



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Gendered radicalisation and ‘everyday practices’: An analysis of extreme right and Islamic State women-only forums

Yannick Veilleux-Lepage^{1*} , Alexandra Phelan²  and Ayse D. Lokmanoglu³ 

¹Institute of Security and Global Affairs, Leiden University, The Netherlands, ²Monash Gender, Peace and Security Centre, Monash University, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia and ³Centre for Communication and Public Policy, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, United States

*Corresponding author. Email: y.d.veilleux-lepage@fgga.leidenuniv.nl

(Received 25 May 2022; revised 6 October 2022; accepted 19 October 2022)

Abstract

A growing amount of literature is being devoted to interrogating gendered dynamics in both violent extremism and terrorism, contributing to the integration of international and feminist security. This includes how such dynamics can shape differences in the motivations and participation of women and men. By critically analysing ideological gender constructs in two women-only extremist forums – the Women’s Forum on Stormfront.org and Women Dawah, a Turkish-language pro-Islamic State group chat on Telegram – and employing feminist methodology, this article demonstrates how gendered online spaces influence women’s ‘everyday practices’ within extremist movements. We argue that women-only online spaces not only facilitate gendered practices by allowing women to share everyday experiences, hold ideological discussions, and engage in debate, but also provide an important means to navigate these issues within the movement itself. In fact, women-only forums are actively used by women within extremist movements to exert greater agency in the face of otherwise constraining gendered ideological constructs. In turn, gendered everyday practices are reinforced by virtual communities that strengthen a sense of meaning – and purpose – in the movement, albeit being ideologically confined to the private sphere in many ways. This study sheds light not only on the differences in participation between women and men, but also on how such virtual communities can serve as spaces to frame and reinforce gendered practices in extremist movements. This has key implications for deradicalisation and disengagement strategies, which are at present overwhelmingly gender neutral. We provide evidence of how women navigate agency in these spaces, while challenging the stereotype that women in extremist movements are typically passive actors confined to traditional roles.

Keywords: Women; Gender; Social Media; Online Forums; Extremism

Introduction

There is a growing body of literature that identifies the importance of women’s participation within terrorism and violent extremism, including the gender dynamics that shape their particular roles and motivations for joining. This is important, as it contributes to the understanding of international security and feminist security as intertwined, rather than distinct. For example, existing scholarship identifies the factors determining women’s participation in violent extremist groups, including contextual pressures (such as domestic/international factors, conflict, and social dislocation), which both drive terrorist organisations to recruit women and motivate women to

join.¹ Moreover, the literature also identifies how organisational practices can shape women's off-line participation in violent groups. Such scholarship seeks to understand how organisational practices such as messaging, recruitment, and propaganda shape women's experiences in violent extremist groups in general, while also highlighting the enabling and constraining factors to women's agency that are present in the practice versus ideology divide.²

However, there is limited research focusing on how we can understand the interplay of involvement in violent extremism and the gendered nature of 'everyday practices' and the mundane. While women are sometimes able to exert agency by determining their own roles, responding to ideology, engaging in activist practices, or delineating gendered spaces practices, it is often argued that patriarchal elements of extremist ideology constrain or limit their agency in the long run.³ Gender analysis and feminist methodology is particularly useful in understanding everyday dynamics, particularly with regard to how masculinities and femininities shape the everyday, the importance of listening to diverse women, and the blurred lines between the private and public spheres. Alexandra Phelan identifies four general approaches to understanding gender and terrorism in existing literature: a positivist, 'gender-as-variable' approach concerned with composition; an instrumentalist approach dealing with differences between women's and men's roles; a 'gendered motivations' approach examining how reasons for engagement may differ between women and men; and a 'feminist curiosity' approach that utilises feminist methodology to examine how femininities and masculinities influence both collective and individual radicalisation processes.⁴

This article sheds light on the gendered dynamics affecting violent extremism and terrorism, in particular how such dynamics shape the motivations and participation of women and men differently. Specifically, we ask: can virtual communities serve as gendered spaces that influence everyday practices, as well as safe spaces within violent milieus that are typically hostile towards women? By critically analysing ideological gender constructs in two women-only extremist forums – the Women's Forum on Stormfront.org and Women Dawah, a Turkish-language pro-IS group chat on Telegram – this article demonstrates how interactive forums and gendered online spaces influence women's everyday practices within extremist movements. Drawing on feminist methodology and the theoretical concepts of 'everyday practices' and 'tactical creativities', we argue that women-only forums not only facilitate gendered practices by allowing women to share everyday experiences and engage in ideological debates, but also provide a venue for women to navigate these issues within the movement itself, despite the patriarchal context. We find that women-only forums are actively used by women within extremist movements to exert greater agency in the face of otherwise constraining gendered ideological constructs and

¹As examples, see Karla J. Cunningham, 'Cross-regional trends in female terrorism', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 26:3 (2003), pp. 171–95, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100390211419>; Margaret Gonzalez-Perez, *Women and Terrorism: Female Activity in Domestic and International Terror Groups* (London, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, 2008), available at: <http://www.crcnetbase.com/isbn/9780203926550>; Jakana L. Thomas and Kanisha D. Bond, 'Women's participation in violent political organizations', *American Political Science Review*, 109:3 (2015), pp. 488–506, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055415000313>.

²As examples, see Katharina Von Knop, 'The female jihad: Al Qaeda's women', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 30:5 (2007), pp. 397–414, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100701258585>; Anita Peresin and Alberto Cervone, 'The Western *muhajirat* of ISIS', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 38:7 (2015), pp. 495–509, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2015.1025611>; Gina Vale, 'Women in Islamic State: From Caliphate to Camps', Policy Brief (International Center for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) (October 2019), available at: <https://doi.org/10.19165/2019.03.9>); Mehr Latif *et al.*, 'Do white supremacist women adopt movement archetypes of mother, whore, and fighter?', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2020), pp. 1–18, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2020.1759264>; Bidisha Biswas and Shirin Deylami, 'Radicalizing female empowerment: Gender, agency, and affective appeals in Islamic State propaganda', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 30:6–7 (2019), pp. 1193–213, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2019.1649831>.

³Latif *et al.*, 'Do white supremacist women adopt movement archetypes of mother, whore, and fighter?'; Vale, 'Women in Islamic State: From Caliphate to Camps'.

⁴Alexandra Phelan, 'Special Issue introduction for terrorism, gender and women: Toward an integrated research agenda', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2020), pp. 1–9, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2020.1759252>.

structures, serving as a key mechanism that enhances active participation within the movement. In turn, gendered everyday practices are reinforced by virtual communities that strengthen a sense of meaning and purpose in the movement, albeit largely ideologically confined to the private sphere. This study sheds light not only on the differences in participation between women and men, but also on how such online forums can serve as highly gendered sites that frame and reinforce gendered practices in extremist movements. In turn, this necessitates gender analysis to better understand the drivers of radicalisation and factors that sustain participation, and has key implications for deradicalisation and disengagement strategies, which are at present overwhelmingly gender neutral. We thus contribute to the understanding of how women navigate agency in and through these forums, while challenging the stereotype that women in extremist movements are typically passive participants confined to traditional roles.

