

# S T S

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Security Terrorism Society

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL - Italian Team for Security, Terroristic Issues & Managing Emergencies



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# SICUREZZA, TERRORISMO E SOCIETÀ

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INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL  
Italian Team for Security,  
Terroristic Issues & Managing Emergencies

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ISSUE 2/2024

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Milano 2024

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EDUCATT - UNIVERSITÀ CATTOLICA DEL SACRO CUORE

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SICUREZZA, TERRORISMO E SOCIETÀ  
INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL – Italian Team for Security, Terroristic Issues & Managing Emergencies

ISSUE 2 – 20/2024

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Largo Gemelli 1, 20123 Milano - tel. 02.7234.22.35 - fax 02.80.53.215  
e-mail: editoriale.dsu@educatt.it (produzione); librario.dsu@educatt.it (distribuzione)  
web: www.educatt.it/libri

Associato all'AIE – Associazione Italiana Editori

ISSN: 2421-4442

ISSN DIGITALE: 2533-0659

ISBN: 979-12-5535-352-2

copertina: progetto grafico Studio Editoriale EDUCatt

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# Nuove minacce, genere e sicurezza: prospettive sociologiche e comunicative

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## Abstract

The social changes present in current societies and digitalization as a new dimension of life represent the relational and communicative context within which the gender issue has developed.

This paper offers a reflection from a sociological perspective on the social construction of gender with reference to the processes of radicalization and extremism phenomena, going beyond the initial approaches based in particular on the role of women as victims of radicalization processes.

After a brief sociological study on the social construction of gender, gender issues will then be addressed from a threefold perspective: gender and forms of extremism; gender themes and narratives; and gender representations.

These orientations support the idea that gender, understood not only in the traditional sense of male and female, has become an agent of socialization capable of catalyzing different forms of extremism and therefore able to attract multiple extremist narratives transversal to contemporary geopolitical scenarios.

The interpretative models that can be developed in consideration of this approach, in addition to providing a sociological in-depth analysis of the issue of gender, also have methodological and operational implications in the practice of security agencies responsible for assessing risk, new threats and systematizing intelligence and communication practices that can prevent and counter increasingly labile and heterogeneous forms of extremism.

This paper therefore presents some preliminary results of the studies and analyses conducted within the D1 research line. “Radicalization and emerging threats: sociological and gender perspectives” funded by the Department of Sociology, Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, Milan.

I cambiamenti sociali presenti nelle attuali società e la digitalizzazione come nuova dimensione di vita rappresentano il contesto relazionale e comunicativo all'interno del quale la questione del genere si è sviluppata.

Il presente contributo offre una riflessione da una prospettiva sociologia sulla costruzione sociale del genere in riferimento ai processi di radicalizzazione e ai fenomeni di estremismo superando gli approcci iniziali fondati in particolare sul ruolo della donna come vittima dei processi di radicalizzazione.

Dopo un breve approfondimento sociologico sulla costruzione sociale del genere, si affronteranno quindi le questioni di genere secondo una triplice prospettiva: il genere e forme di estremismo; temi e narrative di genere; rappresentazioni di genere.

Questi orientamenti supportano l'idea che il genere, inteso non unicamente nell'accezione tradizionale di maschile e femminile, sia diventato un agente di socializzazione capace di catalizzare forme differenti di estremismo e per questo in grado di attrarre narrative estremiste molteplici e trasversali agli scenari geopolitici contemporanei.

I modelli interpretativi che possono essere sviluppati in considerazione di questo approccio, oltre a fornire un approfondimento sociologico al tema del genere, hanno anche risvolti metodologici e operativi nell'ambito della pratica delle agenzie di sicurezza deputate alla valutazione del rischio, delle nuove minacce e alla sistematizzazione di pratiche di intelligence e comunicative che possano prevenire e contrastare forme di estremismi sempre più labili ed eterogenee.

Questo paper presenta quindi alcuni risultati preliminari degli studi e analisi condotte nell'ambito della linea di ricerca D1. “*Radicalizzazione e minacce emergenti: prospettive sociologiche e di genere*” finanziata dal Dipartimento di Sociologia, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milano.

