YOUNG AND EXTREME

– A YOUTH AND GENDER PERSPECTIVE ON VIOLENT EXTREMISM

ENGLISH SUMMARY

PREFACE

This publication is a summary of the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society's publication series *Young and Extreme (2016)* and the supplementary document *Foreign is Frightening (2016)* [Främmande är skrämmande]. In the publications, the agency has learnt more about young people, gender and extremism. The publication series *Young and Extreme* is a compilation of knowledge about three violent environments – left-wing extremism, right-wing extremism and Islamic extremism. The authors of the publications discuss the common norms, ideals and gender roles. Furthermore, examples of propaganda used in the environments to attract young men and women are included. Suggestions for preventative measures to stop young people from being attracted by such messages are also included. In the publication *Foreign is Frightening* we listen to the voices of young people on violent extremism; the text is an important complement to previous publications about violent extremism that often talk about young people, but seldom to them.

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INTRODUCTION

Violent extremism is a serious problem for democracy. The violence used and legitimated by extremist groups or people as a political method challenges and threatens democratic society.[1] In Sweden there are three predominant violent extremist movements: right-wing extremism, left-wing extremism and Islamic extremism.

Despite great ideological differences between the groups, there is a common feature that unites all of them in the refusal of democratic principles and rules, thus posing a threat to basic democratic values. The violence that these groups target towards individuals on the basis of their political or religious convictions, ethnic identity, sexuality, gender expression or identity is an attack on the principle that all people are equal. Hence it is important that mutual powers protect basic democratic values and respect for human rights. These are the most important steps of the work to reduce the breeding ground for violent extremism (Government Communication 2014/15:144).

Including the gender perspective in the work against violence – regardless of its type – is essential for shedding light on what can be thought to be behind violent deeds and how preventative work can be developed. The *Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society's 2015 youth survey*[2] shows that the frequency of violent behaviour is 4.4 times higher amongst young men who agree with stereotypical statements about gender roles when compared to young men who do not agree with these statements or stereotypical norms. Therefore gender is an important variable to take into consideration; as is the significance of groups. Group identity contributes heavily to constructions of masculinity and violence. Performing violent actions in front of "their" group can reinforce their masculine status, just as a violent deed may also be essential to show loyalty to the group (The Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society, 2014a). This knowledge can be useful for use in the work with young people to prevent violence.

It is also important to formulate measures surrounding factors that are possible to change. Gender itself is a factor that is impossible to change as part of the preventative work against violence, however it is possible for us to change how we create gender. We can change the expectations placed on how young women and men are to behave and how these expectations contribute to the higher proportion of young and adult men being violent towards other men and women, when compared to the levels of violence amongst young and adult women. To be able to do this, we need to understand the norms surrounding the construction of masculinity and femininity in different groups and how these norms influence people's behaviour.

It is essential that work to prevent violence, threats, bullying and harassment becomes strategic and long-sighted throughout Sweden's municipalities, and that the matter of preventing violent extremism is included in cohesive work to prevent violence.

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[1]Democratic society refers to: *"human rights and democratic principles as those established in the Instrument of Government (RF) and in international agreements for human rights create the basic social values".* (Government Communication 2014/15:144).

[2] The survey was conducted during the spring and summer of 2015. It was sent to 5,000 randomly chosen young people between the ages of 16 and 25 who were resident in Sweden. Approximately 45 per cent of young people responded to the questionnaire and their answers provide the statistical basis.

It involves:

- preventing the risk that young people are attracted to environments of violent extremism

- preventing stereotyped understandings of gender roles

- reducing the risk of violence and hate crimes.

The Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society created the publication series *Young and Extreme* and the publication *Foreign is Frightening* – four publications about young people, gender and violent extremism (The Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society, 2016a; b; c; d). In *Young and Extreme*, the authors expand on existing research. These are important complements to previous agency publications on the subject that, to a greater extent, is based on original research or work by journalists. The texts aim to provide basic knowledge of violent extremist environments from a gender perspective and can provide support for the development of measures to prevent violent extremism. The publication *Foreign is Frightening* listens to what young people have to say about violent extremism, the material is based on six focus-group interviews with young people.