The perceived anonymity, accessibility, availability, and global nature of the Internet has facilitated the establishment of spaces for individuals to connect on the basis of shared interests, background, or gender.⁵ In this way, individuals interested in extremist ideologies use virtual spaces as venues to connect and interact with like-minded people.⁶ Indeed, virtual spaces represent an ideal ecosystem for tech-savvy extremist organisations, such as the Islamic State (IS) and various white nationalist groups, to connect with both current and potential sympathisers.⁷ Online extremist activity started becoming conspicuous in the 1990s.⁸ For white supremacists, Stormfront.org has served as a virtual home since 1996.⁹ Meanwhile, scholarly research on the intersection of computer-mediated-communication and extremism grew following the IS social media campaign.¹⁰ With the development of social media, these virtual connections have come to mimic physical relationships, creating a paradoxical illusion of intimacy and anonymity.¹¹ Although

⁵Gabriel Weimann, *Terrorism in Cyberspace: The Next Generation* (Washington, DC and New York, NY: Columbia University Press and Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2015); Yannick Veilleux-Lepage and Emil Archambault, 'Mapping transnational extremist networks: An exploratory study of the Soldiers of Odin's facebook network, using integrated social network analysis', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 13:2 (2019), pp. 21–38; Carol Winkler and Ayse Lokmanoglu, 'Communicating terrorism and counterterrorism', in Bryan C. Taylor and Hamilton Bean (eds), *The Handbook of Communication and Security* First edition, International Communication Association (ICA) Handbook Series (New York, NY: Routledge, 2019), pp. 381–98.

⁶Rob Kitchin et al., 'Public geographies through social media', *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 3:1 (2013), pp. 56–72, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1177/2043820613486432>}; Cass R. Sunstein, *Republic.Com* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Magdalena Wojcieszak, "'Don't talk to me": Effects of ideologically homogeneous online groups and politically dissimilar offline ties on extremism', *New Media & Society*, 12:4 (2010), pp. 637–55, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444809342775>}; Kamaldeep Bhui and Yasmin Ibrahim, 'Marketing the "radical": Symbolic communication and persuasive technologies in jihadist websites', *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 50:2 (2013), pp. 216–34, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1177/1363461513479329>}.

⁷Bhui and Ibrahim, 'Marketing the "radical"'; Melissa Pujazon-Zazik and M. Jane Park, 'To tweet, or not to tweet: Gender differences and potential positive and negative health outcomes of adolescents' social Internet use', *American Journal of Men's Health*, 4:1 (2010), pp. 77–85, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1177/1557988309360819>}.

⁸Gabriel Weimann, 'Www.Terror.Net How Modern Terrorism Uses the Internet', Special Report (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, March 2004), available at: {<https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/sr116.pdf>}; Yariv Tsfaty and Gabriel Weimann, 'Terror on the Internet', *Politika*, 4 (1999), pp. 45–64; Yariv Tsfaty and Gabriel Weimann, 'Www.Terrorism.Com: Terror on the Internet', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 25:5 (2002), pp. 317–32, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100290101214>}; Gabriel Weimann, *Terror on the Internet: The New Arena, the New Challenges* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2006), p. 25.

⁹Yannick Veilleux-Lepage, 'Paradigmatic shifts in jihadism in cyberspace: The emerging role of unaffiliated sympathizers in Islamic State's social media strategy', *Journal of Terrorism Research*, 7:1 (2016), p. 36, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.15664/jtr.1183>}; Willem De Koster and Dick Houtman, "'STORMFRONT IS LIKE A SECOND HOME TO ME": On virtual community formation by right-wing extremists', *Information, Communication & Society*, 11:8 (2008), pp. 1155–76, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1080/13691180802266665>}.

¹⁰Carol Winkler and Kareem El Damanhoury, *Proto-State Media Systems: Al-Qaeda and ISIS as Exemplars* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021); Bart Schuurman, 'Research on terrorism, 2007–2016: A review of data, methods, and authorship', *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2018), pp. 1–16, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2018.1439023>}.

¹¹Veilleux-Lepage, 'Paradigmatic shifts in jihadism in cyberspace'.

there is considerable scholarly research concerning online participation in extremist groups, the gender dimension of this phenomenon remains largely unstudied

Women, online extremism, and everyday practices

Existing literature describes the ways in which women interact with online violent extremist spaces. For example, rather than taking on formal militant roles, women and particularly young girls have played an important role as disseminators of official propaganda across social media platforms. Ben-Israel found that IS ‘fangirls’ play a significant role in disseminating propaganda and recruiting other young women to join the fangirl sphere, and that the symbolism used in the propaganda varied significantly depending on whether these young women were based in the West or had migrated to the combat zone.¹² Moreover, Jytte Klausen argues that the sharing of images and information by IS supporters is, contrary to widespread belief, tightly managed and restricted by organisational and feeder accounts.¹³ Klausen also found that women feature heavily as disseminators of propaganda in the Twitter sphere, and are often linked to the social media accounts of foreign fighters.

Recent literature has increasingly focused on the way in which online spaces can be gendered spaces, and the way in which social media affords women a unique opportunity to break gendered constraints that may apply in the offline world. For example, Tammy Castle and Meagan Chevalier argue that white nationalist women largely use Stormfront to discuss matters related to their family and personal lives, and that the forums simply provide ‘a way for racist women to communicate with one another, acting more as a social networking site’ that embodies gender-specific concerns.¹⁴ On the other hand, Laura Huey *et al.* compared the offline and online roles of women in jihadist organisations, and their findings partly challenge the assumption that women only occupy supporting roles, as the online space provides ‘the opportunity to break traditional gendered constraints’.¹⁵ They argue that this is highlighted by the cases of women operating as recruiters online. Meanwhile, Elizabeth Pearson argues that women’s engagement in online extremist sites is significant because women are often afforded more ‘space’ there, given the limitations placed on them by their organisations in the public sphere.¹⁶ Focusing on IS, she identifies that this has significant consequences for CVE policy. In particular, there should be a move away from viewing the online extremist community in rigid pragmatic terms, that is, merely in terms of its role in recruitment and propagandising, to focus rather on the meaning that IS supporters create for themselves in this space, and in particular how they construct online spaces through the framework of gender.¹⁷ This latter point is particularly important for understanding not only how women construct online spaces to discuss the everyday, but also how this can serve to reinforce a ‘sense of meaning’ within violent extremist organisations, despite gender power relations, patriarchal ideology, and misogyny.

Michel de Certeau writes about the concept of ‘everyday practices’, in which individuals exercise creativity and agency to resist the capitalist and classist system.¹⁸ According to de Certeau,

¹²Galit M. Ben-Israel, ‘Telling a story via Tumblr analytics: Europe’s young Muslim female attraction to ISIS’, *International Annals of Criminology*, 56:1–2 (2018), pp. 55–78, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1017/cr.2018.6>}.

¹³Jytte Klausen, ‘Tweeting the *jihad*: Social media networks of Western foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 38:1 (2015), pp. 1–22, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2014.974948>}.