## Keywords

Gender; extremism; radicalisation; MUU ideologies, Genere; estremismo; radicalizzazione; ideologie MUU

### 1. Introduction: Which gender for which threats?

The current era is increasingly characterized by the digitization of communication and socialization processes, as well as a growing climate of pervasive hatred and conflict that, even in latent way, feed the perception of insecurity and precariousness of contemporary life.

The expression of these conflictual and violent feelings and attitudes takes place within a system of relationships that is structured both in the off-line and in the on-line dimension through digital processes of hybridization of personal and social identities.

The social changes taking place are therefore many and affect all spheres of social life, from the most personal to that concerning nation-states and their geopolitical positioning.

These dynamics intersect with two fundamental factors such as the construction of digital social identity and the level of conflict and extremism reached in a large part of the world's population. The latter is a very relevant phenomenon because it is based on elements of cognitive perception that orient attitudes towards others and social behaviors in the digital world.

In this context defined by digital socialization processes and dominated by factors of uncertainty, insecurity, and conflict, it is essential to be able to better understand the role of gender and the differentiation of gender-related roles in socialization processes that result in radicalization and extremism phenomena, transcending traditional ideological boundaries based on radically different political and religious positions.

Such a reflection in the sociological field has not yet been fully systematized, as in the last two decades, gender in the context of radicalization processes has been predominantly identified as a factor of vulnerability with particular reference to the role of women and programs to prevent and counter forms of extremism and radicalization of which women may be victims.

Contemporary history highlights how the role of women, in certain extremist and terrorist social contexts, has been central and very active for the constitution of the group, for the vetting processes or selection of future members and for the maintenance of the group itself over time. An example of this is the phenomenon of some Western women who, as foreign fighters, have left for Syria and Iraq to fight in the ranks of the ISIS group (Saltman & Smith, 2015).

In light of this, retracing the models of socialization to gender from a social perspective is important for understanding how this socio-cultural factor acts in contemporary digital contexts and contributes to the narrative of the phenomena of radicalization and extremism, both political and religious.

Finally, despite the sociological approach, it is considered essential to consider the role of geopolitical scenarios and how they influence socialization dynamics and cultural and communicative processes in the digital dimension of current life. In this regard, Crespi (2008), citing authors such as Friedman (1994), Bauman (2002), and Bartholini (2003), highlighted how the phenomenon of globalization had influenced the processes of construction



of individual and social identities, thus recognizing its role and specific effects produced by a phenomenon of the global context.

## 2. Sociology and gender: perspectives and models

For more than twenty years there has been increasing attention on the part of sociology to the theme of gender and its declination in the sociological field.

Sociology has questioned the role that gender plays in the construction of personal and social identity and in the system of relationships within which a person is inserted.

The sociologist Crespi (2008) has systematized the models of gender-related socialization processes, considering the classical authors and the history of sociology.

In particular, the analysis conducted by Crespi (2008) shows four models related to the development of gender identities:

- *Integrationist model* that is characterized by the functional role attributed to the relationship between men and women;
- *Conflictualist model* through which the character and level of conflict between genders is highlighted;
- *Communicative model* through which the focus on gender is linked to its level and its modes of discursiveness;
- *Relational model* which emphasizes the reciprocity of recognition and relationship that exists between genders

These four theoretical models developed in different historical eras in which social relations, the construction of social identities, and belonging to a gender identity were determined by socialization agencies such as the family and school, elements that today appear increasingly weakened and empty of their socialization purpose.

Moreover, all these approaches, except the last relational one, are placed in pre-digital social context, in which the development of social relationships and communication processes took place for the most part in the off-line dimension.

The advent of new technologies and specifically of social platforms and instant messaging has made it possible to continue the erosion of the roles of mediators of society of socialization agencies typical in modern and post-modern times, to reach a sort of digital socialization characterized by a process of learning social norms, moral and cultural values, of being together that takes place for the most part in self-referential way and mediated by communication technologies.

Most of today's societies are characterized by a plurality of senses and meanings attributed to the construction of gender identity, sometimes discordant with each other, which seek increasingly pervasive and social representative modes with regard to the request for external confirmation.

