

Written evidence from Dr Jessica Aiston, Queen Mary University, Dr Veronika Koller, Lancaster University, Dr Alexandra Krendel, Lancaster University, Dr Mark McGlashan, Birmingham City University [EOV0019]

Misogynist language online can escalate to offline violence against women and girls

We address the select committee's first question, **"To what extent is there evidence that men who exhibit certain non-criminal behaviours, including online, go on to commit criminal offences against women and girls?"**, and provide evidence that violently misogynist language in online spaces can escalate to offline violence against women and girls (VAWG). Our evidence is based on academic research into the so-called "manosphere", a loose network of websites and online fora whose members share anti-feminist and misogynistic beliefs. That network comprises different groups, including men's rights activists, male separatists known as Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW), self-styled "pick-up artists" who advise other men on how to have numerous sexual partners, and involuntary celibates (incels), who wish to but do not have relationships with women. Most members of the manosphere are heterosexual men who align themselves with "red pill" philosophy, a belief that Western society is "gynocentric" (centred around women) and biased against men, a perceived reality that is believed to have been hidden by the undue influence of feminists.

Based on our research, we can say that there is some evidence that the language of the manosphere can escalate into physical violence: in a few cases, [incels](#), who are steeped in a discourse condoning VAWG, have gone on to commit offline acts of violence, including Elliot Rogers in Isla Vista (US) in 2014 and Jake Davison in Portsmouth in 2021. There is also linguistic [evidence](#) that pick-up artists recommend disrespecting women, disregarding lack of consent and acting in emotionally abusive ways. More broadly, the language used in the manosphere dehumanises women, denies violence against women and portrays women as desiring hostile behaviour from men. All of these have the potential to lead to tensions in gender relations and escalate into offline violence.

We are a well-established group of four [researchers](#) who have worked together for over four years to investigate the typical features of language use in the manosphere, identify its harmful potential and advise educators about preventing radicalisation of boys and young men. Our work has highlighted the extent and spread of violently misogynist language online and its potential effects outside the communities in which that language is used. Using approximately 12 million words of 2018-2020 language data and analysing them with computer-assisted methods, we have found that women are routinely dehumanised (Finding A), violence against women and girls is denied (Finding B) and women are represented as desiring violent behaviour from men (Finding C). This can lead to boys and young men becoming desensitised and potentially radicalised (Problem 1), along with difficulties to discuss matters of gender equality and sexual harassment in the classroom (Problem 2). Here we provide evidence of our findings, highlight the problems identified and propose amendments to the Online Safety Bill.

Background

Various behaviours are linked with extremism, and our research suggests that linguistic behaviour in

the manosphere provides possible indicators of extremism and radicalisation. The 2023 UK Prisons and Probation Service’s (HMPPS) [ERG22+](#) (Extremism Risk Guidance) identifies 22 personal and contextual factors contributing to extremist activities and categorises them into three domains: engagement, intent, and capability. [Recent MOJ research](#) shows that the best indicators for involvement with an extremist group, cause and/or ideology are the Tier 1 factors given in Table 1.

Domain	Description	Factor	
Engagement	Factors significant to an individual’s pathway into extremism	1	Need to redress injustice
		2	Need to defend against threats
		3	Identity, meaning and belonging
		8	Political, moral motivation
Intent	Factors significant to overcoming inhibitions against offending and/or harming others	15	Us vs them thinking
		16	Dehumanisation of the enemy
		17	Attitudes that justify offending
Capability	Factors enabling individuals to offend, contribute to/perpetrate harm	20	Personal knowledge, skills, competencies
		21	Access to networks, funding, equipment

Table 1: Tier 1 factors in extremism risk

Our research has found clear evidence within the manosphere of **Tier 1 factors** relating especially to **engagement** and **intent**. Participation in the manosphere is underpinned and motivated by a generally anti-feminist political and moral alignment (**8**) and the idea that men (us) and women (them) exist in a perpetual state of conflict (**15**). This alignment is codified in a “red pill” philosophy (**3, 8**), which posits that women are inherently Machiavellian (i.e. manipulative, callous and amoral in their approach to relationships with men) and that men should therefore take a nihilistic approach to life and relationships with women. Users derive multifarious but coherent identities from this anti-feminist alignment and find belonging in communities of like-minded men (**3**; e.g. incels, MGTOW), which offer them places to identify themselves in relation to perceived injustices (**1**) caused by feminism and threats posed by women (**2**). Thus, the manosphere provides widespread (and growing) access to communities that offer members identity, meaning and belonging (**3**), motivated specifically by anti-feminism. The latter can range from debates on feminism as a political ideology to stark expressions of violent misogyny and hatred of women. Such misogyny can be – and routinely is – articulated through the objectification and dehumanisation (**16**) of women. Finally, we have found that misogynistic attitudes can serve to justify a range of offending behaviours (**17**), including pick-up artists inciting sexual aggression towards and coercion of women by advocating to “overcome” women saying no to sex, and incels endorsing extreme nihilistic beliefs (known as “the black pill”) and offline violence.