¹⁴Tammy Castle and Meagan Chevalier, ‘The women of Stormfront: An examination of white nationalist’, *Internet Journal of Criminology* (2011), p. 12, available at: {https://www.internetjournalofcriminology.com/_files/ugd/b93dd4_19a87177897a4ab2b18fa8ffc2bb7f48.pdf}.

¹⁵Laura Huey, Rachel Inch, and Hillary Peladeau, ‘“@ me if you need shoutout”: Exploring women’s roles in Islamic State Twitter networks’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 42:5 (2019), p. 458, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2017.1393897>}.

¹⁶Elizabeth Pearson, ‘Online as the new frontline: Affect, gender, and ISIS-take-down on social media’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 41:11 (2018), pp. 850–74, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2017.1352280>}.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (3rd edn, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011).

ordinary people (that is, the popular class) use everyday practices to tactically subvert power relations, and may do so through usage or consumption of culture and language, and through everyday creativity or ‘tactics’. Our article argues that the concepts of ‘everyday practices’ and ‘everyday creativity’ are particularly useful for understanding how online spaces can serve as gendered sites to influence everyday practices among women involved in violent extremism. This constitutes the ‘tactical’ part of everyday practices, which can include ‘talking, reading, moving about, shopping, cooking etc.’, and comes in ‘clandestine forms taken by the dispersed, tactical and makeshift creativity of groups or individuals already caught in the nets of “discipline”’.¹⁹ These ‘ways of operating’ are ‘victories of the “weak” over the “strong” (whether the strength be that of powerful people or the violence of things or of an imposed order, etc)’.²⁰ It is important to note that de Certeau focuses on everyday creativity in work and public life, rather than in the private sphere. Henri Lefebvre, meanwhile, argues that everyday life is not merely a set of practices, but rather a level of existence, and that certain individuals, such as women, often live immersed in ‘everydayness’ and find it difficult to escape repetitive mundane tasks necessary for their existence, such as cooking and cleaning.²¹ As a result, women’s immersion in ‘everydayness’ is largely a result of their consignment to the domestic and private sphere.

It is apparent that both the public and private sphere (including the domestic sphere) are inherently gendered, and that the discussion of the ‘everyday’ should be situated in the conceptual framework of social reproduction more generally.²² Social reproduction, according to Juanita Elias and Shirin M. Rai, includes ‘all of those activities involved in the production of life’ as well as ‘biological reproduction, the work of caring for and maintaining households and intimate relationships, the reproduction of labour, and the reproduction of community itself – including forms of social provisioning and volunteer work’.²³ It also includes the reproduction of culture and ideology. Similarly, Rita Felski argues that feminist methodology and gender analysis help to reveal the gender dynamics at work in everyday life, and that ‘the boundaries between home and non-home [i.e., the private and public spheres] are leaky’, as the home is ‘powerfully shaped by broader social currents, attitudes and desires’.²⁴

Drawing influence from existing feminist methodologies and applying gender analysis, we agree that the boundaries between the public and private spheres are indeed blurred and shaped by broader gender norms and power relations, as well as dynamic social currents and changing attitudes, and has clear implications for understanding participation in violent extremism. By examining two women-only extremist forums – the Women’s Forum on Stormfront.org and Women Dawah, a Turkish-language pro-IS group chat on Telegram – this article demonstrates how gendered online spaces can influence and reinforce women’s everyday practices within extremist movements in both the public and the private sphere. In turn, this study has key implications for our understanding of the nexus between international and feminist security, as limited research has examined the importance of gendered everyday practices in the online sphere and the potential to influence offline behaviour. Lastly, we also show how women within violent extremist movements assert agency in their everyday practices (in particular, their engagement with online forums), to (perhaps unknowingly) subvert patriarchal power relations, whether simply through gendered reinterpretation of extremist material, organisational norms, and power relations, or through gendered ‘tactical’ everyday creativity.

¹⁹Ibid., pp. xiv–xv.

²⁰Ibid., p. xix.

²¹Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, Communications Series (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1984).

²²Cynthia H. Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (2nd edn, rev. and updated, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2014).

²³Juanita Elias and Shirin M. Rai, ‘Feminist everyday political economy: Space, time, and violence’, *Review of International Studies*, 45:2 (2019), p. 203, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210518000323>}.

²⁴Rita Felski, *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture*, Cultural Front (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2000), p. 93.

Methodology

The data for this research originates from two women-only forums: the Women's Forum on Stormfront.org, and Women Dawah, a Turkish-language pro-IS group chat on Telegram. To detect underlying topics within these forums, we applied unsupervised machine learning in the form of topic modelling using the Latent Dirichlet Allocation algorithm.²⁵

The Women's forum

Stormfront.org was one of the first online communities catering to those who identify as White Nationalists. It was launched in April 1995 by Don Black, a former grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan and member of the National Socialist White People's Party, as an online bulletin board to assist David Duke's campaign for United States senator of Louisiana. The website's early articles and essays were largely produced by well-known American white supremacists such as David Duke and William Pierce of the Neo-Nazi Alliance. However, with the advent of Web 2.0, new features such as a discussion forum and interactive chatrooms were added to the website. While the website continues to host essays and articles on current events, the discussion board is by far its most popular feature. As of November 2021, there are over a million threads, comprising more than 13,850,000 posts.

With over 366,000 registered users (of which a smaller proportion are active users) the board facilitates community discussion on a wide range of cultural, theological, and ideological issues related to white nationalism. The website is open to the public, but in order to post or participate, it is necessary to make an account. The forum is organised into 149 forums, each with its own explicit purpose, which are occasionally further divided into forums. Each forum has a separate page that is linked to the main page. Some subforums focus on a specific geographical or linguistic region. There are also forums for community discussion on a variety of topics and specific areas of interest, such as ideology and philosophy, culture and customs, revisionism, science, technology, privacy, network security and encryption, business and finance, self-defence, martial arts and preparedness, strategies and tactics, homemaking, education and homeschooling, and youth issues.

The Women's Forum is one of these forums, and it is solely for female users. Throughout the forum are reminders that this is a gender-specific area and that men are not to participate. For example, in a thread named 'Knock it off, gentlemen', male users are warned that participating in the Women's Forum will lead to a week-long ban from the site; another post made by one of the administrators of the forum, titled 'Attention Males', states that:

This is a WOMEN's ONLY Section, You are free to view the threads and get some insight into the female mind, but If ANY MALES are caught posting in this section: You will be fed to Mama Wolf.