The four publications address:

- the violent left-wing extremist environments (The Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society, 2016a)

- the violent right-wing extremist environments (The Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society, 2016b)

- the violent Islamic extremist environments (The Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society, 2016c)

- young people's take on violent extremism (Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society, 2016d).

Together they provide a broad picture of violent extremism in Sweden from the perspective of young people and gender.

In addition to the publications, there are three podcasts in Swedish that discuss violent left-wing, right-wing and Islamic extremism. These can be found at www.mucf.se.

LEFT-WING EXTREMISM

The publication is a compiled understanding of the autonomous left-wing environment from an intersectional perspective. More precisely, it means that we have looked at how gender and other social categories are relevant to the political groups on the far left and how these in turn influence recruitment and behavioural patterns in such political environments. The publication has a broad grasp of the autonomous left-wing environment where the existing research that forms the basis of the article has not specifically examined violent individuals or groupings. Research shows that the autonomous left-wing environment is characterised by its loose composition of individuals that flit between different groups and organisations and a temporary engagement in particular issues where violence can occur. The publication also provides a deepened historical background for the autonomous left-wing movement in its entirety.

We can establish that gender and other aspects of inequality have been continually important issues for the left-wing autonomous movement. Although the movement outwardly formulates feminist and anti-racist messages, many of the internal debates have centred on the importance of making the movement welcoming for more people than the generally dominant group of young white men. These issues have been raised in particular by women and older participants.

Internal discussions have also contributed to the view on violence being questioned – being violent for a political purpose, or performing constant violent political actions has been viewed as exclusive and difficult to combine with a broadly aimed political organisation. This is partly because the environment has become less violent than it was during a turbulent period in the early and mid-2000s. This has resulted in groups that were previously characterised by their violent behaviour losing their significance. Over time, research has pointed to a shift away from violence towards peaceful forms of political impact.

There are a number of important differences between autonomous left-wing movements and the other extremist environments (i.e., right-wing extremism and Islamic extremism). The left-wing autonomous movements are comparatively heterogenic with regard to gender. The lack of formal management plays an important role in this context, and as such management would make it possible to place men and women in different parts of the movement's organisations. Nor do the left-wing autonomous movements have the presence of symbolism coloured by heterosexuality that marks other environments where women are made into passive victims or rewards. On the contrary, research has seen how there has been intensive internal debate at times when the organisations have been seen as being too "macho" or "laddish".

Finally, suggestions are presented for how to counteract radicalisation in the autonomous left-wing environment. Given that research points to radicalisation as a relational process, i.e., something successive in the meeting between different groups and individuals, it should only be in these meetings where effective solutions can be found. For social operators who wish to prevent the radicalisation of young people (and others), the challenge is therefore thought to be the construction of forms for political involvement that are encouraging and supportive and where all young people are able to see and feel that their actions have results.

RIGHT-WING EXTREMISM

The publication is a compiled understanding of the right-wing extremist environment from a gender perspective. The author provides an overview of the environment and how this relates to young people. Here, the reasons for why young people are attracted and recruited to violent right-wing environments are highlighted from a gender perspective, as are the different factors and driving forces behind young people both joining and leaving this environment.

Right-wing extremism, Nazism and National Socialism are no new phenomena in either Sweden or Europe. These ideas and movements have been present for a long time and were particularly prevalent in the early decades of the 20th century. Modern Swedish violent right-wing extremism is part of a comprehensive and often overlapping international network that stretches throughout the western world, but has particularly close ties to several organisations in the Nordic countries and Europe. The right-wing extremist environment in Sweden has previously adopted new techniques to spread its message. In recent years, the internet has become the primary source of information, where the message is spread through a number of different channels that make up a separate communication ecosystem. Within the environment today, there is an ideological continuum that collects the more extreme violent neo-nazi groupings, non-organised violent right-wing extremist individuals and the right-wing extremists as well as the established radical right-wing populist political parties.

