Many Good Men - a summary

Young Scots' experience of online misogynistic extremism and radicalisation

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Extreme misogyny is not new, but online spaces are facilitating a resurgence and re-entrenching of **attitudes and behaviours that seek to justify and incite violence against women and girls**. The internet makes it possible for these misogynistic views to spread rapidly across borders on an unprecedented scale.

These online spaces target young men and seek to radicalise them into extreme misogynistic beliefs. Many indoctrinated young men then perpetrate harm against their young women peers.

This phenomenon is of growing concern in Scotland. To learn more about it, **we commissioned participatory research to explore young Scottish men's and women's experiences and views of so-called 'incel culture'**.

Incels are a misogynistic online community of men who feel they cannot attract women and are thus hostile towards all women. The term incels is short for 'involuntary celibate'

About the project

Civic Digits ran a **participatory theatre project** called 'Many Good Men' from August 2023 to March 2024. Clare Duffy, the Director of Civic Digits, and two senior youth workers, Gael Cochrane and Zaki El-Salahi, led a group of young White women and a group of young Black men to co-create two new plays to be performed by professional actors at Hearts Football Club in February 2024. The audience was predominantly other young people from schools and youth groups.

The Many Good Men project aimed to find out:

- how young people in Scotland experience online misogyny
- how it affects their lives
- how parents, youth workers, and teachers can support them to prevent radicalisation

Methodology

> **Safeguarding**
> Participants in the project were supported to take part by experienced youthworkers with the consent of their parents. Safeguarding was overseen by the Safeguarding Committee.

Two groups of young men and women, ages 13 – 19, took part. **The young women were part of a feminist group organised by a teacher in school and the young men were part of a well-being and**

football youth group. The groups first completed an anonymous survey to ascertain their familiarity with incel content and levels of online gender based hate and abuse they experienced. They then attended workshops to explore experiences of gender, gender based violence, critique online content, and create characters vulnerable to radicalisation and grooming. This work informed the creation of their 'Many Good Men' play.

Experience of online misogynistic content

The findings from the anonymous survey and later discussions reveal some key **gendered differences in young people's experiences and perceptions of incel culture and online misogynistic content**.

Young women had greater awareness of **the term 'incel'** itself and understood who incels are.

> " **They're really lonely, sad people, boys, who can't get anyone to go out with them. So, they hate women.**
> — young woman participant "

The young men were unfamiliar with the term incel but showed familiarity with **related concepts** like the 'Chad' archetype, suggesting they may be absorbing incel ideas without necessarily recognising them as such. Boys also seemed familiar with misogynistic influencer Andrew Tate's rhetoric on masculinity but were unaware of the charges against him for rape and human trafficking.

The young women reported encountering **extreme and threatening misogynistic online content**, which they experienced as a pervasive part of their digital lives. They didn't tend to discuss this disturbing content with others.

In contrast, the young men were more likely to see **critiques of feminism** and content that claims men's actions are often deliberately misrepresented by feminists: for example, male influencers might claim that well-intentioned flirting is misrepresented by feminists as sexual harassment. Young men were more likely to discuss content they found disturbing with friends and family.

Participative theatre exercise

The participatory theatre exercises focussed on embodying gender norms and stereotypes such as role playing a stereotypical man and a stereotypical woman. These exercises provided a rich and nuanced picture of how young people understand and negotiate the complex terrain of masculinity and femininity in their everyday lives. By exploring these themes through the lens of embodied experience, the workshops revealed **the deep-seated nature of gendered expectations and the powerful ways in which they shape young people's sense of self, their relationships and their vulnerabilities to online radicalisation.**

The exercises highlighted the role of gender in shaping young people's willingness to interrogate these norms and their implications. While young women demonstrated a keen awareness of the costs of patriarchal gender roles and a desire to challenge them, the young men appeared more

hesitant to engage in this kind of critical reflection: this points to the need for more targeted interventions that can support them in developing alternative visions of masculinity.

Overall, these findings highlight the importance of **addressing how we feel, express and experience gender, both physically and psychologically, in efforts to prevent and counter online misogyny and extremism**. By creating a safe and supportive space for young people to explore and question gender norms and expectations, projects like Many Good Men can help young people **critically and creatively examine the costs of rigid gender roles with empathy and give space for young men to explore alternative visions of masculinity** that are not founded on the subordination of women.

