential for denying them the agency and joining the organisation, would you say that there is a similar dynamic at play with women joining far-right violent extremist movements.

Dr. Elizabeth Pearson

There's no end of stereotypes sort of abandoning in the literature. And I guess rather than stereotype, just to kind of complete negation of women's participation in the first place, which is understandable because a lot of people have been studying violence. And if we're thinking about... political violence is not violent, extremism is not limited to the two ideologies, which we're really focusing on today, but these are the far-right and violent Jihad are the two ideologies which are the sort of most salient at the moment. First of all, you've got to see, you've got to acknowledge that even if it's mainly men that participate in violence, or even if it's mainly men that you see on demonstrations, even if a movement is largely male in terms of numbers, that doesn't mean that the women that are present and that are there don't count. One of the things that Jo and Gina Vales report on the numbers traveling to Daesh, men, women, minors from all around the world, is just to make that really clear in those numbers. And when you see the numbers, even if the percentages are kind of small, it's quite staggering, they matter, each one of those numbers matters. And so you do have a similar thing with the far-right in that again, you've got largely homosocial, movements and the far-right as it is as an umbrella term, encompasses a large number of groups with different ideologies, with different spaces for men and for women, not all of them, as accepting of women, for example, in leadership roles as others, but you still have the same as you still have the struggle to get the whole, a holistic picture in gender terms, being recognised by outside of just gender scholars, people who look at gender. In terms of the press, there hasn't been quite the same sort of phenomenon. 'Jihadi bride' was kind of essentially a sort of media term, but you do, you do see the same issues and it's largely a factor of the kinds of ideologies that we're looking at, which are ideologies, which have very distinct, gendered roles, gender binaries. As Jo mentioned, they delineate very clearly between roles for men and women. And then partly both of those movements are doing that as a kind of rebuttal of practices, cultural norms and shifts that they are pushing back against, in the rest of society. So yes, you do see that.

Dr. Joana Cook

Really kind of emphasising the point that when we look at terrorism full stop and violent extremist groups, we tend to focus on those who carry the guns or those who set off the bombs. And so it really does negate from looking at that broader network that supports the entire organisation, the ideology, how a group can carry on, even if you have an individual taken off the battlefield. How that ideology gets carried forward generation to generation. So in short, we do tend to focus a lot on those that carry the guns and conduct the violence and it does negate from really understanding the broader network and support base and movement at large, and the very kind of complex roles that both men and women play in all aspects of these.

Dr. Elizabeth Pearson

Yes. You asked the question before about why women joined violent extremist groups and there's so many different reasons. And just because somebody isn't necessarily carrying a gun or setting off a bomb, it doesn't mean they're any less ideologically committed. It's about visibility a lot of the time. And when you look at Daesh and you look at how determined it was to produce this 'proto-state' in which it absolutely has got a vision going forward of a functioning society. You can't have a functioning society that doesn't have men and women, and Daesh always made that clear in its propaganda. There are roles for the men, the role to carry a gun. The role for the woman is different, but it's no less ideologically committed. And it's really important to understand that some of the things that we sort of stereotypically associate with men, such as violence, and women, such as being brought into friends are also true in reverse as well, that women can support violence. Some women actually want to take part. We've had plots in which women have been stopped from committing acts of violence. It's not what Daesh had called for, but it's what some people were intending to do nonetheless. And we have men who are drawn into organisations through their emotional connections, their friends, their siblings, people that they know, the promise of marriage. So it's about when we're thinking about gender, it's about sort of trying to free ourselves as well of kind of some of the assumptions that we enter into this space with either because historically the literature has not considered them or because we bring our own sets of assumptions into this space as well.

Maygane Janin

Liz, you mentioned online radicalisation and the importance of gender in this regard. So allow me to jump back on that, to shift the discussion to topics of particular interest for us at Tech Against Terrorism. So many women's role terrorism and violent extremists online networks. So could you tell us more about this as well as whether in your opinion, the online sphere provides maybe a new opportunity for women to become more involved in violent extremism?

