



Why Gender Matters in Violent Extremist Propaganda Strategy

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Counter-Terrorism

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Contents

About ICCT	iii
Abstract	1
Introduction	2
The Gender Representation Theoretical Framework	2
The Strategic Construction of Gender	7
Conclusion: Implications for Analysis and P/CVE Strategic Communications	9
Bibliography	12
About the Author	15

Abstract

This policy brief presents the gender representations theoretical framework to analyse how and why gender is used in the propaganda and politico-military strategies of violent extremist movements. It argues that violent extremist ideologies break down in-group and out-group collective identities into individual “good” and “bad” gender identities, or gender representations. These representations are manipulated to maximise the effectiveness of violent extremist propaganda, and to construct a gender and conjugal order strategically designed to advance their own political objectives. The gender representations framework offers analysts a tool to examine violent extremists’ manipulation of gender to mobilise women and men, and can help in understanding the types of beliefs and actions that may be taken to advance violent extremists’ political objectives.

Keywords: gender, propaganda, strategy, strategic communications, P/CVE, right-wing extremism, jihadism.

Introduction

The role of gender in the propaganda, political, and military strategies of violent extremist groups has persistently been underestimated and misunderstood. In many ways, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) came to epitomise that trend. Crimes marking ISIS' genocide against the Yazidi community, for example, were often dictated by gender: men were murdered and boys were forced into military training, while women and girls were sold into slavery.¹ Its propaganda, including messaging specifically written by and for women,² not only endorsed,³ but instructed audiences on how to carry out these atrocities. This occurred not just at the hands of ISIS fighters, but at the hands of its women.⁴ If we are to learn anything from ISIS as we confront right-wing extremism, it is that we need to pay attention to violent extremists' grasp of the gendered logics of terrorism. Otherwise, violent extremists, from ISIS to misogynist Incels, will continue to have devastating effects on the lives of those they deem to be the enemy.

To this end, this policy brief presents the gender representations theoretical framework⁵ to analyse how and why gender is used in the propaganda and politico-military strategies of violent extremist movements.⁶ It argues that violent extremist ideologies break down in-group and out-group collective identities into individual "good" and "bad" gender identities, or what I call gender representations. These representations are manipulated to maximise the effectiveness of violent extremist propaganda, and to construct a gender and conjugal order⁷ strategically designed to advance their own political objectives. The gender representations framework offers analysts a tool to examine violent extremists' manipulation of gender to mobilise women and men, and can help in understanding the types of beliefs and actions that may be taken to advance violent extremists' political objectives.

The Gender Representations Theoretical Framework

Three conceptual premises underpin the gender representations framework. First, propaganda is the deliberate and systematic use of discourse to shape the perceptions and influence the behaviours of a target audience in a way that benefits the propagandist.⁸ Second, gender is

1 "They came to destroy": ISIS Crimes Against the Yazidis", *Human Rights Council*, 15 June 2016, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/A_HRC_32_CRP.2_en.pdf; Nadia Al-Dayel, Andrew Mumford and Kevin Bales, "Not Yet Dead: The Establishment and Regulation of Slavery by the Islamic State," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* (2020); Susan Hutchinson, "Financing Da'esh with Sexual Slavery: A Case Study in Not Gendering Conflict Analysis and Intervention," *Journal of Global Security Studies* 5, no. 2 (2020): 379-386.

2 "Slave Girls or Prostitutes," *Dabiq* 9, Al Hayat Media Centre, 2015

3 "The Revival of Slavery Before the Hour," *Dabiq* 4, Al Hayat Media Centre, 2014.

4 "German woman jailed for nine years for enslaving Yazidi woman," *Al Jazeera*, 22 June 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/6/22/german-woman-jailed-for-nine-years-for-enslaving-yazidi-woman>

5 Kiriloi M. Ingram, "The Islamic State's Gendered Propaganda: Mobilising Women and Men from Territorial Control to Insurgency," (PhD diss., University of Queensland), 2022. <https://doi.org/10.14264/5e62009>

6 It is important to note that the framework has not been applied to militant left groups and thus I do not claim its utility across all violent extremist ideologies. However, it has been applied to Salafi jihadist and extreme right discourse in the following research, and is being applied to extreme right propaganda in forthcoming publications: Kiriloi M. Ingram, "The Islamic State's Gendered Propaganda"; Kiriloi M. Ingram, "An Analysis of Islamic State's Gendered Propaganda Targeted Towards Women: From Territorial Control to Insurgency," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 35, no. 2 (2023): 338-354; Kiriloi M. Ingram and Kristy Champion, "Of Heroes and Mothers: Locating Gender in Ideological Narratives of Salafi-Jihadist and Extreme Right Propaganda," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2024.2322758>; Justin Phillips, Kiriloi M. Ingram and Kristy Champion, "Gendered Online Extremism in the Pre-Tarrant Pacific: A machine learning exploration of Australian and New Zealanders' conceptualisation of gender and sexual violence on 4chan before Christchurch," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09546553.2024.2384044>.