This point has been well underlined by Crespi (2008):

This is how relational (gender) identity takes shape, in which there is a continuous verification of the "fixed points" that constitute it and an incessant confrontation with the multiple stimuli that come from global society (Rossi, 2001).<sup>1</sup>

Alongside this perspective, the communicative orientation typical of the processes of construction of social identity is taken up again as central in the current era of digital societies:

Identity becomes a communicative (and partly linguistic) process built-in interactions (situational aspect) and is continuously in question (processual aspect). It is therefore open, flexible, dynamic and subject to continuous reworking.<sup>2</sup> (Crespi, 2008)

The re-elaboration of identity of which Crespi (2008) argues is a typical element of the processes of socialization and of the dynamics of construction of contemporary gender identities and actualizing this perspective in particular, it is considered that the processes of construction of social identity are characterized by a lack of traditional socialization agencies, thus making it possible to speak of digital social identities strongly characterized by the characteristics themselves of the dimension of digital life as the pervasiveness and spatial and temporal continuity.

The theme of gender and gender identity is a traditional theoretical line of sociological thought that can however be declined originally and innovatively, taking into consideration how gender dynamics and the construction of social gender identity develop in relation to radicalization processes and participation in digital extremist groups.

This is theoretically and sociologically relevant because gender identities, their representations and narratives have a significant impact on digital relationships of conflict, hatred and violence as well as on organizational and power dynamics between members of different genders.

<sup>1</sup> In italiano nel testo originale: "Prende forma così l'identità relazionale (di genere), in cui c'è una verifica continua dei "punti fermi" che la costituiscono e un incessante confronto con gli stimoli molteplici che provengono dalla società globale (Rossi, 2001)."

<sup>2</sup> In italiano nel testo originale: "L'identità diventa un processo comunicativo (e in parte linguistico) costruito nelle interazioni (aspetto situazionale) ed è continuamente in discussione (aspetto processuale). È quindi aperta, flessibile, dinamica e soggetta ad una continua rielaborazione."

It is in this context that the need to understand how gender has become an agent of socialization between different forms of extremism and its narratives, cognitive warfare strategies and disinformation is substantiated.

### 3. Extremisms and gender: social and security perspectives

The perspective that we want to propose here as a line of theoretical and methodological research concerns the role of gender in the dynamics of socialization and construction of social identity in extremist digital communication ecosystems.

For some years now, the context of digital extremism has been characterized by a strong hybridization between different ideologies and by a difficulty, even objective and therefore relevant for security agencies, in the certain systematization of the various extremist ideologies and orientations in their own and defined cultural spaces.

In this regard, for example, conspiracy theories, siege culture, accelerationism, incel sub-culture and eco-extremism can coexist and feed conflicting social representations and extremist interpretations of global events, influencing a public opinion – prosumer – which has now become both a user and a producer of the same content.

In the theoretical field, this phenomenon has been described by Criezis (2020), as intersections of extremism precisely in view of the impossibility of identifying specific forms of extremism and characterized by any cultural, ideological and technological distinctive trait.

For these reasons, Brace et al. (2023) have recently coined the acronym MUU which identifies forms of contemporary extremism as mixed, unclear and unstable.

These three elements highlight the essential features of current extremist phenomena that present mixed ideological and cultural orientations, unclear in their definitions and theoretical orientations and decidedly unstable in the methods of selecting new members, for which forms of permeability and openness between different extremist groups are increasingly present, in the communicative and narrative choices, in the maintenance of the original group and the continuation of propaganda activities and support for extremist visions.

Furthermore, it has been noted in recent years, precisely in consideration of the fact that the processes of radicalization and extremism are phenomena of secondary digital socialization, a limit to the recognition of this variegated extremist landscape according to the current legal systems and criteria of national security agencies.

In essence, the socio-anthropological forms of the global and current extremist phenomenon take on indistinct characteristics that are reflected in the need to update the monitoring and analysis systems of emerging threats.