Dr. Elizabeth Pearson

If you're thinking about research in the online space and violent extremism, it's been going on for a really long time now. If you look at some of the people who've been doing this ... it's not really new. Whether it offers a new opportunity for women it's evolving, certainly. If you look back at some sort of past research, it makes very clear that women have been again, sort of involved and potentially for reasons of accessibility, that there were more opportunities to be active in different ways in online forums or producing videos, or on social media and all of the different platforms that are constantly evolving all the time as groups evolve and respond to the measures that are taken against them. So it

provides online spaces, provides everyone with new opportunities. And there's certainly evidence that, particularly with ideologies and with groups where there are gender restrictions, where there is, restriction on women's access to public space or where young women, and this is something that came out of the research that we were doing in the five country research and also the research that I was doing when I was doing my PhD, that people said to us who were working in the countering space, that they saw young women with very, very active and large social media networks that, when they were becoming involved with Daesh, when they were capitalising on those networks and they were using them to recruit their friends, they knew exactly how to do it because it's happened to them themselves. And that for some not all, young Muslim women, there were cultural restrictions, which made it easier for them to access the ideology online, to make the connections, to have those friendships. And also of course, a group like Daesh was actively reaching out systematically trying to recruit young men and young women in, in ways that have been likened to child sexual exploitation online and that 'grooming' word, which is, as you know, it's a difficult word, cause it does imply lack of agency, but certainly there is some evidence emerging that the strategies were very similar. So yes, I think it changes the space. The online space changes the dynamics. It has changed gender dynamics. Also it allows people the freedom to not use their own identity, perhaps. It's a difficult space to research for gender because you don't always know whether people are being honest and open about their gender identity in that space. So yes, I think the evidence is there that it has created different opportunities and will continue to do so. I think, again, as this evolves and we're moving from more and more different platforms with different functionalities.

Dr. Joana Cook

And I think when we look online as well, there've been so many cases documented coming up and even things like court cases now to do with women in ISIS that offer really interesting reflections or perspectives again for looking at other ideologies as well. So for example, on the far-right online or their ideologies online as well. So for example, there was a case, Ines Madani, she was one of the women recently convicted of a Notre Dame car bomb plot. So in total five women had planted a bomb in a car, the bomb didn't go off thankfully. But she was a really interesting case because it came out in the court proceedings that she'd posed as a male militant online to recruit other women. She'd been instructed by a male who was a recruiter and a handler in Syria. Some really interesting dynamics come out of this. It makes you think a little bit more about the kind of online networks that individuals are able to access, how they're able to obtain things like instructions or guides or technical knowledge, how they're able to find like-minded individuals online as well in a way that they might not be able to access in real life. So I think, the online space just really opens up a lot more opportunities, for individuals to access to, not just women, men as well, but perhaps in areas where it's been a little bit more restrict for women, it does really open up the means, the information, the networks and the opportunities for them to participate in ways that they just hadn't before.

Maygane Janin

So what it is about the Notre Dame plot and the five and the fact that she passed on demands from a man to specifically recruit other women is really interesting. And we were actually wondering, with regard to propaganda efforts, are women particularly tasked with recruiting other women, or is that just another gendered patriarchal construct?

Dr. Joana Cook

It depends very much on the ideology as well. I think too, because if there's very restrictive gender roles and it's perhaps more encouraged for when to interact only with other women, women can be key recruiters in a sense, and there were a number of really a famous or infamous, I should say, female recruiters with ISIS, Aqsa Mahmood was one of them, a woman out of Scotland. And another woman who was named a [Bird of Jian], out of Malaysia. Online they would, they would share their stories. They would really kind of target memes and images and narratives towards women and very practically as well. In the case of Aqsa Mahmood in particular provided very clear direction and instruction as to how women could travel over to Islamic State. I think this is quite important as well to highlight. And again, opens up questions about how women can access other women in the case in Canada as well. We did have a case where there was a female recruiter who was offering religious lessons online that started off as religious lessons until she started leaning them towards her interpretation of this ideology and fielding individuals to IS, Syria and Iraq. There are multiple cases, many, many cases of women recruiting other women as well. But again, it kind of goes down to what ideology the group has and what those gendered norms and gendered interactions are prescribed as in that group.