7 Conjugal order is defined as the formal rules and informal norms that maintain gendered and sexual behaviours for women and men. I unpack this further below. For more on conjugal order, see Nicole George, "Policing 'conjugal order': gender, hybridity and vernacular security in Fiji," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 19, no. 1 (2017): 55-70; Megan Mackenzie, "Securitising Sex? Towards a Theory of the Utility of Wartime Sexual Violence," *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 12, no. 2 (2010): 202-221; Megan Mackenzie, *Female Soldiers in Sierra Leone: Sex, Security and Post-Conflict Development*, New York: New York University Press, 2012.

8 Garth Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion* (California: Sage Publications, 2006); Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: the formation of men's attitudes*, (New York: Random House Vintage Books, 1965); Anthony Pratkanis and Elliot Aronson, *Age of Propaganda: The Everyday Use and Abuse of Persuasion*, (Henry Holt and Company, 2011), 11, cited in Jowett and O'Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, 5; Philip M. Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda from the Ancient World to the Present Day* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).

the socially constructed expectation of what it means to be a woman, and what it means to be a man in a given context.⁹ Gender performances attached to femininities and masculinities evolve based on the socio-historical, political, cultural, and military context they are contained within. Gender, in this sense, is inherent to one's identity and is "real only to the extent that it is performed."¹⁰ Third, the "linkage" approach¹¹ is an analytical framework for analysing violent extremist propaganda strategy that has been applied across jihadist and extreme right-wing case studies by J.M. Berger,¹² Joe Whittaker and Lilah Elsayed,¹³ and Alastair Reed and Jennifer Dowling.¹⁴ Its central contention is that the overarching strategy of violent extremist messaging is to shape the perceptions and mobilise the active support of audiences via a mix of rational-choice and identity-choice appeals to promote not only the violent extremist's own "competitive systems of control" (i.e. their own politico-military activities),¹⁵ but to also provide audiences with a "competitive system of meaning" (i.e. a lens through which to understand the world, themselves, and others).¹⁶ Rational-choice appeals promote the pragmatic benefits of aligning with the violent extremist movement while framing adversaries as dangerous and unreliable, and identity-choice appeals offer perceptual appeals, such as feelings of belonging to a stable identity. The "competitive system of meaning" that emerges is a dichotomised picture of the world between an in-group who bears solutions, and an out-group who causes crisis. This interplay between collective identities, solutions and crisis constructs aims to provoke audiences to make decisions by the logic of appropriateness – decisions in accordance with the new collective identity to which they belong.

Applying the linkage approach is an essential first step for understanding violent extremists' overarching propaganda strategy, and for identifying the propagandist's construction of collective in-group and out-group identities. However, when I applied the linkage approach to a range of primary sources, it became clear that violent extremists also construct individual gender identities, or female and male representations. These identities are portrayed as a hierarchy of different types of good and bad women and men who belong to either the in-group or out-group respectively. These female and male representations are situated within and reinforce violent extremists' systems of meaning. The gender representations framework thus builds upon "linkage" by situating gender appeals within the overarching strategy of violent extremist propaganda to enable an analysis of discourse at macro-, meso-, and micro-levels (see figure 1 below).¹⁷

9 While gender operates on a spectrum and establishes hierarchies of masculinities and femininities, I deal with gender in its binary definition within the context of violent extremist constructions.

10 Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519-531; Also see R.W. Connell, "Theorising Gender," *Sociology* 19, no. 2 (1985): 260-272.

11 Haroro J. Ingram, "The Strategic Logic of the 'Linkage-Based' Approach to Combating Militant Islamist Propaganda: Conceptual and Empirical Foundations," *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 8, no. 6 (2017). <http://dx.doi.org/10.19165/2017.1.06>

12 J.M. Berger, *Extremism*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2018; J.M. Berger, "Extremist Construction of Identity: How Escalating Demands for Legitimacy Shape and Define In-group and Out-group Dynamics," *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 8, no. 7 (2017). <http://dx.doi.org/10.19165/2017.1.07>

13 Joe Whittaker and Lilay Elsayed, "Linkages as Lens: An Exploration of Strategic Communications in P/CVE," *Journal for Deradicalisation* 20 (2019).