The ideological messages and their symbolism are mediated with help from an involved propaganda network that comprises a number of different channels such as websites, music, magazines, demonstrations and so on. The basic ideological outlook often rests upon conservative ideals of masculinity where men are given the role of the warrior. These ideals play an important part in the search for identity amongst the young men that believe that involvement in right-wing extremist environments is a masculine rite of passage. The central messages within the movement are composed of extreme nationalism, xenophobia and racism alongside arch-conservative values, alongside an outspoken resistance to gender equality, socialism and liberalism. What these ideas have in common from a gender perspective is a hyper-masculinity that often includes a narrowly defined, exaggerated and often violence-oriented masculine ideals.

Young men are the most important target group for right-wing extremist groups and organisations, whereas young women are only marginally affected. Right-wing extremist ideology provides little room for women as independent citizens. Instead it often refers to their "natural duty" to bear children and raise the nation's future activists. In this context, motherhood is almost treated in the same vein as male national service – giving birth to and raising the nation's children is just as important to a nation's survival as its defence. Hence both immigration and feminism that question heteronormativity are threats that must be combatted.

Recruitment to the environment currently takes place predominantly as direct meetings between young people and activists, plus with the help of information and communication technology channels. The publication presents more general and comprehensive preventative measures that can reduce the risk of young people becoming involved in the environment. These can be summarised in the following measures:

1) fostering strong confidence in democracy

2) strengthening young people's participation in democracy

3) reaching out to young people at risk

4) offering support programmes

5) increasing society's knowledge

6) increasing national and international collaboration on the issue.

ISLAMIC EXTREMISM

The publication is a compiled understanding of violent Islamic extremism from a gender perspective. The publication primarily addresses a violent Islamic extremist organisation, the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS), which is described and analysed through the lens of gender.

Research shows that different types of gender constructions within violent Islamic extremism influence young people's decisions to join movements within a given environment. Violent Islamic extremism – IS in particular – offers several different types of masculine ideals - ideals that can function as an attractive force in the movement for young men together with other factors such as witnessing male humiliation, marginalisation and experiences of power relationships characterised by violence. Propaganda that is spread through social media contributes to painting a picture of a presence filled with adventure and male camaraderie. To attract young people to the environment, IS uses imagery and audio that young people in the western world are familiar with from television series and computer games. The aim of the propaganda is to create a 'cool factor' around fighting for IS and jihad, a phenomenon known as "jihad cool".

The feminist ideal that arises in IS also creates an attractive force that is important to recognise. The women are viewed as carriers of social norms and values and therefore form an important aspect of building the IS identity. Sisterhood, together with the message that the self-proclaimed Islamic State is the only state where a Muslim woman can be free forms part of the attraction to the environment. These are further combined with other factors, such as the idea that all Muslims are under attack (a romanticised picture of life in the Muslim community) and the idea of securing a place in paradise.

Generally speaking, in violent Islamic extremism, male honour is found in their role as warriors, whereas female honour is found in the home. Men will kill the enemy whilst the woman takes care of the children and home and praises her husband's actions as a warrior. To summarise, the feminist ideal within IS has various meanings. They allow women to be both a triggering force for

violence and be fascinated by it, something which is often ascribed to men. At the same time the women are expected to play the traditional female role of child-bearer.

The explanations highlighted in the publication are based on both social and ideological factors. Social factors such as marginalisation can be understood as a driving force in the environment, whilst ideology can work as an attractive force for the environment. To a great extent, propaganda contains ideas that speak to young people who feel alienated from society and are looking for some form of context; a fellowship. The gender analysis also provides us with important perspectives to include in preventative measures to refute the messages young people encounter in the organisation's propaganda and enables it to focus particular efforts on young men and women who are thought to be in the risk zone.

The publication presents a number of preventative efforts to meet and counteract violent Islamic ideology. These can be summarised by the following points:

1) develop work in schools, discuss conspiracy theories

2) develop work for increased integration

3) support the parents – the family can create practical and emotional barriers

4) counterparts and messages

5) gender-changing efforts

6) work to strengthen democracy.