Dr. Elizabeth Pearson

I think when you're looking at Daesh online, at the sort of height of when they were trying to get people from a variety of different countries to make Hajj as they called it, to travel. I was doing a study around 2015 in that summer, to set out and try and look at what the differences were in male and female or self identifying men and female behaviours online. You think of Daesh, it's all about women's separation from men, separation of roles separation physically. They were constructing this online as well, this exact same sort of parallel universe where everybody's ... if you want to look good, your bio would obviously have "brothers don't DM me". And there was this absolute separation of spaces. So women were looking to other women to tell them, because that was the kind of decorous thing to do. It was not okay to be messaging brothers that were not your family members or that you were not going to be in a relationship with. And then there was one point on Twitter before they purged, that space of those accounts, there were plenty of women who claimed to be already there, who were directing other women to other platforms - Ask FM was a very popular one at that time. Or to websites where they had specific lists of questions. What do I bring? How much money do I need? Do I need weapons? What clothes do I need to bring? How do I get to the border? What happens when I get there? So these really, really sort of detailed, pragmatic questions, which were women guiding women. But then when I was doing the later PhD research, what was really interesting to me was to see the ways in which those kinds of barriers between men's and women's communities, cause they're very active men's and women's communities, they had their different roles. Women policing other women, women shaming men into action - not just trying to recruit women, but shaming men to be recruited as well. On the face of it, everyone is adhering to these extremely strict gender divisions between the men's and women's communities and their separate roles and then the underbelly of life that's going on that's a bit more subversive of those norms but is hidden. But I was right, you need to consider the ideology of the group that you're looking at; looking at the norms, the values, what is acceptable within those communities? Because, particularly for something like Daesh, those communities were very, very strict and policing one another, and hugely suspicious group of people that they didn't know coming into their midst. And

Twitter, very successfully purged, but that space, its space of those supporters. But once governments were hounding them to do so, they've done that very successfully. And of course, Daesh is not in the same position at all that it was back in 2015.

Dr. Joana Cook

And I note that some of these gender roles, particularly those for women in the far-right, are ones being explored a lot more in current research, which is great. And so one person I would give a shout out here to is Ashley Mattheis, who does a lot of work in this space. In one of the courses that I teach on radicalisation and terrorist networks, I think it's also worth highlighting that, in the far-right too, there has been so much catering to women in different ways as well. So whether it was like the KKK or white Arian resistance or Hammersmith Nation and some of the women's auxiliaries that they've had historically, they did also have kind of dedicated spaces for women to interact in these kinds of women only forums. So they had names like 'the Ladies of the Invisible Empire' or the 'Arian Women's League' or 'Crew 38'. There's so much focus that's been placed on jihadist groups, in particularly ISIS and for very clear reasons. But I think that, again, a lot of the interesting reflections that we have on how women have acted and how gender norms and roles have been understood and studied and analysed in the group, also give us really important reflections for looking at how other organisations across the full spectrum of ideologies really also kind of cater to different genders in different ways. And so I think that's something that is important to really highlight because so much of the conversation continues to be on ISIS. And this is something I've focused on for years now, but it is important to really reflect on lessons learned. And some of the knowledge that's been accumulated over these years and really utilise it to look at some of these new concerns coming up as well.

Dr. Elizabeth Pearson

And you look at the people who've been working on the far-right. And gender for years. And people like Kathleen Blee has done a lot of work on the KKK and sometimes there's not enough kinds of interactive discussion or conversation between those kinds of different... so scholarship can become a bit siloed and in a way that there's so much to learn from that scholarship that has gone before on the far-right, which is being rediscovered by a different set of people now. People coming from a terrorism or security studies perspective, Ashley's work is really good because she is looking at the ways in which maternalism, which we saw with Daesh in terms of thinking about mother's roles and the ways in which women, there's sometimes this idea that, what people can't quite understand is why would women grasp on this sort of maternalism. Why would anyone proactively want to be in a space which is a domestic space. But it's extremely prevalent, women absolutely embrace the power of maternalist roles. As Jo mentioned before, these kinds of power that that gives you in terms of the upbringing, the rearing of a new nation, because often we're talking about groups that have got this very utopian vision. They want to create, they see everything that's wrong, they have their own understanding of what's wrong in the world. They want to create this new society and they want to do so using family and kinship as a starting point. That sort of recognition of the power of maternalism. Ashley talked about 'alt-maternalism' in the alt-right and the far-right. It's long been a kitchen table activism that has also been identified in the far-right. That has pride in women's role in being part of women's groups. And in embracing the domesticity of this as a pushback now. There's so many sort of male dominated groups, misogynist groups that sell themselves on misogyny, particularly in the online space. The alt-right is