This is also in consideration of how extremist phenomena and their digital representations are profoundly influenced by the possibilities made available by new technologies both in terms of specific functionality and in terms of the way in which communication and social relationship processes can be shaped by new digital technologies (Lucini, 2022a).

The recognition of new technologies as active social actors in the definition of an extremist digital communication ecosystem is fundamental for analyses that want to be effective and in line with the changes in the more general phenomenon.

This theoretical and methodological premise is declined in the study of the relationship between the new forms of extremism and the question of gender, wanting to answer in particular the question which gender for which extremism?

In particular, the role of gender in the context of current forms of hybrid and digital extremism can be deepened by considering three framework orientations such as:

- gender and some forms of extremism;
- gender themes and narratives;
- gender representations

In this context, gender from a social, cultural and anthropological instance (Kaufam et al., 2024) takes on the role of actor in the conflictual and extremist dynamics expressed by some forms of extremists such as the three that are now being considered.

#### 4. Incel

The Incel – Involuntary celibates – subculture (ICSR, 2024), represents a form of extremism that has its roots a decade ago and the first case that can be identified as Incel is that of Elliot Rodger in 2014:

The incel subculture, often referred to as the ‘incelosphere’ due to its inherently online nature, entered the public consciousness after the 2014 killing spree in Isla Vista, California by the 22-year-old Elliot Rodger, who, after killing six people died at the hands of his own gun.<sup>3</sup> Rodger left behind a sprawling manifesto entitled “My Twisted World”, in which he described his lifelong

misery over his inability to lose his virginity or get a girlfriend, and his intention to murder as many women as possible in an act of revenge.<sup>3</sup> (ICSR, 2024)

This represents the first case of extremism and killing attack perpetrated by a member of the Incel subculture, which provides for an exclusively male membership of its members, who perceive themselves as victims of a social system and often report feeling rejected and excluded by the existing social system.

The interesting issue to note is that the first online Forum that began to collect the lives and experiences of these people was founded by a woman, Alana, in 1997 (ICSR, 2024) who then moved away from the community she had created.

The Incel phenomenon shows that technological evolution has made it possible to create digital hubs, sort of social attractors and catalysts of individual frustrations, feelings of hatred towards other social categories considered as causes of one's evil of living.

On a narrative level, the line chosen by Incel members is that of misogyny and the narratives that underlie hatred towards women, but it must be pointed out that over the last few years even the Incel orientations have witnessed a hybridization of their original extremist theories and new ideological orientations have arisen such as transphobia and transmisogyny which, as shown by Craanen et al. (2024), are the new representations of hatred and extremism in digital environments.

Finally, another characteristic element of the Incel community is that precisely in view of the broadening of the ideological base and the inclusion of ideologies contrary to the recognition of genders outside the traditional binary perspective, it becomes difficult to attribute specific actions and attacks as Incel as argued in the ICSR report (2024): "*Yet proving that a specific act is motivated by inceldom remains difficult.*"

This supports the idea that even in the context of risk assessments and explosive threats, new interpretive and threat definition categories must be considered.

## 5. Tradwife

The Tradwife phenomenon – Traditional Wife was born in the United States a few years ago and then expanded mainly in Germany, France and the United Kingdom.

<sup>3</sup>Elliot Rodger, 'My Twisted World: The Story of Elliot Rodger,' 2014. [http://schoolshooters.info/sites/default/files/rodger\\_my\\_twisted\\_world.pdf](http://schoolshooters.info/sites/default/files/rodger_my_twisted_world.pdf).

It is an interesting phenomenon because the promoters are mainly influencers and use Tik Tok as the main platform for sharing their content and narratives that focus on the theme of the lives of women considered in the traditional roles of mothers and wives.

From a sociological perspective, the phenomenon is interesting for several reasons: the first concerns the cultural datum of the vision of women rooted in a traditional society of the 50s and 60s and which is expressed in a visual representation of environments, clothes and accessories that confirms the years to which they refer.

The second reason is that it is a phenomenon born on Tik Tok and that exploits the topicality of the platform, especially among an audience of young people, thus intercepting segments of the population potentially sensitive to the issue of lifestyle and personal choices.