YOUNG PEOPLE'S OPINIONS ON VIOLENT EXTREMISM

The publication makes young people's opinions on violent extremism heard. In December 2015, we held meetings where young people were able to discuss violent extremism. We asked the young people about what they know about the concept, their experiences of it, how young people and their surroundings are affected and what structural consequences they see – for example, whether they view violent extremism as a threat to society or democracy. A total of six focus-group meetings were carried out at different locations in Sweden in which a total of 48 young people between the ages of 15 and 25 participated. Certain themes were established from the discussions that arose during the meetings:

1) *There are several ways into extremism* – young people provide an overview of how the paths into violent extremism – in this case Islamic extremism – can be quite different. A number seem to have travelled *to* something – an adventure or less demanding everyday life, whereas others are felt to have *left* something, such as financial problems. They show how some of them were not particularly aware of the religion and some have most certainly been attracted by the images and films distributed online. It is also clear from what the young people discuss that there are certain gender patterns. However, these are something that they do not notice themselves. Participants describe how the attraction can be different for young women and men, without placing them in relation to each other.

2) *Awareness of media and information is an important factor in the preventative work* – young people repeatedly describe the media and media reporting as problematic. The media play an

important role in society as fact-based, nuanced providers of news and so it becomes problematic if they are seen to be treating different perpetrators in different ways in the practice of reporting. At the same time, the young people posited that there is often talk about a certain group of people, yet seldom with them. These situations also include deficits in representation; i.e., who speaks about the group or groups. On a number of occasions, media reports are described with scepticism – the young people shared their belief that these organisations only want to make money or that they have another hidden agenda. These are ideas and thoughts that are in line with how groups such as right-wing extremists wish to portray the media reporting the news. A number of right-wing extremist news sites are profiled as "truth-tellers". This rhetoric is becoming increasingly common and often alludes to the idea that traditional media do not tell the "whole truth". Similar rhetoric can be traced in the IS propaganda publication *Dabiq* where the "real" picture of the repression of Muslims in the west is said to be described.

3) Racism, xenophobia and discrimination – during the discussions it became evident early on that the young people have a different definition of what should be included in the concept of violent extremism, compared to the government. Unlike the government's focus on three different violent environments, the definition from young people is broader and includes structural social problems. During the discussions, the participants discuss racism, xenophobia and discrimination as expressions of and potential breeding grounds for violent extremism.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

This is a summary of the four publications created by the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society in the work to protect democracy from violent extremism.

Comparing the different violent environments cannot be done easily and becoming tangled up in a discussion of similarities and differences can also be counter-productive.

If we take the gender perspective as a starting point, it is possible to discuss the ideals, norms and how the environments choose to view gender and gender roles. It is also possible to say something about the mechanisms behind young people's participation in or distancing themselves from the environments as well as the process of working proactively to prevent young people from becoming involved in violent extremist activities. These summarising discussions address the descriptions established in all three publications in the *Young and Extreme* series (The Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society, 2016 a; b; c).

Within violent right-wing extremist environments, the relationship between men and women is often seen from an arch-conservative perspective. Men are described as protectors of the family and as hyper-masculine warriors. This is emphasised and strengthened through the examples of uniform-resembled clothing, nationalist battle music and aggressive behaviour. Of course there are several different explanations for why young people choose to join the groups, organisations and parties that are active within violent right-wing extremist environments. From a gender perspective, the recruitment of young people to this environment is predominantly targeted towards men and the entire basic outlook of right-wing extremist ideology places men and masculinity ideals at the centre. Even if the routes into the environments can differ, the arch-conservative perspective linked to the masculine ideal is present in all the explanatory factors for

why the environment attracts young people. In such a way, participation in right-wing extremist environments is transformed into a masculine rite of passage.[3]

Constructions of masculinity within violent Islamic extremism become particularly clear in IS propaganda. Similar to the right-wing extremist environments, gender constructions form the foundation of violent Islamic extremism in a conservative definition of masculinity. The message aimed at young men addresses the hard-sell of battle ideology, large weapons, violence and honour. There is a consistent portrayal of hyper-masculinity with the aim of attracting young men to join. The stereotype of how men within the environment are and should be depicted with a sacred warrior masculinity that offers the idea of power over their own living situation and power over other people through violent acts. A sacred warrior dies a martyr and is declared a hero both before and after their death. This form of masculinity is an important attraction into the environment and the recruitment of young men.

