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WHY SHOULD DERADICALISATION AND PREVENTION INTERVENTIONS BE ATTENTIVE TO GENDER ISSUES?

SOME OBSERVATIONS AND EXPERIENCES FROM FIRST-LINE PRACTICEAS DISCUSSED IN THE WOMEX – RAN- DERAD WORKSHOP IN DEZEMBER 2013/BERLIN

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Throughout the WomEx project and the dissemination of its results it has been experienced many times just how difficult it is for many people to imaging the mere possibility that gender roles and gender identity issues may be of any major importance for (de-) radicalisation and intervention with target groups that are susceptible to violent extremism. People ask: Aside of the obvious fact that males and females play a different role in this – why should gender identity issues in the psychological sense have anything substantial to do with terrorism and violent extremism? What should it be good for – or is it not senseless altogether – to employ and even emphasize gender focussed methods/ tools in extremism prevention and deradicalization? The further the respective audience is removed from areas of practical intervention work, the more difficult it sometimes was to communicate the WomEx results. The following proved helpful in facilitating this communication and lending support to gender awareness in questions of prevention and deradicalisation.

(1) Violent extremism and sexism/ homophobia

Practitioners' experience throughout RAN Derad and beyond has taught us: There is hardly any violent extremist, terrorist, or hate crime offender that does not *also hold sexist and homophobic* attitudes. In other words: Extremists do generally manifest highly conflictive gender issues – especially among young vulnerable people in the process of building their identity and gender- self.

This especially holds true for both of the two major threats of violent extremism in Europe, rightwing extremism and religious fundamentalism (both from Moslem and Christian background). Moreover, un-ideological/ non-religious hate crime perpetrators who constitute a prime recruitment pool for various forms of extremism/ terrorism seem to be particularly sexist, homophobic, and prone to hateful offenses against perceived

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others.

(2) Examples from and empirical observations about the prime target groups

From a practitioner's point of view there are many empirical indications of the intrinsic connection between extremism/ hatefulness and sexism, homophobia, and gender role rigidity.

Especially individuals that hold rightwing extremist, racist, religious fundamentalist or ethno- nationalist views tend to propagate highly restrictive gender roles. These views generally defy human rights and civil liberties in that they aggressively support a resentful or/and violently hostile attitude towards the other sex, people that are homosexual, or persons that, by appearance or behaviour, challenge their rigid gender role order.

(2.1) For instance, in the area of *male* vulnerable young people and/or extremists ...

(2.1.a) Neo-Nazi followers tend to use anti-gay curse words (e.g. "you bloody fag!") even when attacking foreigners or coloured persons that do not give any sign of being homosexual. Also they do take any opportunity to violently strike out against (perceived) homosexuals.

(2.1.b) Here the young rightwing extremists often draw from them fact homophobia also was an essential element in historic anti-Semitism during the Third Reich since Jews have then often been portrayed as being homosexuals or as being sexualized, promiscuous, child-molesters etc. which was equalled with homosexuality. (Even in post-WWII restorative Germany which was still heavily influenced by the Third Reich elites, homosexuality was formally outlawed until the first social-liberal coalition in the 1970s.)

(2.1.c) In at least one case it is reported by an exit facilitation team that a young rightwing extremist follower in the course of his disengagement process, lasting two to three years, has turned out to be transsexual by personal disposition and in the end underwent a sex-change becoming a woman.

(2.1.d) Quite topically, in December 2013 the German rightwing extremist party NPD has ousted its long time party leader, Holger Apfe, father of four children under allegations that he has sexually molested young men when being drunk. On the NPD Facebook site three colleagues from the NPD leading committee called upon Apfel to kill himself with a gun.

(2.1.e) With young recruits in Jihadist extremism/terrorism practitioners have often observed that the young men see it as prove of their maleness and masculinity when being chosen as suicide bomber for an attack ("finally I am acknowledged as man") and perceive it as insult/ threat to their male identity if they are not chosen. Moreover, homosexuality is perceived as being against the religion and thus as being not permissible

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by many sectors of Muslim communities/ societies.