Finding A: Women are dehumanised

Several of our publications find evidence that women and girls are routinely dehumanised in the manosphere through being [likened to non-human beings and parasites](#) (e.g. female humanoids

[*femoids, foids*], *vermin, leeches, bitches*) and regarded as either repulsive animals due to their perceived lack of attraction (e.g. *landwhales*) or as objects to be manipulated (e.g. *plates* to be spun). Women are further dehumanised through being conceptualised as a commodity on the “sexual market”, with their *sexual market value* being ranked on a scale from 1 to 10. Women can be (and are) thus discussed solely as numbers in the manosphere. Overall, members of the manosphere construct women as both a threat to men but also as an object of sexual desire that men are encouraged to pursue. This finding is linked to ERG22+ factor 16: dehumanisation of the enemy.

Finding B: Denying VAWG

[Our work](#) has found that a salient feature of manosphere language is the denial of violence against women and girls. For example, the word *lie* frequently occurs in phrases such as “all women lie”, where users claim that women frequently lie about experiencing rape and other sexual assault. This makes sexual violence deniable. Moreover, instances of violence against female victims are downplayed in favour of those against male victims. [We have also found](#) manosphere users argue that women make false claims of violence in order to benefit themselves (e.g. advantages in custody or divorce disputes, financial gains, public sympathy) or to get revenge on men and negatively affect their reputations. Additionally, women are referred to as *bitches* (see Finding A), *sluts* and *whores* across the manosphere, and – in contrast to men – women and girls are sexualised and discussed as mostly sexual partners. Talking and thinking about women in these derogatory and sexualised ways has the potential to downplay the seriousness of violence committed against them. This finding is linked to ERG22+ factor 2: need to defend against threats.

Finding C: Portraying women as desiring hostile behaviour from men

[We found](#) that in the manosphere, women are seen as wanting male partners who could cause them harm. For instance, women are described as “hybristophiliacs” (i.e. having sexual interest in criminals), which could legitimise manosphere users engaging in criminal behaviour. Similarly, women are described as having a biological drive towards “hypergammy” (i.e. entering relationships with men of a higher social status) or “war bride syndrome” (i.e. ability to quickly cut ties with former partners and fall in love with a captor). The use of such pseudo-scientific language can legitimise misogyny and increase the credibility or persuasive appeal of respective claims, while making it difficult for young people who haven’t yet learned critical approaches to scientific claims to evaluate this material. Furthermore, pick-up artist “seduction strategies” often encourage sexual harassment or aggression towards women. For example, techniques may involve insulting women and trying to lower their self-esteem (“negging”). Pick-up artists also claim that [women’s resistance to sexual activity is only “token” or “symbolic”](#) and is therefore something that men need to “push through” and “overcome”. This encourages men to ignore women’s non-consent, possibly leading to sexual harassment or rape. This finding is linked to ERG22+ factor 17: attitudes that justify offending.

In view of these findings, two main problems emerge.

Problem 1: Desensitisation

First, boys and young men may become desensitised to gender-based violence and potentially radicalised. Apart from the attacks by incels mentioned above, this problem is all the more acute because of the mainstreaming of manosphere language. This is for example seen in online media unrelated to the manosphere, such as gamers’ YouTube channels, as well as in the high public profile

of Andrew Tate and other manosphere ideologues: earlier this year, the charity Hope not Hate [reported](#) that 52% of 16-17 year old boys held a positive view of the former social media influencer.

Problem 2: Consequences for schools

The growing influence of the manosphere makes it harder to discuss matters of gender equality in the classroom, as [boys accuse their teachers of hating men](#) and repeat manosphere talking points. Teachers have also reported an increase in boys engaging in sexist, harassing behaviours towards female pupils and teachers, from “make me a sandwich” jokes to [threats of sexual violence](#), which they attribute to the influence of Andrew Tate (see above). Teachers and educators have reported similar difficulties during our own outreach work with education charities including the Human Restoration Project (US) and the National Grid for Learning (UK). Sexist, harassing behaviour can have a detrimental impact on women’s and girl’s mental health and self-esteem and discourage their full participation in the classroom. However, the evidence at this point is anecdotal; further empirical research is needed to discern the full scale of the problem.

Policy Recommendation: Amendments to the Online Safety Bill

To address the issues discussed in this evidence, we recommend that modifications be made to the Online Safety Bill so that social media platforms are required to identify content which promotes and perpetuates VAWG. Companies should be obligated to do so using proactive technology (e.g. automatic keyword/phrase matching) alongside human moderators, to label such content as harmful and to swiftly (i.e. within no more than three days) remove this content from their platforms. This policy proposal is aligned with the renewed focus on protecting women and girls in the [passed version of the Bill](#) and would also tie into the 2021 Law Commission [recommendation](#) to extend offences of stirring up hatred to include sex or gender, explicitly mentioning the context of “the growing threat of ‘incel ideology’”. We urge the Women and Equalities Select Committee to revisit this concept as doing so would minimise the risk of users becoming radicalised by such content and of women and girls being harmed.

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