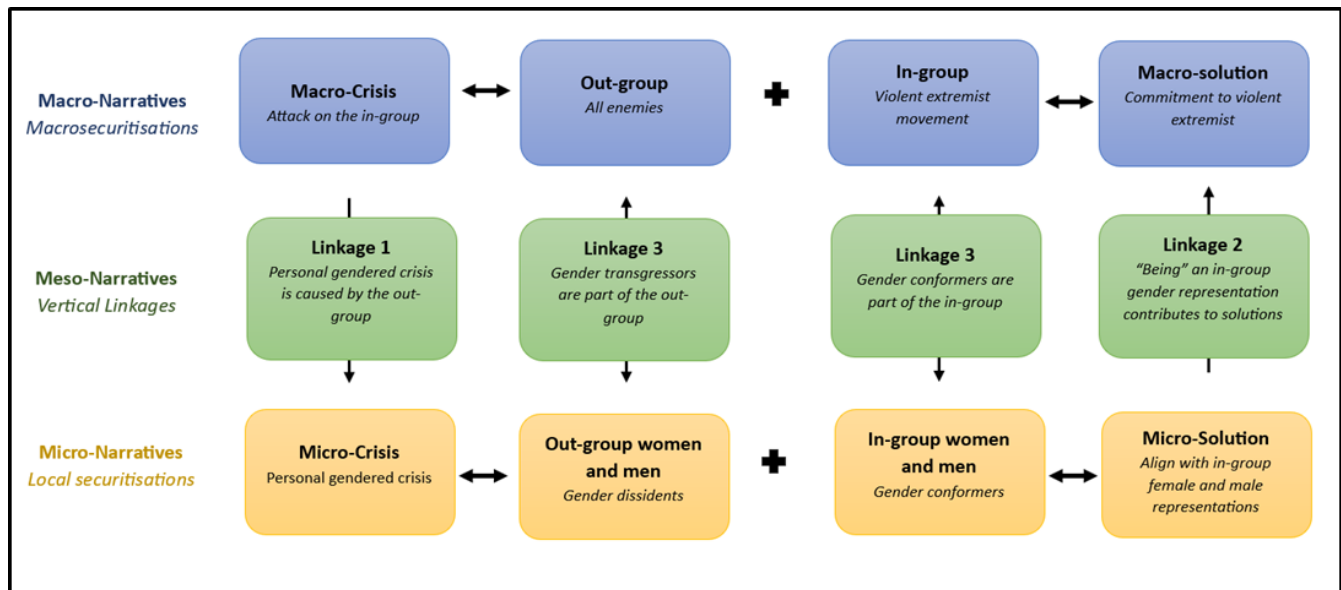
14 Alastair Reed and Jennifer Dowling, "The Role of Historical Narratives in Extremist Propaganda," *Defence Strategic Communications* 4 (2018): 79-104, <https://www.icct.nl/multimedia/alastair-reed-jennifer-dowling-role-historical-narratives-extremist-propaganda>

15 B. Fall, "The Theory and Practice of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency," *Naval War College* 18, no. 3 (1965):

<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/c1cb/1f5a6a19e8a049022bb4a070c63f1ca653b9.pdf>; D. Kilcullen, *Out of the Mountains – The Coming Age of the Urban Guerrilla*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013; D. Kilcullen, "Blood Year: Terror and the Islamic State." *Quarterly Essay*, 58 (2015): 1–98.

16 Ingram, "The Strategic Logic of the 'Linkage-Based' Approach to Combating Militant Islamist Propaganda."

17 For the full methodological application of the framework, see Kiriloi M. Ingram, "The Islamic State's Gendered Propaganda: Mobilising Women and Men from Territorial Control to Insurgency," (PhD diss., University of Queensland), 2022. <https://doi.org/10.14264/5e62009>

Figure 1: Macro, meso and micro-narratives

The macro-strategy seeks to shape audience perceptions via collective identity, solution, and crisis constructs.¹⁸ The micro-strategy breaks down collective identities into individual gender identities, seeking to shape audience behaviours in the everyday.¹⁹ The female and male representations are not used in isolation to only appeal to female or male audiences respectively. Rather, there is a symbiotic relationship between feminine and masculine gendered messaging, and this symbiosis contributes towards enhancing the macro-strategy of violent extremist propaganda. The meso-strategy situates these local and personal gender appeals into the violent extremist's overarching propaganda and politico-military strategy via three vertical linkages.

The first linkage frames personal gendered crises experienced in the everyday (micro-crises) as a derivative of the crisis caused by the out-group. The second linkage portrays the gender performances characterising each in-group female and male representation as actions which contribute to solutions by establishing a historically traditional gender and conjugal order. The third linkage creates a collective identity for individual female and male representations to belong to. While performing gender “correctly” results in membership to the in-group, gender dissidents belong to the out-group and contribute to crises by establishing a corrupt gender order.

Macro-strategy: Linkage, Macro-securitisation, and Social Identity Theory

Accounting for these levels, I draw on macro-securitisation because, according to Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, effective macro-securitisations require smaller, local securitisations within.²⁰ Securitisation is the use of speech acts to construct a collective identity which is depicted as existentially threatened by an “other”. In doing so, the securitising actor heightens its own political power while simultaneously justifying and necessitating the use of force to combat the threat. Macro-securitisations are on a larger scale, and make four universalist claims: “inclusive universalisms” where a particular ideological belief is portrayed as the mechanism to optimise the

¹⁸ It can be analysed via the linkage approach, augmented with macrosecuritisation, and social identity theory. Securitisation is understood as the use of communicative acts to elevate politics into the security realm as a means of heightening power and furthermore, justifying and necessitating the use of force to combat a threat. For more, see Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, “Macrosecritisation and security constellations: reconsidering scale in securitisation theory,” *Review of International Studies* 35, no. 2 (2009): 253-276.