The same administrator later clarified that she will 'issue infractions and temp bans' to men participating in the subforum. Moderators of the Women's Forum appear to devote a considerable amount of effort to preserving the gender segregation of this forum by rooting out trolls, lurkers, and men. In fact, there appears to be a sort of internal validation system for its members: one of the first pinned threads on the forum page is 'Ladies, Post Your Introductions Here', which seeks to enforce the female-only nature of the space by means of an honour system. In one rather

²⁵David M. Blei *et al.*, 'Latent Dirichlet Allocation', *Journal of Machine Learning Research*, 3:4/5 (15 May 2003), pp. 993–1022; Dror Walter *et al.*, 'Vaccine discourse in white nationalist online communication: A mixed-methods computational approach', *Social Science & Medicine*, 298 (1 April 2022), p. 114859, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2022.114859>}; Ayse Lokmanoglu and Yannick Veilleux-Lepage, 'Hatred she wrote: A comparative topic analysis of extreme right and Islamic State women-only forums', in Derek M. D. Silva and Mathieu Deflem (eds), *Radicalization and Counter-Radicalization*, Vol. 25, *Sociology of Crime, Law and Deviance* (Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2020), pp. 183–205, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1108/S1521-613620200000025011>}.

humorous interaction, an administrator confronts and bans a user who introduces themselves as a woman but who has posted in the years prior about their experience undergoing a vasectomy. Overall, the topics discussed on the Women's Forum range from 'Ladies, What Have You Done to Contribute to The White Race?' to 'Nursing mothers thread', 'Don't put your cellphone in your bra!', and 'What Would Attract More Women to WN [White Nationalism]'.

The dataset used in this study contains 35,250 unique postings from 1,842 English language threads in the Women's Forum. These posts were gathered during a 14-year span (2001–15) by the Southern Poverty Law Center, who made them available to the authors. This results in a large dataset for analysis, comprising a total of 580,787 words.

Women Dawah

In the years leading up to the Syrian civil war, jihadi groups began using relatively accessible platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to interact with followers, expanding their activities beyond traditional forums and bulletin boards. In recent years, IS has developed a clear preference for using the Telegram app to engage with core supporters, in response to push factors such as increasingly aggressive content removal and account closures, as well as pull factors such as the app's greater utility and range of services, including file sharing and encryption.²⁶

Telegram is a free, cross-platform app that offers secure messaging. It was launched in 2013 by the founders of VK ВКонтакте (Russia's largest online social network) after several run-ins with Russian intelligence services.²⁷ The service was originally designed as a safe place to exchange files and messages without being intercepted by government intelligence services.²⁸ Aside from its security features, such as self-erasing messages and relatively robust encryption, Telegram offers both group chat rooms (multidirectional chat rooms that can host up to 100,000 members), and 'channels', a unidirectional messaging service that allows administrators to broadcast messages to an unlimited number of subscribers. Telegram offers users privacy and security in the online environment and allows online sharing and storing of large files.²⁹ IS uses Telegram to host a variety of channels, which users can join via links shared in other IS-affiliated channels. In other words, there is an internal system by which channel links are disseminated among IS sympathisers.

For the purpose of this study, we focused on the (now-defunct) Turkish-language Telegram group chat called Women Dawah, which roughly translates to 'The Women's Cause' or 'The Women's Fight'. Women Dawah was dedicated to female IS sympathisers and, as of September 2019, appeared to have been online for at least two years, with around one thousand members and roughly 10–15 new messages posted each day. The administrators of Women Dawah appeared to enforce the group's gender segregation by removing users whose usernames indicate that they may be men. The Women Dawah channel was taken down during Europol's November 2019 crackdown on IS channels and accounts.³⁰

²⁶Mia Bloom, Hicham Tiflati, and John Horgan, 'Navigating ISIS's preferred platform: Telegram', *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2017), pp. 1–13, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2017.1339695>}; Yannick Veilleux-Lepage, 'A typology of Islamic State's social media distribution network', in Allen Thompson (ed.), *The Rwanda Genocide and Beyond* (Toronto, Can.: CIGI Press, 2019), pp. 453–82; Kayla McMinimy et al., 'Censoring extremism: Influence of online restriction on official media products of ISIS', *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2021), pp. 1–17, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2021.1988938>}.

²⁷Veilleux-Lepage, 'A typology of Islamic State's social media distribution network'.

²⁸Jason Murdock, 'The best encrypted messaging apps to keep you safe from hackers and snooping', *International Business Times* (6 April 2016), available at: {<https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/best-encrypted-messaging-apps-keep-you-safe-hackers-snooping-1553488>}.

²⁹McMinimy et al., 'Censoring extremism'; Mia Bloom and Ayse Lokmanoglu, 'Conducting field work in a virtual space, exploring ISIS' encrypted messaging on Telegram', in Peter Krause and Ora Szekeley (eds), *Stories from the Field A Guide to Navigating Fieldwork in Political Science* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2020).

³⁰Europol, 'Islamic State Propaganda Machine Hit by Law Enforcement in Coordinated Takedown Action' (27 April 2018), available at: {<https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/islamic-state-propaganda-machine-hit-law-enforcement-in-coordinated>}.

The Women Dawah dataset was compiled through daily data collection over a one-year period between 1 June 2017 and 1 June 2018. This was achieved by monitoring the group chat daily and scraping the content using Selenium web scraping in R Studio v1.3.³¹ In total, 2,836 Turkish-language messages were collected. Following data collection, usernames were anonymised.

These two women-only online spaces were selected as examples of gendered extremist virtual spaces, enforced through moderation and an internal honour system. Note that both of these spaces are susceptible to ‘fake’ members (male members) and are accessible to the general public with limited gatekeeping. The cases are thus illustrative, and deliberately selective rather than representative. Future research should build on these findings by taking into account multiple forums and/or ideologies. Quotes presented in this article are taken from unique individuals participating in these forums; for the purposes of anonymity, we have provided pseudonyms to conceal their usernames.

Data analysis

Both the Women’s Forum and Women Dawah datasets were evaluated by means of topic modelling, in particular, Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA). This is a probabilistic method of describing distinct subjects in a document, or in this case, a massive textual dataset. The latent structure in the corpus under study is represented by topics. LDA combines inductive and quantitative approach to look for ‘hidden theme organisation’ inside textual data.³² This method displays how words in a data corpus are grouped together.³³ Topic modelling using an inductive approach to quantitative measurements and parameters allows researchers to conduct semantic analysis on a large number of texts. The LDA algorithm models the interconnectedness of the words within a document and/or a corpus.³⁴ Based on this, it is possible to label topics inductively, by using both the words and the documents within each topic. LDA allows a document to be assigned to multiple topics, providing a deeper insight into the thematic structure of the corpus.

We followed the standard steps in text analysis: (1) pre-processing; (2) determining the number of topics; and (3) setting the control parameters, for which we used the R packages *quanteda*, *ldatuning*, and *topicmodels*.³⁵ For the Women’s Forum data, the text pre-processing was conducted by cleaning the dataset; that is, by removing function words with no semantic content (for example: ‘as’, ‘and’, ‘the’), stemming the words, and trimming the total dataset by 0.99 maximum and 0.001 minimum, which made the most sense after multiplication with the total number of words. The Turkish-language dataset obtained from Women Dawah was prepared using the same approach, before being translated into English by a translator.

takedown-action}; Amarnath Amarasingam, ‘A view from the CT foxhole: An interview with an official at Europol’s EU Internet Referral Unit’, *CTC Sentinel*, 13:2 (2020), available at: {<https://ctc.usma.edu/view-ct-foxhole-interview-official-europols-eu-internet-referral-unit/>}; McMinimy *et al.*, ‘Censoring extremism’.