really something that's kind of developed in the online space and so many offshoots. And even with something like a group like the Proud Boys, there is a sort of space for women to be involved in Proud Boys activities online. I think it's really interesting, the more conversations that develop between people who've got scholarship in different directions that can speak to each other, you can see the resonances and you can also see the spaces where these are not quite the same, and they're not always quite the same. I think that the more conversations that happen between people coming from different fields, the better.

Anne Craanen

We think that the far-right point is incredibly important also in terms of online propaganda. We've seen in terms of research, when it comes to women and gender in the far-right violence, extremist environment, the 'wheat field' imagery appears to play an important role. Once again, stressing the importance of visual culture and violence extremism. Could you develop on this phenomenon and the importance of online identity formation and expression?

Dr. Elizabeth Pearson

My research encompasses both Jihadis and the radical right. And by talking to people and looking at online identities, the wheatfield, the far-right, is a space in which there's a lot of memes, visual imagery is extremely important. I wouldn't like to say whether it's more important than in other ideologies, but the wheat field imagery is about this idea of utopia. It's about idealism, about ideal representations of womanhood. So women walking through wheat fields, this kind of bucolic, paradise of domesticity and perfection, of feminine perfection. And that's what that imagery is about. And it's seen in a variety of different ways. These are aspirational, utopian kinds of movements that need to visualize and need to propagate, not just the reality, but the aspiration, the idealism of what the movement stands for. And it's also symbolic. So women across the far-right are involved in different ways. So the alt-right has seen a number of female leaders, who have also experienced a lot of pushback. So some of the far-right allows space for women as leaders. And some of it wants women to be in a symbolic role purely. And there's a lot of differentiation. It creates boundaries between groups. So it's important for women to have a symbolic role, as well as an actual role. And what you see here with these wheat field images is the importance of a symbolic representation of this idealised woman. And sometimes there isn't space in some groups for much more than that for women, because some of these groups are extremely misogynistic, patriarchal, and want to keep women out of leadership roles and into a more kind of support space.

Maygane Janin

So let's go back to ISIS women and the use of online platforms and to a more recent example of a use of social media. There have been reports of ISIS women detained in Kurdish detention centres. Reinstating that there are women who continue to support ISIS and long for the return of the caliphate. They have been using social media for crowdfunding campaigns to find a way out of the camps. Could you tell us a bit more about most campaigns?

Dr. Joana Cook

Yes. I think it's worthwhile to highlight that a lot of really interesting online ways of transferring and obtaining and exchanging money have been used by women in ISIS. For example, there was a case of Zoobia Shahnaz in New York. She was raising Bitcoin, or she'd purchased Bitcoin and a number of other cryptocurrencies, over \$60,000 worth and had used this to fund ISIS. When we look at al Hol today, there's been a lot of recorded cases now of women setting up Gofundme pages and other kinds of online fundraising campaigns to pay for them to essentially be smuggled out of these camps, so to pay human smugglers. Vera Marinova, is there another really interesting academic who looks at this in more detailed, but I think it has been quite interesting to see how not only have women used, so for example, there've been a number of different online channels that they have as well, that I've followed and looked up, but they use them to not only exchange information, but again, share it, these kinds of crowdfunding campaigns and fundraise to essentially help them escape, which I think is quite interesting and still ongoing as well. And as long as they do remain in these camps, such as al Hol the longer they're there, I think the more desperate many of them are to really get out. There are prospects that have been so dire for so long. It's just quite interesting to see the means by which they're obtaining funding and what that means in terms of trying to address their current situation.