Researching incel content

The next phase of the project sought to engage participants in **a more direct exploration of incel culture and its underlying ideologies**. The groups were asked to use safe, anonymous devices to search for YouTube content using the phrase 'How to get a girlfriend'. This exercise opened up space for critical discussions about:

- how misogynistic online communities target and exploit young men's insecurities and desires
- the role of key influencers like Andrew Tate in normalising misogynistic world views

Young men's discussions of incels during the project

To further explore the young men's attitude towards misogynistic influencer Andrew Tate, the facilitators introduced an interview between Andrew Tate and Piers Morgan[i]. In this interview, **Tate claims that what is referred to as** misogyny is in fact traditional, positive masculine values such as 'stoicism', 'courage' and 'strength'. He also argues that emotional men are very dangerous – that emotions cloud their judgement, which can lead to explosions of anger: "Oh, I'm sad. I'll just shoot everyone."

The young men perceived Tate positively, "He was composed. Didn't flip out." When the facilitator suggested that he seemed tense, even angry, a young man responded, "But that's because he's defending himself. He's being called a misogynist."

The young men **partly** agreed with Tate that emotions are dangerous for men and that this could be why some men become incels or commit mass shootings. They viewed Tate as socially beneficial because as a role model for stoic, manly strength, he can help people avoid giving in to emotions such as despair or loneliness and becoming a violent incel.

> ⚠️ **Content Warning**
> Suicidal thoughts and suicide

To explore the extreme end of incel thinking, the project facilitators shared a video of a self-identified incel discussing 'black pill' thinking [i]. The black pill concept refers to the 'realisation' that an incel's situation is hopeless and to the decision to die by suicide.

It was clear that this incel life experience was **new to** the young men**.** They were shocked by **the incel's attitude, how casually he noted that four of his friends had recently killed themselves, the extreme racist and sexist language they used, and their jokes about shootings**. The young men saw this as fuelled by anger and desensitisation: "Being exposed to something too much makes something normal, so it doesn't shock you any more."

The group could see the incel mental state is very poor, and they mostly thought that this was caused by incels not having anything to do and being too engaged with the internet: "it's not normal, no job, no school", and "he's on his laptop for two whole days". "They feel left out, disappointed and angry with themselves," said one young man.

The young men's engagement with the incel video interview provided a sobering glimpse into the disturbing realities of incel ideology and they recognised the dangerous allure of this community for vulnerable young men seeking belonging and purpose.

This experience highlights the urgent need for proactive interventions that can offer alternative narratives of masculinity and identity and provide support for those at risk of being drawn into these harmful ideologies.

Perceived causes of radicalisation

The next phase of the project looked deeper into the participants' understanding of the potential causes of radicalisation, drawing on their own experiences, observations, and reflections. The aim was to explore the complex interplay of personal, social and cultural factors that may contribute to the appeal of extremist worldviews, in order to think about prevention and identify points of intervention and support for young people at risk of being drawn into these communities. This exercise served as the basis to the Many Good Men play's characters and plot.

Domestic abuse

It is notable that in some of the participatory exercises both groups created characters who had experienced domestic abuse in the family home. The example of violent masculinity set by the fathers (the perpetrators), coupled with a lack of communication from the mothers about the abuse both they and their children experienced, made their fictional sons feel extremely lost and lonely, and therefore vulnerable to radicalisation.

Both groups saw parents as being responsible for their son's alienation and subsequent attraction to incel thinking in different ways. They thought that the sons would blame their mothers, even though their mothers were also victims, and still have feelings of love and respect for absent and much-missed fathers. This kind of thinking aligns readily with the misogynistic world view that is promoted in the manosphere.

Pornography

The young men to some extent recognised pornography as a significant factor in radicalisation. However, the young women saw it as a critical factor, and talked about it passionately and at length.

They talked about the desensitising violence they witness their male peers consuming on a daily basis, sometimes even in classrooms, and how it affects the young women's safety and security both in school and in everyday life. "I think pornography has a lot to do with it. It promotes violence and desensitisation," said one young woman.