³¹Diego Molina, ‘Selenium/Py at Trunk · SeleniumHQ/Selenium’ (2022), available at: {<https://github.com/SeleniumHQ/selenium>}.

³²Daniel Maier *et al.*, ‘Exploring issues in a networked public sphere: Combining hyperlink network analysis and topic modeling’, *Social Science Computer Review*, 36:1 (2018), p. 93, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1177/0894439317690337>}.

³³Blei *et al.*, ‘Latent Dirichlet Allocation’.

³⁴Daniel Maier *et al.*, ‘Applying LDA topic modeling in communication research: Toward a valid and reliable methodology’, *Communication Methods and Measures*, 12:2–3 (2018), p. 94, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1080/19312458.2018.1430754>}.

³⁵Kenneth Benoit *et al.*, ‘Quanteda: An R Package for the quantitative analysis of textual data’, *Journal of Open Source Software*, 3:30 (2018), p. 774, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.21105/joss.00774>}; Nikita Moor, ‘Nikita-Moor/Ldatuning, R’ (2021), available at: {<https://github.com/nikita-moor/ldatuning>}; Bettina Grün and Kurt Hornik, ‘Topicmodels: An R Package for fitting topic models’, *Journal of Statistical Software*, 40:13 (2011), available at: {<https://doi.org/10.18637/jss.v040.i13>}.

To determine the appropriate number of topics to be extracted using LDA, four distinct model comparison metrics from the R package *ldatuning*, namely ‘Griffiths 2004’, ‘CaoJuan2009’, ‘Arun2010’, and ‘Deveaud2014’, were tested.³⁶ The graph find-topic-model produced an optimal $k = 60$ topics for the Women’s Forum content and $k = 25$ topics for the Women Dawah content, resulting in the most common phrases for each of those themes within the datasets. Topic clustering was then used to produce a comparative analysis of the two datasets, by integrating comparable themes into topic clusters. The thirty most frequent words in these merged subjects were used to create topic cluster headers. To determine the prominence of each cluster, theta values – that is, the prominence of each word inside the topic across the datasets – were aggregated under the overall cluster heading.³⁷ The sixty subjects in the Women’s Forum dataset were assigned to 13 cluster groups based on their top terms and overall content, while the 25 topics in the Women Dawah dataset were assigned to seven unique cluster categories (Table 1). An additional category called ‘Miscellaneous’ was created for both datasets, consisting of prepositions, determiners, articles, and words related to the forum format; these were then excluded from the analysis.

This preliminary data analysis provides a quantification of gendered texts and establishes the presence of ‘everyday topics’; this in turn substantiates the presence of gendered content. This identification of gendered texts on everyday topics provides the basis for the qualitative analysis presented below. Note that although both datasets were derived from women-only forums with enforced gender segregation, the prominence of themes discussed within both sites differed. For example, while the topic of ‘relationships’ was discussed with similar frequency, ‘pregnancy’ and ‘appearance’ were discussed more within the far-right Women’s Forum, and ‘family’ and ‘violence’ were discussed more within the jihadist Women Dawah group. It appears that the focus of the jihadist forum was more on immediate issues, including family and violence, since IS was actually engaging in direct conflict; meanwhile, the far-right forum was able to cover more non-conflict-related themes such as education, shopping, the household, and money. In short, active conflict dynamics can explain the greater amount of violence within jihadist conversations as opposed to those of the far right, as violence is part of daily life while conflict is ongoing.

Ideological engagement, gendered everyday practices, and the assertion of agency

Our topic analysis substantiates the presence of gendered discussion that not only enhances women’s participation and membership within both violent extremist movements, but also allows for the assertion of greater agency in their everyday practices within the movement. Discussion among like-minded women facilitates the process of gendered interpretation through the consumption of extremist material, which in turn enables women to strengthen their understanding of the world in line with how the extremist ideology frames gender norms and identity.

It is interesting to note that this ideological understanding extends to relatively mundane topics and activities of women within the group. For example, on the Women’s Forum, discussions falling under the ‘appearance’ topic covered such issues as the perception of ideal beauty according to white supremacy and/or white nationalism:

³⁶R. Arun et al., ‘On finding the natural number of topics with Latent Dirichlet Allocation: Some observations’, in Mohammed J. Zaki et al. (eds), *Advances in Knowledge Discovery and Data Mining*, vol. 6118, Lecture Notes in Computer Science (Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2010), pp. 391–402, available at: {https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-13657-3_43}; Juan Cao et al., ‘A density-based method for adaptive LDA model selection’, *Neurocomputing*, 72:7–9 (2009), pp. 1775–81, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neucom.2008.06.011>}; Romain Deveaud, Eric SanJuan, and Patrice Bellot, ‘Accurate and effective latent concept modeling for ad hoc information retrieval’, *Document Numérique*, 17:2 (2014), pp. 61–84, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.3166/dn.17.1.61-84>}; T. L. Griffiths and M. Steyvers, ‘Finding scientific topics’, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 101: Supplement 1 (2004), pp. 5228–35, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.0307752101>}; Moor, ‘Nikita-Moor/Ldatuning’.

³⁷Margaret E. Roberts et al., ‘Structural topic models for open-ended survey responses’, *American Journal of Political Science*, 58:4 (2014), pp. 1064–82, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12103>}.

Table 1. Topic predominance across datasets.

Women's Forum dataset		Women Dawah dataset	
Cluster Categories	Prominence	Cluster Categories	Prominence
Ideology *	17.71%	Ideology *	49.88%
Pregnancy *	16.62%	Family *	20.96%
Appearance *	15.51%	Violence *	11.66%
Family *	11.87%	Relationship *	8.78%
Relationship *	10.04%	Appearance *	8.72%
Women	7.87%	Forum Rules *	5.90%
Forum Rules *	7.46%	Pregnancy *	2.89%
Entertainment	3.77%		
Education	3.67%		
Violence *	2.87%		
Shopping	1.58%		
Money	0.77%		
Household	0.26%		

Note: *Denotes a topic present in both datasets.

'Kate': Hi, to all the fellow lovely Aryan women around the world. Have you ever been minding your own business out in public like doing some shopping, going to the nail salon, etc. and all of a sudden, you sense someone or better yet something is staring at you and you look over to find some black female giving you a nasty glare of envy? Just because you have pretty, long hair, beautiful eyes, slim body, etc. There is an endless amount of beautiful white ladies everywhere in the world, so I know I am not the only white woman out in the world who has experienced the sherilla stare of envy.

'Jenny': I'm in the same boat. I hear all the time about how tans are 'healthy looking', but they just make me feel dirty looking. I've been trying to get outside and exercise more in the fresh air, so I've gotten a lovely farmers tan a few months back myself. It looked like I'd been bicep deep in dust. Ultimately, there's very little we can do, though. Cucumber soap is supposed to help lighten the skin, but I have not seen it have any affect [*sic*] on my tans. I don't know if there is a difference between the melanin released reactive to sun exposure and the melanin we see in the darker races, or how it is used ...