When IS propaganda is directed towards young women, men are instead portrayed as sensitive and caring, as well as brave and protective. Just as with the right-wing extremist environments, men and women are described as being equally important to the mutual fight – even if their roles are different. The main task of women is to further the fight by bearing more children – first and foremost she gives birth to the activists of the future. This description is much the same for both right-wing extremist environments and Islamic extremist environments. Even if both the right-wing extremist and Islamic extremist environments emphasise how women are essential to the fight, a woman's role is subordinate. Her main purpose is to serve men and the Muslim community or nation. Furthermore she is viewed as the bearer of the family – often as a metaphor for the nation's survival. This female ideal can be seen as attractive for young women who see a clear role for themselves.

At times, the battle ideal or hyper-masculinity that is described in violent right-wing extremist or Islamic extremist environments has also been an element present in violent left-wing extremist environments. This was evident during the violent riots during the EU summit in Gothenburg in 2001.[4] However, one significant difference is that these militant or masculine acts of violence are continually challenged within the movement. Especially after the riots in Gothenburg, the environment has changed course away from violence. A clear signal of this change is that the more famous associations have been shut down or maintain a significantly low profile.

The arch-conservative values within both violent right-wing extremist and Islamic extremist environments also generate understandings of a feminine ideal. The women within the environments are provided with a small space to define for themselves how they want to be or behave. Within the left-wing extremist environment, there has always been long-term internal debate based on the ideal setting that everyone should be able to participate, regardless of gender or other factors. In left-wing extremist environments, women are expected to carry out approximately the same actions as everybody else, however there is an over-representation of men in the most serious crime statistics. Questioning the violent acts and hyper-masculinity is

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[3] A rite of passage can be understood as a right that marks a person's transfer from one stage of life to another (http://www.ne.se/uppslagsverk/encyklopedi/l%C3%A5ng/%C3%B6verg%C3%A5ngsrit).

[4] http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=2054&artikel=6456118

described as a driving factor behind the left-wing autonomous organisations move away from the traditional macho cultures that characterise the two other violent environments.

Regardless of which of the three violent environments a person is drawn to, there are always expectations placed on gender and what men and women are. These ideas formulate how people think and approach their surroundings. Using this as a basis, it is also possible to perform preventative work with young people within the framework for broader work to prevent violence. *The Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society's 2015 youth survey* has told us that young people that conform to stereotypical statements of gender display a higher risk of being violent. All three publications describe the roles of stereotypical images of gender that are predominant in violent right-wing and Islamic extremist propaganda aimed at young people. Preventative work that aims to challenge these norms should provide effects on how appealing this propaganda is seen to be.

One practice that is integral to understanding the perspective of young people is listening to them. Strengthening young people's democratic participation by creating opportunities for genuine influence can be one way to strengthen democratic resistance and protect democracy. This is evident in all three publications. Discussions with young people should ideally be based on human rights and deal with how democratic institutions and principles work and are used. Young people should receive information about how to influence and participate at the local level as well as regionally and nationally.

At the same time, young people need to be given the tools to critically review and assort the propaganda, information and messages they are bombarded with every day in social media, online and from the people they meet. Both violent right-wing extremism and Islamic extremism contain ideas and movements that believe that democratic society has gone too far with regards to the rights and equality of certain groups. The assumptions and propaganda need to be clearly challenged and discussed. Within the left-wing extremist environment, the perceived lack of democracy is instead viewed as the problem, compared to how there is too much of this in the other groups. Young people need the opportunity to discuss political engagement and participation in a wide sense. Such discussions should include conversations about political activism such as protests and occupations. It is also important to discuss different forms of local influence, such as suggestions from the community and broader democratic issues such as why we vote in public elections.

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