¹⁹ It can be analysed through the lens of local securitisation, gender identity, and gender performativity to establish a taxonomy of female and male representations.

²⁰ Buzan and Waever, “Macrosecritisation and security constellations,” 253-276.

human condition; “exclusive universalisms” that claim superiority for one group and the right to rule over others; “existing order universalism” presenting a global social structure as the object; and “physical threat universalisms” which claim humankind is threatened on a global scale.

The macro-strategy of violent extremist propaganda constructs a macro-crisis caused by an out-group collective identity in stark contrast to a collective in-group identity that offers a macro-solution. Social identity theory reveals that this dichotomised perception of the world can be a powerful mental model for shaping and influencing behaviours. As theorised by William Sumner,²¹ Andrew Silke,²² and Marilyn Brewer,²³ intergroup competition that threatens the existence of identity groups serves the dual functions of maintaining in-group cohesion and justifying extreme measures to be taken against the out-group. Perceptions of crisis²⁴ can fracture identity and create uncertainty, driving people to engage in “uncertainty-reduction” behaviour.²⁵ Uncertainty can be alleviated through self-categorising as a group member, as it provides individuals with a consensually validated group prototype to emulate. As Catarina Kinnvall²⁶ and Anthony Giddens²⁷ argue, membership to a social group promises individuals a fundamental sense of confidence, safety, and trust of others, which also works to eliminate existential anxiety. Thus, violent extremists’ macro-narratives incentivise in-group membership by promising belonging and salvation from crisis.

Micro-strategy: Local Securitisation, Gender and Conjugal Order, Gender Identity and Performativity

Micro-narratives break down in-group and out-group collective identities into female and male representations by attaching positive or negative values and performances that the propagandist claims directly contribute to solutions or crises, which in turn, distinguishes each representation as part of the in-group or out-group. These narratives are characterised by local securitisations portraying in-group women and men as being subjected to micro-crises. While the macro-crisis existentially threatens the existence of a collective identity, micro-crises are everyday gendered experiences of the crisis caused by the out-group, with differing yet interrelated experiences for women and men. For instance, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and ISIS’ English-language magazines frequently portray victimised women who are indiscriminately killed, raped, or persecuted by enemy forces.²⁸

Localised gendered messaging situates the conflict and responsibility to act at the individual level. Micro-crises depict women and men personally suffering in gender-specific ways in their everyday lives. At the same time, micro-narratives heavily rely on gender to empower audiences. Violent extremist messaging aims to convince women and men – who perceive themselves as being under threat – that they have agency and can save themselves from grievances while also contributing to protecting the in-group (their own collective identity) simply by being a “good” woman or man. Gender identity and performativity are thus central to micro-narratives. Performing

21 William Sumner, *Folkways: A study of the sociological importance of usages, manners, customs, mores, and morals*, New York: Mentor, 1906, 12.

22 Andrew Silke, “Retaliating Against Terrorism,” in *Terrorists, Victims and Society: Psychological Perspectives on Terrorism and its Consequences*, edited by Andrew Silke. West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2003; Andrew Silke, “Holy Warriors: Exploring the Psychological Processes of Jahadi Radicalisation,” *European Journal of Criminology* 5, no. 1 (2008): 99-123.

23 Marilyn B. Brewer, “The Psychology of Prejudice: Ingroup Love or Outgroup Hate?” *Journal of Social Issues* 55, no. 3 (1999): 429-444.

24 Haroro J. Ingram, “Learning from ISIS’s virtual propaganda war for Western Muslims: A comparison of Inspire and Dabiq,” in *Terrorists Use of the Internet: Assessment and Response*, 2017. <https://www.icct.nl/publication/learning-isis-virtual-propaganda-war-western-muslims-comparison-inspire-and-dabiq>

25 Michael A. Hogg. “Uncertainty-identity theory,” in P.A.M Van Lange, A.W. Kruglanski, and E.T. Higgins (eds.), *Handbook of theories of social psychology*, Sage Publications Ltd, 2012. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446249222.n29>

26 Catarina Kinnvall, “Globalisation and Religious Nationalism: Self, Identity, and the Search for Ontological Security,” *Political Psychology* 25, no. 5 (2004): 741-767. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9221.2004.00396.x>

27 Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge: Polity, 1991.