(2.1.f) There have been cases reported in which male suicide attackers have enwrapped their genitals in order for them to not be injured by the bomb explosion, so that their afterlife persona may remain physically intact in terms of sexual organs when it enters eternity (and is provided with virgin women).

(2.1) ... to be continued ....

(2.2) In the area of *female* vulnerable young people and/or extremists ...

There still seems to be lesser experience with vulnerable women and/or female extremists. However, practitioners working in the area of rightwing extremism in Germany generally agree that it makes sense to assume at least two basic kinds of gender issues for women in extremism and hate crime.

(2.2.a) In rightwing extremism in Germany many women follow the restrictive gender order and thus tend to take on attitudes of obedience and submissiveness within the movement and within their personal relationships. In their identity concept these women thus tend to stick to the rules of a restrictive gender role order and concentrate on those behaviours and activities that are assigned to women (be partner/ supporter, child raiser, support organizer etc.). Some others seem to exceed this base pattern in that they are more outgoing, active, forceful and in that they assume leadership functions. This may coincide with a tendency to sexualized, violent and overtly hateful behaviour.

(2.2) ... to be continued ....

(3) Conflictive gender issues as driving force of violent extremism

Moreover, field experiences and research from clinical practitioners' (from psychotherapy and psychiatry) has taught us all along: Sexism and homophobia does *not only coincide* with extremism/ hate crime/ terrorism. Rather, these practitioners' experiences have long indicated that the conflictive gender issues that lie behind sexism and homophobia are also a major psychological *driving force* behind most ideologically/ religiously defined extremism and violence. (Yet, the factor of sexism/homophobia/ gender issues has often been underrated or overlooked in much of the academic literature on radicalisation and violent extremism due to the more ideological and cognitive focus that such research often took.)

It has been a recurring experience, in fact a truism, for practitioners of social and clinical work since long time that male hate crime perpetrators and violent extremists (rightwing and religious) generally manifest *insecurities in their gender identity and sense of maleness*. These insecurities may appear in the form of latent and/or personally unacknowledged (or even unconscious) impulses of bi- and homo-eroticism, in activities as cross-dressing, or otherwise. Biographically, such unacknowledged insecurities of

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gender identity (and accompanying reactions of dissociation) in all experience go back to a individual life-history issues of abuse (be it relational, sexual and/or violent abuse), neglect, degradation, and resultant psycho-trauma.

However this may be in each individual case, this type of young men, in psychological respect, often seem to compensate for and find relieve from these insecurities of their male gender identity by acting-out hatefully not only against foreigners/ political enemies but in many cases also against women, homosexuals or persons that challenge the rigid gender role order that these men adhere to in any other way. In a similar way, these insecurities also seem to be key motivations that lead up to formulating rigid, anti-liberal, resentful and extremist worldviews. In any case, this – wide and multifarious – group of young men in all experience is a pool from which any extremist organisation may relatively easily recruit not only followers but, in particular, terrorist attackers.

Consequently, derad practitioners have come to learn in many instances: Violently-extremist clients and hate crime perpetrators commit violence against *perceived others* of various sorts (foreigners, non-believers, people of non-mainstream life styles etc.) in part because they experience psychological trouble and resultant aggression in dealing with *the other sex* and with *otherness in gender respects* – and have experienced biographical traumas in developing their gender identity.

In the same vein, practitioners always knew that violently-extremist clients propagate rigid *homogenous* and *anti-diverse* concepts of society (as for instance Hitler's concept of an ethnically/racially homogenous 'Volksgemeinschaft'/ folk community or any religious fundamentalist vision of a world state of devoted believers, strictly abiding by their religious rules) in part also because they experience personal conflict in dealing with the very *basic diversity/ heterogeneity* of life: the fact that there are females and males in the world. In all experience, the more difficulty a person experiences in safely positioning him/herself within this base diversity of life, the more likely it is that s/he will hold anti-divers, anti-liberal and anti human rights views (be it of a religious or ideological sort) and be prone to act out violently in these respects.