'Anna': I have noticed I am getting down, and paying less attention to my care of self, and this post is as much for me as for anyone else. Remember, we are some of God's most beautiful creations, we must take pride in this. Every other race attempts to mimic us, we need to take care of ourselves, for we have been blessed. There is no need to be vain, but to keep ourselves clean, healthy, is to take care of some of God's most precious creations. Clean healthy hair, clean skin, clean clothes, clean living spaces, putting healthy things in our bodies, and keeping active, strong and healthy will help us, especially in times of trouble, and set us aside from others and fully embrace the beauty the lord gave us.

These examples demonstrate the nexus between everyday practices and gendered interpretation of identity, particularly in terms of how a woman should look according to the extreme-right movement and their perceived exceptionalism *vis-à-vis* minorities. However, in these examples,

ideology not only frames the physical appearance of women within the movement, but also reinforces among peers an ideal type of appearance for women if they are to be included in the in-group.

In another discussion in the Women's Forum the falls under the category 'relationships', participants share advice for dating, marriage, and the challenges that arise in relationships.

'Erin': Hello, at 37 I'm worried about finding a husband and becoming a housewife and mother. However, I'm in good physical shape and have a pretty youthful appearance. I'm wanting to meet a nice white man and settle down, but I'm also worried about meeting fake white men. Maybe I should stick to mostly white neighborhoods? I worry sometimes that most of the good men who will be good fathers are taken? Ladies, how did you meet your husband? Where did you meet, online or offline? Did you find him right here on stormfront? Thanks!

'Sarah': You could go onto WhiteDate.com I would also recommend joining Patriotic Alternative, that might be a good place to look for a suitable man. If there is an Asatru Folk assembly there in England, then that might be worth a look as well.

'Jennifer': Instead of dating sites, even White Nationalist dating sites, maybe we should have White Nationalist matchmakers. These could be trusted, 'proven' men and women that we could share personal details with; they could make matches based on what their White Nationalist 'clients' want in a potential partner.

These examples demonstrate the ways in which online forums not only provide a space for women to discuss everyday realities such as dating, but also how to pursue this in a way that adheres to far-right ideology. Although seemingly mundane compared to other far-right activities (including violent activities), discussions such as these serve to demonstrate a clear nexus between online and offline life, reinforcing ideological and identity-based approaches to daily activities among peers who share a similar worldview.

Both the Women's Forum and the Women Dawah group facilitate women's agency, through discussion, ideological engagement with like-minded peers, and the interpretation of daily activities in the context of ideology. However, they also differ in one key regard: the Women Dawah group appeared to be more prescriptive in outlining the 'appropriate' manner for women to carry out daily activities in line with the movement's ideology, and (at times) in terms of how certain activities are legitimised for men. That is, whereas participants in the Women's Forum were negotiating degrees of individualism within the movement, Women Dawah members were more active in conforming with and validating the group. For example, in the Women Dawah group, users provided advice about the use of contraception and the permissibility of this in the context of the group's ideology, which clearly advised against the use of birth control:

'Elif': It is not religiously permissible for a woman, even if she doesn't want a child, to use birth control methods without her husband's permission.³⁸

'Halime': ... birth control should be in a way that will not harm the woman and the baby in case of a possible pregnancy in the future. It is not permissible even with the permission of the husband!³⁹

³⁸Original quote: 'Kadın, kocası istemese dahi kocasından izinsiz herhangi bir doğum kontrol yöntemi uygulaması helal değildir. Şayet erkek kadının hamile kalmasını istemiyorsa, kadın kocasının bilgisi dahilinde herhangi bir doğum kontrol yöntemi uygulayabilir.'

³⁹Original quote: 'Ancak bu doğum kontrolünün kadına ve ileride olası hamilelik ihtimalinde bebeğe zarar vermeyecek şekilde olması gerekir. Şayet zarar verecekse; kocanın izni olsa dahi caiz değildir!'

‘Ezel’: The expression ‘Search for what Allah has written for you ...’ in the verse requires entering into a relationship with the desire for a child. For this reason, the husband has a duty, not the right to ask for children.⁴⁰

Another example from the Women Dawah group is a discussion about adultery and the line between cheating and being faithful:

‘Lale’: Marrying and having fun are separate things. It is not halal to meet and talk, to ask for advice, to meet secretly, to be friends, to have fun and spend time between any man and woman. This does not bring blessings to anybody. It results in both themselves and Muslims being respected less. And it will break a lot of people’s homes.⁴¹

‘Irem’: One of the biggest examples of approaching adultery is that two people who are forbidden to each other text each other ... Every sane person knows very well that adultery will be approached by first talking and then meeting. No one says out of the blue ‘stop, let me go downstairs and commit adultery’. But if he gets his neighbour’s number and writes to her (for example) on WhatsApp or social media, he has taken the first step, then if she replies to him, the conversation is advanced, finally a meeting is arranged and the devil prevails. It’s called flirting in public. And Muslims are prohibited from this tradition of ignorance.⁴²

Through their active engagement in the online space, participants in Women Dawah and the Women’s Forum are able to interpret their daily reality through the lens of their ideology. This enables participants in both groups to understand their place within the organisation or movement, providing them with a sense of meaning within the group while also blurring the boundary between public and private spheres. Furthermore, despite the fact that both far-right and jihadist groups institutionalise and promote patriarchal power relations between the genders, our analysis reveals that women-only forums also provide a space for women to push back against this.

Ideological contestation and ‘pushback’: Challenging patriarchal power relations

In both the Women’s Forum and Women Dawah, there was evidence to suggest that these online forums served as gendered sites of ideological contestation, where there would also be pushback against the patriarchal gender ideology and traditional gender norms espoused by the movements. In this sense, women within violent extremist movements assert agency in their everyday practices to subvert patriarchal power relations through the process of gendered reinterpretation, exercising ‘tactical’ creativity. Within the Women’s Forum, there were clear examples of women negotiating individualism within the misogynistic and patriarchal ideological structures prevalent among the far right. For example, the Women’s Forum users questioned physical and aesthetic standards prescribed for women, questioning their fairness:

⁴⁰Original quote: ‘Ayetteki “Allah sizin için ne yazmışsa, onu arayın ...” ifadesi, çocuk isteği ile ilişkiye girmeyi gerektirir. Bu sebeple kocanın çocuk isteme hakkı değil, görevi vardır. Bu yüzden Peygamberimizin şöyle buyurduğu rivayet edilmiştir: “Cahir! Allah’tan çocuk istemeye bak (Fe aleyke bi’l-keysi, el-keysi)” buyurdu, demiştir (Buhari, Nikah, 122).’

⁴¹Original quote: ‘Evlenmek ile eğlenmek ayrı şeylerdir. Hiçbir yabancı kadınla/erkekke eğlenmek ve vakit geçirmek için görüşüp konuşmak, dertleşmek, gizlice buluşmak, arkadaş olmak helal değildir. Bu hiç kimseye khayır getirmez. Hem kendilerini hemde müslümanları hafif gösterir. Ve bir çok kimsenin de yuvasını yıkar.’