Anne Craanen

To zoom out a little bit, could you tell us a bit more about the online threat that women might pose and how it impacts the offline world. As we at Tech Against Terrorism are very interested in how the online and offline create this balance in terms of the effect or the threat of terrorism that we currently experience. So what could be the overlap between the online and the offline world, specifically to your latest publication on the similarity hypothesis, whereby you started the offline gender dynamics of the far-right and Islamist extremists.

Dr. Elizabeth Pearson

There are a lot of people who engage online in and participate either as members of far-right, or other extremist groups who will never pose any kind of offline threats. So how are you thinking about what a threat is? Is it about a sort of threat to civility, to mainstream discourse? Because there's a lot of the conversation around what's happening online is less about it. It began to be about what is online radicalisation, what is the risk of somebody being radicalised online, going off and committing an act of violence in the offline space. And there's very much this kind of conversation about these two things is very distinct. And now the conversation is much more about how the conversation has evolved. It's much more about the kinds of discourse that we want to encourage. What happens to our online spaces when there is a preponderance of discourse publicly available. And that's not to talk about, groups which are hidden behind passwords or on the dark web. So what is the threat that we are specifically concerned about. And we need to be clear about what those threats are before we know exactly what it is that we expect of online spaces. So many of the people, to go back to Daesh you could look at the numbers that were online and how many actually ended up sort of going traveling to Daesh, even though they weren't supporting that ideology, the numbers are always, we're talking about minorities of people. So when we're talking about women and the threat, I'm wondering if you're thinking more about sort of a violent threat or something more situated in that online space in terms of civility and changing to mainstream discourses.

Maygane Janin

So how do you think gender stereotypes that we might have about women in terrorism and violent extremist movement have impacted tech platform responses to online exploitation, and on that what would your recommendation be to tech platforms to be more sensitive to a gender question?

Dr. Joana Cook

I would just really highlight that being able to deploy a gender lens on all aspects of your work is incredibly important. And I think when trying to assess things like, again, threats, the status, the role, the presence of a violent extremist groups online, what they do, who they're interacting with and what that means offline like that gender lens just gives you such a valuable tool for again, thinking through how you establish these platforms, what kind of elements and aspects are inherent within those as well, or that are designed within those, and just being able to think a little bit more about when you are kind of tracing or tracking or analysing what that means offline, ensuring that that gender lens is there. What does that mean for men? What does that mean for women? What does that mean for those kinds of intersecting, socio-cultural categories as well, like age and race and so forth? I think I would just encourage that gender lens is an analytical tool or a lens that I hope practitioners and people working in the tech industry are willing to embrace it, and utilise and deploy in their own work.

Dr. Elizabeth Pearson

But there's so much misogyny online. One of the difficulties for tech platforms, especially now we're talking about the far-right, purging tech platforms and social media sites, essentially of jihadist activity was relatively easy because they were distinct, they were identifiable. They had a variety of different symbolic visual images that they used to communicate their ideological adherence to other people. But when you're talking about the far-right, if you look at Berger's Twitter census on the alt-right, the delineations are not very clear. The boundaries are not very clear. And I've talked to people about removing misogyny as part of violent extremism from an understanding that as something that you need to address in kind of looking at the far-right online. But there's so much misogyny online and there's so much overlap between some of the themes that are prevalent in far-right discourse with the rest of social media, that the task for tech platforms and for social media platforms becomes so much more complex and so much more difficult. And for me, it goes without saying that there should always be a consideration for gender. It should go without saying though it doesn't always. The key issue, I think, is not around gender, it's around now trying to promote civility and understanding which accounts, which identities are the ones that are in need of removal and which are just noise, and which are part of a broader mainstream and the boundaries between these are no longer as distinct as perhaps they were. It makes it a very difficult task.

Maygane Janin

Thank you very much. That was Dr. Joana Cook and Dr. Elizabeth Pearson, discussing the need to consider gender in terrorism and violent extremism in online spaces and the role of women in those spaces. We'll be back soon with another episode. In the meantime, find us on Twitter @techsterrorism.