28 Kiriloi M. Ingram and Kristy Campion. “Of Heroes and Mothers: Locating Gender in Ideological Narratives of Salafi-Jihadist and Extreme Right Propaganda,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2024.2322758>

gender through female and male representations is framed as a mechanism for re-establishing individual identity and affirming membership to a collective identity, reducing uncertainty and insecurity, and attaining meaning. For example, Abdullah Azzam wrote,

*...mothers play a great role in building a generation. The better a mother is at raising her children, the more successfully the Ummah is built and the more successful it is at producing heroes. You hardly ever see a great man except that a great woman is behind him who left some of her traits in his personality by way of the milk from which he was fed and the warm embrace in which he sought refuge.*²⁹

Conversely, if women and men fail to fulfil the performances characterising their identity according to that ideology, then they are not “real” women or men, and are the source of their own micro-crisis and the in-group’s macro-crisis. For example, Anders Breivik in his manifesto attributes a source of micro-crisis to the women of the “radical feminist agenda” who facilitate the distribution of free contraceptive pills and liberal abortion policies, and who pressure weak men into being a submissive “touchy-feely subspecies.”³⁰

Meso-narratives: Vertical Linkages

Meso-narratives align individual and collective identities by connecting micro-narratives with macro-narratives via three distinct yet interrelated linkages. First, personal gendered crises (micro-crises) experienced in the everyday are a derivative of the crisis caused by the out-group at the macro-level. Second, gender performances characterising in-group female and male representations are framed as actions which help save the in-group by establishing a historically traditional gender and conjugal order. Out-group representations undermine the in-group and contribute to crises, and the collective in-group is framed as women and men’s vehicle to salvation. Women’s and men’s everyday performances of gender thus become imbued with meaning and a greater purpose. Third, performing gender “correctly” ensures belonging to the in-group while transgressing your in-group gender role warrants punishment and designation to the out-group. The construction of a gender and conjugal order is thus central to violent extremist messaging. I follow Megan Mackenzie and Nicole George’s conceptualisation of conjugal order as gendered and sexual behaviour that is regulated and policed by formal rules and informal norms and behaviours that work to uphold certain behaviours for women and men, such as maintaining women’s social reproductive responsibilities.³¹ Judith Butler similarly asserts that the construction of a gender order through “wrong” and “right” performances “serves a policy of gender regulation and control.”³² According to George, as conjugal order is policed, the idea is reinforced that only those whose gendered behaviour is considered to be “correct” are worthy of protection, and those whose gendered behaviours are “incorrect” not only threaten the conjugal order, but disrupt broader socio-political order.³³ In the case of violent extremists, this renders supposed gender transgressors (according to the extremist) as justified targets of violent retribution. Therefore, portrayals of gender transgressors who characterise a corrupt gender order, and, in contrast, gender conformers who uphold the conjugal order (typically portrayed as a historically traditional order) are central to violent extremists’ competitive systems of meaning.

29 Abdullah Azzam, “Mothers Producers of Heroes.”

30 Anders Behring Breivik, 2083: *A European Declaration of Independence*, 2011.

31 George, “Policing ‘conjugal order’”, 55-70; Mackenzie, “Securitising Sex?”, 202-221; Mackenzie, *Female Soldiers in Sierra Leone: Sex, Security and Post-Conflict Development*.

32 Butler, “Performative acts and gender constitution,” 528.

33 George, “Policing ‘conjugal order’”, 57.

For instance, right-wing extremists construct misogynistic gender orders that are influenced by a patriarchal conjugal order that privileges heterosexuality, assumes marital sex is consensual, and enforces female reproductive and domesticity roles within the nuclear family. For example, Brenton Tarrant in his manifesto *The Great Replacement*, cites the “destruction of the family unit” as a factor catalysing “white genocide”. To “fix...[e]thnic replacement”, he states, “a new society will need to be created with a much greater focus on family values, gender and social norms.”³⁴ This conjugal order is enforced through gender-based violence, where violence in all forms is a performative act of doing and enforcing gender. For instance, the National Alliance published the novel *Hunter* by William Luther Pierce, which follows a white nationalist murdering “[w]hite sluts who had married Blacks because they had no better prospects among men of their own race.”³⁵ Meanwhile, in the neo-Nazi text *Siege*, James Mason visualises himself as conducting a “clean-up” targeting corrupted race-mixers:

*...a lot of the most rabid, sneering miscegenators are blond, blue-eyed doll babies. If you can't close your heart to pity, if you couldn't blast the head off of one or a thousand of these types, then you had better bow out right now.*³⁶

The Strategic Construction of Gender

The effectiveness of violent extremist propaganda is boosted by gendered micro- and meso-narratives for three key reasons. First, according to Giddens and Philip Sutton,³⁷ and David Snow and Doug McAdam,³⁸ identity is partly collective (which macro-narratives seek to affect), partly individual³⁹ (which micro-narratives seek to affect), and gender is intrinsically tied to a person's identity⁴⁰ (which gender representations seek to affect). Collective identity is the definitional boundary for a group which influences one's connection with a broader community. Individual identities exist at the micro-level and are the “internalised set of meanings attached to a role played in a network of social relationships.”⁴¹ Individuals can possess multiple identities at the micro-level, such as being a student, a father, or a nurse. However, individuals are also identified by their participation in different collectives. Because of this, it is impossible to understand individual identities at the micro-level without consideration of the collective to which they belong, and vice versa.