The young women were keen to discuss their view that pornography makes young men feel entitled to sex and particular kinds of 'kinks'. They said that the young men they know will see young women as weird or odd if they express the view that violence in sex is wrong. "Hitting a woman is not a kink," said one young woman.

They criticised the sexual education they had experienced for not making space to talk about pleasure and consent, as well as pornography, and not just pregnancy and STIs. The young women felt that there is a huge disconnect between what young people are seeing online and the conversations they are having with teachers and parents.

The young men highlighted the dangers of being overly censorious of pornography and sex in creating their character 'Stirling'. 'Stirling' was a young Black man, a virgin, who had never had a romantic relationship with a woman. He did not masturbate and had never seen any pornography. He was so over-protected, even 'imprisoned' by his parents from the world, that he was vulnerable to radicalisation by a new friend who was misogynistic and who did not see pornography as problematic in any way.

The path to becoming an incel

The young people viewed pornography and messages about being an 'alpha man' (which are rooted in misogynistic beliefs about gender) as the beginning of online grooming of young men into radically misogynistic thinking. Many of the messages incel influencers share about what it means to be a man align with gender stereotypes widely held in the rest of society.

So, when a young man looks for reasons for his loneliness and rejection and is told that it is because of women and feminism he is already primed to believe it. If he is then offered a community of lonely men, who are able to give him an identity, a place where he feels he can belong, he may, through a process of desensitisation, become ready to take part in violent expressions and even violent actions towards women.

Discussion

In conclusion, the Many Good Men project found that young men and women are very aware, in different ways, of the **influence of the manosphere** on ideas around gender. Both groups also perceive incels to be the extreme end of that online world.

The young women feel that they experience a daily assault of misogyny that is fuelled by the internet through social media, YouTube content and pornography. **The young men feel a pressure to be successful as men**, and understandings of a successful man are deeply influenced by online pressure to be wealthy, muscular and attractive to the opposite sex.

The young men did not have the same practice of **analysing ideas about gender** as the young women. However, when offered the chance to use their creativity to think about why a young man might be vulnerable, they were profoundly **empathetic and intuitive** about the potential causes of depression and loneliness for young men.

The project revealed how **tackling misogynistic online content directly** was often not productive for the young men as this content also promoted an appealing vision of masculinity that viewers desire and buy into. However, **creative activity** provided a new frame for the young men to explore these issues and in this project became an effective 'bypass' of manosphere rhetoric. The project revealed a need for **sex education** to include learning about consent and pleasure in relationships as well as the dangers of pornography. It also showed how important it is that **the adults in young people's lives** understand the online world young people experience and that they provide safe and creative ways for young people to explore how their online experiences affect their identities and lives (both online and offline).

The project also revealed that for educators seeking to **challenge incel ideology and disrupt radicalisation**, a key opportunity lies in exposing the explicit misogynistic archetypes central to incel culture. The project also indicated that there may be strong merit in **counter-radicalisation early intervention programmes** that focus on whole-family support and anti-racist community safety work.

Conclusion

The rise of the incel movement represents a deeply concerning manifestation of harmful masculinity and misogyny in the digital age. **We must act now to prevent online misogynistic radicalisation and the violence against women and girls it incites**. The rise of incel extremism must be understood not as an aberration but as a symptom of the **wider patriarchal attitudes and rigid gender norms** that permeate society as discussed in pages 7 -26 of our Many Good Men report. Challenging the threat of incels requires a proactive, structural approach that addresses the root causes of young men's radicalisation, from pervasive misogyny to the lack of healthy outlets for dealing with romantic rejection and frustration (Scaptura and Boyle, 2019; Sugiura, 2021).

Ultimately, the incel phenomenon serves as a sobering reminder of the urgent need to foster healthier models of masculinity and to challenge the sexist beliefs and attitudes that continue to limit human potential. Only by working to dismantle the patriarchal structures that give rise to such hate can we hope to build a society of true equality and mutual respect.

Recommendations

In order to prevent online misogynistic radicalisation and the violence against women and girls that so often follows, **Zero Tolerance makes seven key recommendations for youth workers, groups and centres, and teachers and schools**:

1. **Talk to young people explicitly about gender inequality and online misogyny and racism, using safe, fun, creative and non-judgemental approaches.** This will help young men develop the critical lens some young women already seem to have, and help young people of all genders counteract the harmful gender stereotypes they have likely internalised.