Hence, on the manifest level of psychological observation, violent extremism and terrorism always go back to a state of mind which, when confronted with – and in fact feeling threatened by – the diversities, dualities, and ambiguities of life, reacts by radically splitting, dissociating and polarizing such dualities. Here, the clinically well-known psychological defence mechanism of splitting/dissociating sets in which mentally reduces any diversity and ambiguity to simple black-and-white orders and puts any duality into a polarized in-group out-group constellation.

This is why issues of gender and biological sex always become so fundamentally import once one gets onto the second level of observation that includes latent motivations and biographical root causes of extremism and terrorism. For it is the basic duality of biological sex and socially constructed gender roles which constitutes in each individual's life one of the first opportunities – and, in fact, a veritable temptation – to get into mental

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routines/ impulses of radical splitting, dissociation, polarization. Hence, the duality of gender and sex are the earliest biographical instance in which the young and developing personality, under unfortunate circumstances, may resort to reducing complex phenomena of life into rigid black-and-white, in-group-out-group orders – and may then proceed to enforce such orders by means of violent extremism so that s/he may uphold his/her stable personal identity formation. Put more poignantly, the time of building a basic gender consciousness during the first years of life constitutes the earliest biographical moment at which one may become or not become an extremist.

(4) Gender issues are of key importance for the methodology of interventions

It is thus not so surprising that practitioners of extremism prevention and derad intervention have found it so highly impactful in their work with various target groups of vulnerable young people to not emphasize ideological or religious topics too much but rather, by way of narrative exchange, concentrate on gender and family issues – as well as on other related issues from the personal and social life context of the clients. These practitioners have found it to be a most potent driver of deradicalisation and resilience building if one manages to work on depolarizing and loosening up the rigid gender role splits and mental dissociations that vulnerable young people tend to hold on to in terms of their gender identity. It was thus the practitioners who in their work became acutely aware of the psychological dynamic interconnectedness of violent extremism and conflictive gender issues (as witnessed in sexisms and homophobia). Since to them it was immediately graspable how much the success and sustainability of their work in many cases was dependent on whether or not aspects of gender could be addressed and worked with in the intervention.

(5) Gender attentiveness in deradicalisation – the dimensions of gender specificity and gender focus in prevent and derad methodology

Gender attentiveness in deradicalisation (and prevention) seems to have two essential dimensions:

A – the dimension of *gender specificity* of activities and interventions, which today needs to be mostly directed at target groups of women in various extremism(s), since the focus thus far has been largely on men. It is generally acknowledged that
   - women have particular roles and functions in extremist organisations;
   - there are specific female push and pull factors in both radicalization and deradicalization processes of women
   - women are of specific importance for interventions of prevention an deradicalization.

Hence, it seems advisable to devise gender specific intervention approaches mostly for young women in extremism – but also for men.

B – the dimension of *gender focus* in the methodology of each and every intervention

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setting, be it single sex, coed, community oriented or other settings. Gender focused methods work on the gender roles of both (vulnerable) women and men. These methods have the purpose to de- rigidify the gender roles, in the sense of making male and female identity concepts and behaviour patterns more flexible and less compulsive – and thus reduce the clients' susceptibility for extremism, violence, and hate crime. In particular, the interventions aim at making the participants more aware of the intrinsic connection between violent extremism and rigid/restrictive gender roles, reflect upon their personal stance and experience with this topic. To some extent the participants also learn about how certain biographical and milieu specific conditions (violent/ relational/ sexual abuse, neglect, degradation, trauma) may lead an individual to adopt rigid/restrictive gender role concepts and at the same time become susceptible to engage in violent extremist behavior. Furthermore, gender methods allow for getting to know alternative modes of male and female identity and practice alternative patterns of behavior which comply with a human rights based and pro-social sense of democratic citizenship.

(6) Gender attentiveness – cultural/ social milieu, family, and biography

Since gender roles are strongly determined by the cultural/ social milieu, the family, and biographical incidences, gender attentiveness in deradicalisation and prevention means to pay heed to these aspects and integrate the elements of milieu, family, and biography into the methodology of the intervention.