This has implications for violent extremist movements seeking to mobilise support and influence specific behaviours which advance socio-political objectives. Shelby Longard⁴² and Francesca Polletta and James Jasper⁴³ argue that movements seeking to affect social change must uphold their purported collective identity. However, due to the inextricable relationship between individual and collective identity, it is equally important for participants' individual identities to ebb and flow with the group's collective identity. It follows that one's individual and collective identity – including their gender identity – is not fixed or absolute, but is performative, a process

34 Brenton Tarrant, *The Great Replacement*.

35 William Luther Pierce, *Hunter*, National Vanguard Books, 1989.

36 James Mason, *Siege* (2 ed.), 2015

37 Anthony Giddens and Philip Sutton. *Sociology*: 7th Edition (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013) 307.

38 David Snow and Doug McAdam, “Identity Work Processes in the Context of Social Movements: Clarifying the Identity/Movement Nexus” in *Self, Identity, and Social Movements*, ed. Sheldon Stryker, Timothy Owens and Robert White (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 41-67.

39 For more on the origins of hybrid identities, see Homi Bhaba, *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994; Stuart Hall, “Black and White Television,” in *Remote Control: Dilemmas of Black Intervention in British Film and TV*, ed. June Givanni (British Film Institute, 1995), 13-28; Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, London: Routledge, 1993.

40 Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” 527; Daniel G. Renfrow and Judith A. Howard, “Social Psychology of Gender and Race,” in *Handbook of Social Psychology*, edited by John DeLamater and Amanda Ward (Springer, 2013) 491-531; Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973); R.W. Connell, *Gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002).

41 Sheldon Stryker, Timothy Joseph Owens, Robert W. White, *Self, Identity, and Social Movements*, University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

42 Shelby Longard, “The Reflexivity of Individual and Group Identity within Identity-based Movements: A Case Study,” *Humanity & Society* 37, no. 1 (2013): 55-79.

43 Francesca Polletta and James M. Jasper, “Collective Identity and Social Movements,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 27 (2001): 283-305.

of becoming, and made and remade in everyday life. Thus, violent extremist movements need to ensure participants' individual identities align with the collective identity of the group (which meso-narratives seek to affect). The gender representations framework offers analysts a method through which to analyse this construction of individual gender identities and situate them within violent extremists' overarching propaganda strategy.

Second, gender is one of the most important identity levers in violent extremist propaganda. It offers the most expedient, efficient, and potent means to appeal to the broadest possible audiences while using targeted nuanced strategies that are designed to resonate at a personal level. Gender can cut across race, nationality, geography, or religion in a way that few other identity levers can do. ISIS could not use race or nationality in the same strategic manner as gender when building its global Caliphate. When Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi accepted his appointment as Caliph, he declared that the Caliphate is,

*...a state where the Arab and non-Arab, the white man and the black man, the easterner and the westerner are all brothers. It is a Caliphate that gathered the Caucasian, Indian, Chinese, Shami, Iraqi, Yemeni, Egyptian, Maghribi, American, French, German, and Australian.*⁴⁴

In contrast, the exclusionary nature of right-wing extremist appeals similarly precludes race, nationality, and often religion from being leveraged like gender. In *Siege*, Mason writes, "The real White Americans who are left (and there are many) HATE the very sight of race-mixing even though they scarcely understand the larger, genetic meaning of it."⁴⁵

Third, gender through female and male representations is instrumental in personalising violent extremists' competitive systems of meaning, thus maximising the efficacy in achieving the primary objective of propaganda: to shape audience perceptions and motivate behaviours which benefit the propagandist. According to "linkage," violent extremists' systems of meaning "may shape the way an individual perceives not only broader socio-political issues but also how personal injustices are understood."⁴⁶ A central contention of the gender representations framework is that violent extremist propaganda, through its construction of gender, seeks to directly shape the way women and men perceive personal injustices they encounter in everyday life by linking individual gender insecurities (micro-crises) to a global crisis. Importantly, analysing violent extremists' micro-strategy and its construction of female and male representations reveals exactly what values and behaviours the violent extremist movement is seeking to affect. This has important implications for strategic-policy analysts and security practitioners.

Indeed, violent extremists' construction of gender is political, dictated by strategic objectives, and thus correlates with politico-military strategy. The gender performances characterising in-group female and male representations are actions that directly benefit the movement's socio-political objectives, while the performances attached to out-group representations undermine them. By fulfilling expected behaviours of what it means to be a woman and a man as stipulated by the propagandist, in-group representations promote and reproduce a gender and conjugal order which supports the violent extremist's political objectives. For instance, I compared the quantitative prioritisation of female⁴⁷ and male⁴⁸ representations in ISIS propaganda released during a period of strength as a Caliphate governing territory (2014-2016), compared to a period

44 "Khilafah Declared," *Dabiq* 1, Al Hayat Media Centre, 2014.