2. **Be attentive to the gender-specific experiences and needs of your young people.** This research revealed that young men and women in Scotland have vastly different understandings and experiences of online misogyny, and we must respond appropriately. In particular, young men need support with developing a sense of community and a critical lens for things they see online, accepting and expressing their emotions, and accessing safe spaces to talk about masculinity. Young women need safe spaces to discuss how unsafe they feel, and trusted adults who make them feel safe to disclose the violence, harassment and abuse they are experiencing. They may need some separate spaces for this, in the context of a gender-equal setting with many activities being delivered to young men and women together.

3. **Embed gender-equal cultures in the everyday practice of your setting.** This means considering the activities you deliver, but also how you deliver them. Consider what the young people learn from the behaviour of adults, the gendering of activities, and their everyday interactions in your setting. Develop a gender equality policy, and work as a team to create a genuinely gender-equal culture.

4. **Role-model diverse and positive masculinities and femininities.** Both young men and women need alternatives to harmful gender stereotypes, and many are left vulnerable to radicalisation or violence because their home lives do not offer positive role models. Support your young people by showing them through your everyday behaviour that there is another way to be.

Youth workers and teachers cannot solve this alone. **Effective prevention requires a whole-system approach, and therefore Zero Tolerance calls on the Scottish Government to:**

1. **Make it compulsory and statutory to provide comprehensive, gender-equal, culturally sensitive education in relationships, sexual health and parenthood (RSHP)**, so that young people do not have to resort to searching for information online.

2. **Strengthen ties between the youth work and education sectors, so that every young person in Scotland has a youth worker they can talk to and ask for information.** Youth workers' skills in relationship building and creating safe, non-judgemental relationships are vital.

3. **Collaborate with UK and international partners to regulate online platforms**, reducing the amount of harmful content and preventing algorithms from promoting it.

Together, we can prevent online misogynistic radicalisation and eradicate men's violence against women and girls.

Glossary

The manosphere: websites, blogs and online forums promoting masculinity, misogyny and opposition to feminism

Incels: 'involuntary celibates', a misogynistic online community of men who feel they are unable to attract women and are thus hostile towards all women, and towards men who are sexually active

Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOWs): a misogynistic online community advocating for men to separate themselves from women and society

Men's Rights Activists (MRAs): a global movement and ideology that asserts that men do not have the same rights as women, acting to criticise and inhibit women's rights work

Pick Up Artist (PUA): a man who uses manipulative techniques and social engineering to attract women

Alpha male: a strong, powerful man who likes to be in charge of others; the ideal man

Chad: a tall, White, handsome man who has no problem finding sexual partners; can be used as an expression of jealousy

Sigma males: a popular, successful but highly independent man; a lone wolf

Red pill: stemming from the film The Matrix, the red pill represents the choice to learn the alleged truth; a supposed kind of political awakening

Blue pill: stemming from the film The Matrix, the blue pill represents the choice to ignore the alleged truth and remain content with ordinary reality

Black pill: representing the realisation that the situation is hopeless, and the choice to LDAR (see below)

LDAR (lay down and rot): to die by suicide Stacy: an attractive woman who has no problem finding a male partner; can be used as an expression of jealousy

Beth/Becky: an average-looking woman; an insult to a woman's physical attractiveness

Femoid: derogatory term for a woman, stemming from 'female humanoid'

Foid: short for femoid

Roasties: an insulting term for women deemed promiscuous; so-called because their labia are compared to roast meat

Jail baits: girls under the age of consent perceived as sexually attractive because of their assumed 'virtue'; so-called because they are seen as tempting men to commit rape

References

Scaptura, M. N., & Boyle, K. M. (2019). Masculinity threat, 'incel' traits, and violent

fantasies among heterosexual men in the United States. *Feminist Criminology*, 15(3),

278–298.

Sugiura, L. (2021). *The incel rebellion: The rise of the manosphere and the virtual war

against women.* Emerald Group Publishing.

Notes

⚠️ **Please be aware that the following notes include links to content that may be upsetting. Reader discretion is advised.**

[i] An interview between Andrew Tate and Piers Morgan

[ii] A video of a self-identified incel discussing 'black pill' thinking ***Content Warning for suicide***