⁴²Original quote: ‘Birbirine haram olan iki kişinin telefonla mesajlaşması bir de özellikle evlilik niyeti ile bunu yapması zinaya yaklaşmanın en büyük örneklerinden biridir. Çünkü zinaya yaklaşmak başka nasıl olur? Bir kimse eğer sapık, akıl hastası gibi problemleri yok ise her akıl sahibi zinaya önce konuşarak sonra görüşerek yaklaşacağını çok iyi bilir. Kimse durup dururken “dur ben aşağı komşuya inip zina edeyim” demez. Ama komşusunun numarasını alır ona (örneğin) what-sapattan veya sosyal medyadan yazar ise ilk adımı atmış olur, sonra ona geri cevap verirse sohbet ilerletilir, en sonunda bir buluşma ve görüşme ayarlanır ve şeytan galip gelir. Bunun ismi halk arasında flört etmektir. Ve müslümanlar bu cahiliyye adetinden men edilmiştir.’

'Mary': I see that a lot of newly red-pilled males are encouraged to lift weights, eat healthily etc. which is great. But in this same scenario [*sic*], I do not see any encouragement aimed at females. They're just referred to as fat or ugly and that's the end of it. Shouldn't we be encouraging both sexes to be the best they can be? I come from a very poor working class family. My family has eaten the typical British diet for about two generations (in other words sugar and stodge) I am working on improving my health and appearance through diet and exercise. Are there any other women who are attempting to do this? Any tips?

'Kara': We should ask ourselves is an artificially tiny frame a good thing? Maybe it makes you attractive to some. But do you want to marry a man who will support you and your children for life? If so the last thing you want is to attract men with a fetish for an artificial shape that's actually unhealthy and bad for fertility. I'm only against 'waist control', not sensible corset wearing. And if your goal isn't to have a traditional family then obviously what I'm saying won't matter to you.

There was also pushback against the far-right conceptualisation of the patriarchal traditional family and the fetishisation of the ideal female aesthetic within the movement:

'Jessica': Not all women are built to be 'homemakers', nor was this really that traditional before like ... the 1900s. For most of European history, women could seek secular divorces, own property, work outside of the home (which was uncommon for both sexes), and had more or less the same duties as the men, except they tended more to children than to physical labour (but pretty much everyone including the children had to do some physical labour). The biggest difference being we weren't working for corporations, but rather in our own home. It's not natural for men to sit in cubicles for 40 hours a week, either. For most of human history in general, governments were far less powerful, corporations and companies were virtually non-existent, and most people had something to the effect of what we'd call a 'homestead' today, where the entire family would have various duties around a 'farm' of sorts (or an average family home as it was then). And I say this as a woman who aspires to be a homemaker, one day, when it's possible. With all due respect, 99% of people's lifestyles today do not reflect what was common or normal for most of human history or even European history specifically. The world has changed so much since then. That being said, I can't stand 'trad' men. There is nothing traditional about hating and judging women, about having borderline or even explicitly abusive attitudes towards women, or fetishising the 1950s aesthetic.

'Hannah': We must be leaders and examples to our children and teach them the roles that life defines. We must make sure our men children know as much as our girl children in the ways of a household. I was blessed to have a husband who actually liked to cook and help around the house, with six boys and a girl there was plenty to do. We had a huge dry erase board on our kitchen wall and every Sunday the names would change on the board for their chore for the week. They also (the boys) learn to do laundry and such, isn't that what a relationship is about teamwork? My kiddos are all married and producing the next generation. The wives of the boys, they are very happy that they help out. My husband taught them well as isn't it a happy wife makes for a happy life??

Although not as explicit, there was also ideological contestation within the Women Dawah forum, particularly in terms of questioning misogyny and patriarchy:

‘Yasemin’: Cooperate with your husband about jihad. Encourage your husband to join the jihad. Send your husband to the battlefield with immortal words.⁴³

‘Oznur’: There is no doubt that even if it is for the purpose of inviting and preaching Islam, the conflict between the two sexes, whether in work or education, cannot be avoided. Therefore, it is haram for men and women to be together. Since the Companions of the Prophet knew that the religious evidence made men and women acting and being in the same place together unlawful, they forbade it and prevented it.⁴⁴

‘Sibel’: A person; an Islamic marriage can be in question only when the person with whom she will continue her lineage is morally complete or close to a sufficient level. For an Islamic marriage to be sound, spouses must have morals. The emergence of an auspicious generation from an immoral man or woman. Is not possible except by Allah’s will. And with that, taking the matter to Allah and His Messenger, it is useful to correct a person with moral weakness and to take precautions.⁴⁵

‘Fatma’: Umar bin Khattab was very jealous of women. For this reason, he advised the Messenger of Allah (pbuh) to order the hijab, and the Quran’s order to wear the hijab was compatible with this.⁴⁶

By enabling tactical creativity through discussion, shared experiences, and debate in women-only forums, it is evident that these gendered online sites not only facilitate gendered practices by allowing women to share everyday experiences and engage in ideological debates, but also provide an important means for women to navigate these gender-specific issues within the movement.

Conclusion

Through a critical analysis of ideological gender constructs in two women-only forums – the Women’s Forum on Stormfront.org and Women Dawah, a Turkish-language pro-IS group chat on Telegram – this article argues that gendered sites influence women’s everyday practices within extremist movements, and in turn play a key role in closing the gap between online and offline life. Data from both the Women’s Forum and Women Dawah show women exerting greater agency in their everyday practices despite otherwise constraining gendered ideological constructs. Such forums not only facilitate gendered practices by allowing women to share everyday experiences, hold ideological discussions, and engage in debate, but also provide an important mechanism to navigate these issues within the movements themselves, by exercising tactical creativity amid ideological and patriarchal power structures. Although the discussions may appear mundane, the reinforcement of these gendered everyday practices by the virtual communities in

⁴³Original quote: ‘Kocanla cihat konusunda işbirliği yap. Kocanızı cihada katılmaya teşvik edin. Ölümsüz sözlerle kocanı savaş alanına gönder.’

⁴⁴Haram means it is forbidden or proscribed by Islamic law; Original quote: ‘Şüphe yok ki, İslam’a davet ve tebliğ amacıyla bile olsa, iki cinsin ihtilatı ister çalışma alanında, ister öğrenim alanlarında olsun, karşılıklı bakışın önüne geçilemez. Bu yüzden kadınlarla erkeklerin bir arada bulunmaları haramdır. Sahabeler, şer’i delillerin kadın erkek ihtilatını haram kıldığını bildikleri için, bundan sakındırması ve engel olmuşlardır.’

⁴⁵Original quote: ‘insan; soyunu devam ettireceği kişi ahlak olarak ancak tam olduğu zaman veya yeterli seviyeye yaklaştığı zaman İslami bir evlilik söz konusu olabilir. Çünkü İslami bir evliliğin sağlam olabilmesi için eşlerin ahlak sahibi olması gerekir. Ahlak sahibi olmayan erkek ya da kadından hayırlı bir neslin çıkması; Allah’ın dilemesi müstesna mümkün değildir. Ve bununla beraber meseleyi Allah’a ve Rasulune götürerek; ahlak zafiyeti olan kimseyi islah etmek, bunun önemini almak faydalıdır.’