45 Mason, *Siege* (2 ed.), 2015.

46 Haroro J. Ingram, "A Linkage-Based" Approach to Combating Militant Islamist Propaganda: A Two-Tiered Framework for Practitioners," *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 7, no. 6 (2016). <http://dx.doi.org/10.19165/2016.2.06>

47 Kiriloi M. Ingram, "An Analysis of Islamic State's Gendered Propaganda Targeted Towards Women: From Territorial Control to Insurgency," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 35, no. 2 (2023): 338-354. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2021.1919637>

48 Ingram, "The Islamic State's Gendered Propaganda," <https://doi.org/10.14264/5e62009>

of weakness as it reverted back to an insurgency (2016-2019).⁴⁹ During that period of strength, narratives stressed the importance of women and men maintaining the functions of a normal society in the Caliphate through their roles as “supporters” (emigrants to ISIS territory), “mothers/sisters/wives”, “fathers/brothers/husbands” and male “workers.” In contrast, during the decline, the male “worker” representation decreased by 35.58 percent, female and male “supporter” representations decreased by 76.31 percent and 48.07 percent respectively, the male “fighter” increased by 20.74 percent, and the female “fighter” had the largest increase of 166.67 percent.

Overall, the three levels of messaging combined offer audiences psychosocial promises that address core human needs. Macro-narratives offer audiences belonging to a collective identity, salvation from an existential threat, and with that, systems of control and meaning that provide security and a simplified and consistent interpretation of a complex world. The female and male representations in micro- and meso-narratives demonstrate to audiences how meaning can be found in everyday life through the performance of their gender. It is well established that meaning plays an important role in human lives.⁵⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche stated, “If we have our own ‘why’ of life, we shall get along with almost any ‘how.’”⁵¹ Carl Jung wrote, “meaning makes a great many things endurable – perhaps everything,”⁵² and Viktor Frankl maintains that meaning can be discovered and is present in the everyday, and that “there is no situation that does not contain within it the seed of meaning”⁵³ especially during times of crisis. One’s search for meaning is tied to one’s gender, identity, and security. By portraying gender performances of female and male representations as both everyday antidotes to insecurity, as well as profound actions which directly help save the in-group, violent extremist messaging aims to inject meaning into the everyday lives of women and men and thus provide impetus to conform to these gender expectations. By simply performing the expectations of in-group female and male representations, women and men contribute to the violent extremist’s greater political cause.

Conclusion: Implications for Analysis and P/CVE Strategic Communications

Analytical Application

The gender representations framework offers analysts an apparatus to conduct two interrelated streams of analysis. First, this framework facilitates an analysis of how and why gender is strategically constructed and manipulated in propaganda. It can examine propaganda strategies at a macro-level to discern that group’s overarching system of meaning, at a micro-level to discern that group’s female and male representations and thus the expected roles women and men are expected to undertake, and at a meso-level to understand how and why those female and male representations contribute to the group’s broader strategic objectives.

It can be applied to violent extremist propaganda via discourse analysis, using three steps.⁵⁴ These three steps analyse two levels of identity construction: collective in-group and out-group

49 During the period of success, I analysed a total of 28 official Islamic State propaganda items released from 31 May 2014 to 31 July 2016. During the period of decline, I analysed a total of 23 official Islamic State propaganda items released from 5 September 2016 to 29 April 2019.

50 Max Taylor and John Horgan, “A Conceptual Framework for Addressing Psychological Process in the Development of the Terrorist,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 18, no 4 (2006): 585-601; Arie W. Kruglanski and Edward Orehek, “The role of the quest for personal significance in motivating terrorism,” in J.P. Forgas, A.W. Kruglanski and K.D. Williams (eds.), *The Psychology of Social Conflict and Aggression*, Psychology Press, 2011; Fathali M. Moghaddam, “The staircase to terrorism: a psychological exploration,” *AM Psychol* 60, no. 2 (2005): 161-9.

51 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, London: Penguin, 1889.

52 Carl J. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, Vintage, 1989.

53 Viktor Frankl, *Viktor Frankl Recollections: An Autobiography*, Cambridge: Basic Books, 2000, 53.

54 I specifically draw on Lene Hansen’s analytical steps for systematically examining the complexity of identity construction. See Lene Hansen, *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War*, New York: Routledge, 2006. Due to word constraints, I do not provide in-depth instructions on the methodological application. However, it can be found here as well as an example taxonomy of gender representations: Ingram, “An Analysis of Islamic State’s Gendered Propaganda Targeted Towards Women: From Territorial Control to Insurgency,” 338-354; Ingram, “The Islamic State’s Gendered Propaganda.”

identities in macro-narratives, and individual gender representations in micro-narratives. The first step in classifying identities is to identify explicit articulations or “signs”⁵⁵ that indicate a formation of the out-group, such as “evil” and “hypocrisy”, and of the in-group, such as “good”, “honourable” and “brave.” When identifying female and male representations, trending ideational factors (values, beliefs, behaviours) that are used to conceptualise idealised and dissident representations of women and men should be examined. Importantly, constructing identity does not involve the designation or linking of a single sign with the in-group or out-group, or a female or male representation. Rather, the use of a sign must be analysed in relation to the *context* of the narrative. As Hansen details, identity construction is not a single “self-other” dichotomy but rather, identity is produced through processes of positive linking and negative differentiation: “meaning and identity are constructed through a series of signs that are linked to each other to constitute relations of sameness as well as through a differentiation to another series of juxtaposed signs.”⁵⁶

The second step locates performances⁵⁷ designated to each gender representation. For example, in-group representations may have the same signs attributed to them, such as being honourable, chaste, and devout, but their performance could be fundamentally different, such as “fighters” being encouraged to engage in combat, while “mothers” act as symbols of the “nation” and are encouraged to raise children.

The final step entails contextualising the analysed identities within the temporal or socio-historical context in which they are constructed. Therefore, signs, performances, and context predicate gender representation characterisation and these attributes can be used to form a taxonomy of female and male representations.

Second, once a taxonomy of female and male representations has been established, by chronologically mapping the frequency of female and male representations over time, the gender representations framework enables analysts to identify and situate alternative gender orders within insurgencies’ competitive systems of meaning and broader politico-military strategy. This enables analysts to examine the strategic value of gender-dictated roles and understand when and why those roles may be deployed contingent on the movement’s strategic objectives and politico-military strategy.

Strategic Communications

Conceptual frameworks play an important role in shaping not only the way social phenomena are understood, but in how policy decisions are made. Integrating gender into how violent extremist propaganda strategies are understood helps to facilitate a more methodical and evidence-based integration of gender considerations into the design and implementation of policy responses and multisector practices. Two key implications for policy and practice emerge from this framework. First, strategic communications designed to confront the influence of violent extremists must offer competing gender appeals, such as alternative gender identities that offer alternative pathways to empowerment, security, and meaning. Second, preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) programming must be geared towards addressing the underlying contextual factors which render audiences receptive to violent extremist narratives, including addressing the personalised gendered crises (real or perceived) leveraged in violent extremist propaganda.

A core principle of the linkage approach emphasises the importance of out-competing violent extremist influence through systems of meaning (messaging) and systems of control (actions).

⁵⁵ Ibid., 41.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 42.

⁵⁷ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London: Routledge, 1990.

The value this framework offers is that the findings from its application indicate important gendered considerations which must be centralised in P/CVE. Regarding messaging, the core components of micro-narratives reveal important factors that ought to be addressed in messaging efforts to counter gender appeals. Micro-crises highlight the types of grievances and gendered insecurities that could potentially motivate support for the movement. For example, a common micro-crisis in ISIS propaganda is the unjust persecution and alienation of Muslim men based on their faith and draconian counter-terrorism methods implemented by governments.⁵⁸ It may seem obvious, but it is essential practitioners, media commentators, and politicians are guided by the “don’t do violent extremists any favours” rule and inadvertently amplify violent extremist propaganda through misguided policy and rhetoric. For example, rhetoric which profiles terrorists as only Muslims or denounces Islam as the cause of terrorism only works to perpetuate real and/or perceived perceptions of alienation, discrimination and unjust persecution. Strategic communications efforts by government and civil society should not perpetuate or seek to delegitimise and deny local grievances, as this could potentially generate distrust and animosity in those who do experience such grievances. Rather, counter-messaging must seek to out-compete violent extremist appeals by offering alternative solutions to gendered insecurities. Facilitating empowerment in audiences will be crucial to competing against violent extremist appeals.⁵⁹

Indeed, micro-solutions aim to restore self-esteem, agency, cognitive and behavioural order, and reaffirm gender identity. Micro-solution constructs, therefore, heavily rely on gender to empower audiences by convincing women and men that they have the power and agency to take control of their lives and save themselves by simply performing in-group representation roles. Furthermore, the vertical linkages of violent extremist’s meso-narratives demonstrate to audiences that through the fulfilment of in-group representation expectations, women and men strengthen the in-group, denigrate the out-group, and reap the benefits of membership to the violent extremist movement. Violent extremist micro- and meso-narratives, therefore, seek to instil in female and male audiences a sense of empowerment and meaning by promising value in society (system of meaning), with competitive systems of control to facilitate their empowerment and address their micro-crises. Following the linkage approach, a key means of discrediting propaganda is to “dismantle the... ‘system of meaning’ using a variety of messaging targeting the linkages violent extremist’s forge between themselves and solution and their enemies and crises.”⁶⁰ The key to dismantling violent extremist appeals to women and men is to deploy a mix of rational- and identity-choice messages designed to discredit the vertical linkages between the competitive system of meaning and control, and the empowerment of audiences through the female and male representations.

58 For example, see “And as for the Blessing of your Lord, then Mention it [ad-Duha: 11] bu Abul-Harith ath-Thagiri,” *Dabiq* 12, 29-32.; Among the Believers are Men: Abu Mujahid al-Faransi,” *Rumiyah* 11, 44.; “Among the Believers are Men: Abu Mansur al-Muhajir,” *Rumiyah* 1, 14-17.

59 I unpack this in more depth here: Kiriloi M. Ingram, “Centralising Women in PCVE and Peacebuilding Programme Design,” *Journal for Deradicalisation* 28 (2021).

60 Ingram, “The Strategic Logic of the “Linkage-Based” Approach,” 19.

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