⁴⁶Original quote: ‘Ömer Bin el Hattab radiyallahu anh kadınlara karşı çok kıskanç idi. Bu yüzden Rasulullah sallallahu aleyhi ve sellem’e hicabı emretmesini işaret etmiş, bunun üzerine Kur’an’ın hicab emri buna muvafık gelmiştir.’

turn strengthens a sense of meaning and purpose in the movement, despite the discussions being ideologically confined to the private sphere in many ways.

The current study has important implications for understanding international security; moreover, it demonstrates that recognising the nexus between international and feminist security is key in responding to security threats and challenges at the global level, given the close relationship between online and offline spaces. Online forums, and indeed women-only forums, transcend state boundaries and facilitate the participation of diverse individuals from around the world, brought together by a perceived common identity and ideology, who share views, experiences and interpret (and reinterpret) participation within extremist groups. Our findings shed light on the differences in participation between women and men, as well as the way in which such online forums can frame and reinforce gendered practices in extremist movements, in turn serving as ‘gendered sites’. This has important consequences for deradicalisation and disengagement strategies, which remain overwhelmingly gender neutral despite the differential impacts of violent extremism – both within and outside the movement – on women and men. The findings of this study provide evidence of how women navigate agency in these forums, while also challenging the stereotype that women within extremist movements are typically passive actors confined to traditional roles.

In his book, *Does Terrorism Work? A History*, Richard English addresses the concept of the ‘inherent rewards’ associated with terrorism, including that participation can provide fame, money, excitement, or – importantly for the current study – purpose.⁴⁷ In other words, in addition to ideological drivers that play a role in radicalisation and sustain involvement, individuals derive benefit from their participation in extremist groups. Our findings have two important implications: firstly, that it is important to integrate gender into preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) policy and programming, and secondly, that feminist and international security cannot be considered as distinct from one another. Online women-only forums in many ways operate as virtual support networks that transcend state boundaries. They serve as gendered sites that foster virtual communities, facilitating the development of friendship and the discussion of everyday practices, including advising and supporting one another through otherwise isolating participation. Moreover, in these forums, female members of extremist groups are not only able to get support and advice, but are able to get this from other individuals with similar value systems and experiences. For example, ‘Ami’ on the Women’s Forum shares that:

I have lost all of my immediate family, ‘WN’ husband deserted me to chase younger girls. No children. No real friends in my area. I have tried to make friends online but am usually left disappointed by their true intentions. Anyways, Just kind of needing to vent here. I often feel out of place because of my situation – being childless and full of anxieties. I hope I won’t be a lone wolf forever, but it gets scary thinking ‘what if this is just my life now?’ I thought I’d post and see if there happened to be any women in the same boat here?

Furthermore, these gendered sites serve as spaces where women can utilise their agency to not only participate within these extremist networks, but also engage in tactical activities to ideologically interpret and reinterpret gender power relations, identity, and norms within the movement. These forums serve as safe spaces for women to establish a sense of ontological security, and in some cases to contest misogyny and gender power relations that constrain their agency within the group. Extremist groups – particularly far-right and jihadist groups – are inherently hostile towards women, but some allow slightly more participation for women than others. This also could in part explain why white nationalist and far-right women are permitted to post elsewhere

⁴⁷Richard English, *Does Terrorism Work? A History* (1st edn, Oxford, UK and New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016).

on Stormfront.org, whereas jihadi women are not generally welcomed elsewhere on the IS Telegram channel.

In conclusion, our study has two important implications for gender-responsive P/CVE policy and programming. First, gendered sites where women can actively discuss everyday practices through simultaneous processes of ideological interpretation and reinterpretation are important, especially for consolidating a sense of meaning and purpose within the movement. As our select quotes demonstrate, these forums are important for the social well-being of these women and offer a venue for them to express their agency amid otherwise patriarchal power-structures espoused by the ideology of these extremist groups, as well as providing crucial peer support systems through participation. Therefore, any P/CVE programme needs to be gender-responsive, and compensate for the loss of social and peer support networks that women would derive from their participation in the movement. Second, these women-only forums and the seemingly mundane conversations that take place within them should not be dismissed as harmless. In fact, they can be integral to women's radicalisation and sustain their involvement, allowing them to consolidate their ontological security and their 'place' within the movement through this support from peers within the broader extremist (transnational) network. Consequently, when considering existing P/CVE strategies, it is crucial to include gender-sensitive risk factors and account for the distinct experiences of women within violent extremism. This should include responding to the push and pull factors that are also often discussed within these forums. Otherwise, women-only extremist spaces will continue to serve as a potential vector for entry into such movements, as well as helping to retain and support existing members.

Acknowledgements. This research was partly funded by the Canadian Network for Research on Terrorism, Security, and Society. The authors wish to thank the participants of the Social Science Research Council's Extreme Right Radicalisation Online workshop, Meredith Loken, and the anonymous reviewers for providing very helpful comments on drafts of this article. Finally, we thank Christina Schmid for her essential research support.

Dr Yannick Veilleux-Lepage is an Assistant Professor of Terrorism and Political Violence at the Institute of Security and Global Affairs at Leiden University. He holds a doctorate in International Relations from the University of St Andrews in Scotland. Dr Veilleux-Lepage's research interests include the creation of online narratives and propaganda that fosters or normalises terrorism; historical antecedents to terrorism; far-right extremism and the transnational links of far-right groups; ideological and technical diffusion, and the application of evolutionary approaches to social sciences. Dr Veilleux-Lepage is also an Associate Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society, a Senior Research Associate of the Canadian Network for Research on Terrorism, Security, and Society, and an Associate Fellow of the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism. Author's email: y.d.veilleux-lepage@fgga.leidenuniv.nl

Dr Alexandra Phelan is Deputy Director of the Monash Gender, Peace and Security Centre (Monash GPS), and a Lecturer in Politics and International Relations at Monash University. Dr Phelan's research at GPS focuses on gendered approaches to understanding terrorism and political violence. Her research interests include insurgent governance and legitimisation activities, insurgent women, political violence, illicit financing and organised crime with particular focus on Latin America. She has published on insurgent legitimisation strategies, the Colombian conflict, and women in terrorism. She is the editor of the book *Terrorism, Gender and Women: Toward an Integrated Research Agenda* (Routledge, 2021). She currently serves as a contributing editor for the journal *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, and is a Small Wars Journal-El Centro Fellow. Author's email: Alexandra.r.Phelan@monash.edu

Dr Ayse D. Lokmanoglu is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Center for Communication & Public Policy at Northwestern University and a member of Vox-Pol leadership team. Her work takes a mixed methods approach that integrates computational methodologies and critical cultural theory to examine information campaigns in digital media associated with racial, gender, and religious supremacy. Her dissertation 'Imagined Economics: An Analysis of Non-state Actor Economic Messaging' was awarded the 2022 National Communication Association Gerald R. Miller Outstanding Doctoral Dissertation Award. Author's email: ayse.lokmanoglu@northwestern.edu