In addition, video sharing is in line with the communication and narrative choices of these influencers, for whom showing a traditional family life is essential and the purpose of their communication strategy.

A strategy that is not new, however, and that is indeed based on the narratives of the nascent Islamic State, when at the beginning of its development, interested in attracting new members and showing the possibility of a serene and happy family life, they showed videos developed for these specific purposes.

The third reason is that the phenomenon of Tradwives, despite being undersized in terms of aspects related to forms of violent extremism, has often been associated with the American far right and with white supremacism (Sitler-Elbel, 2021).

This is an interesting element that highlights the question of the ideological areas within which to understand phenomena that could represent security threats in the future.

In fact, in addition to the association of the Tradwife phenomenon with white supremacism, some support (Sykes and Hopner, 2023) that these women are commodifying the ideology of the right, especially American, influencing the people who meet them not only from a cultural but also from a political perspective.

The case of the Tradwives is also relevant to argue that, although this phenomenon cannot be counted among the ranks of officially declared extremist groups, in reality, both some narrative modes and the sharing of an ideological and political substrate should lead to greater attention to the digital social and communicative dynamics active on the main platforms used (Tik Tok but also Reddit), in order to be able to identify any more evident signs of systematization and radicalization.

## 6. Eco extremism and gender

A very interesting position is also held by the relationship between phenomena and movements of eco-extremism and the gender issue.

Gender is an element that in recent times has been the subject of reflections, even critical, on the relationship between gender and conceptions of nature.

In particular, the theories and movements belonging to queer culture and the vision of a post-gender society bring the issue back to some fundamental assumptions such as the fact that the subdivision and recognition of genders according to the binary perspective is something normed for men and taken for granted for women, seeing in the relationship between men and nature the reproduction of powers on a patriarchal scale of society itself (Ourkiya, 2023).

This is directly related to a heteronormative ecological vision that is associated with a far-right vision to be overcome in its binary logic to reach a queer and postgender ecological vision:

This gendering, however, has been focused on the feminine, the female, the woman, as if gender is exclusive to women while men are the norm. Nevertheless, recent years have seen the emergence of ecomasculinities, which as a field has finally begun to stand on its own. The main reason behind the need for a specific focus on masculinities is to remind the world that the masculine is gender, has feelings, can be oppressed and has the ability to care and nurture just like its contrasting feminine. Thus, in order to move forward a post-gender nonbinary approach, an ironically binary work needs to be completed by giving equal attention to masculinities in the study of ecology and the nonhuman world. (Ourkiya, 2023)

The overcoming of the opposition between the two binary genders therefore leads to a new theorization of the relationship between people and nature, placing a different consideration on how this relationship influences the dynamics of socialization and the construction of gender identity:

This completion lies in the way ecological masculinities address oppressive masculine hegemonies that people have long used to dominate the Earth, women, Indigenous peoples, people of color, LGBTQI+ communities and other marginalised groups. Yet the reality is not black and white, as not all oppressed groups fall under the umbrella of woman/close to nature and not all oppressing individuals or institutions fall under the umbrella of man/close to culture. Gender identities are diverse and so should be the theories to address these identities within any ecological framework.

The demands of a non-gender-oriented ecology but inclusive of the various orientations could become the object of exploitation for propaganda, disinformation and extremism, especially considering the current conflictual

global geopolitical scenario, in which issues related to ecology and environmentalism are increasingly the subject of the various political agendas.

In this regard, the intersections with various extremist ideologies from the anarchist to the far right are an element of attention, considering how these extremist orientations can appropriate some narratives, such as that of power between genders, to exploit their potential to catalyze extremist attitudes, narratives and actions.

An example of this perspective is the case analysis of Cyprus' far-right National Popular Front's (ELAM) and its visual communication of the environment (Christou, 2023).

In particular, the results that emerged from the analysis conducted highlighted that the concepts of purity and control disseminated through the images chosen by National Popular Front's (ELAM) overlap with the typical ideologies of nationalism and male hegemony (Christou, 2023).

The function of appropriation and the catalyzing purpose of gender instances with reference to the ecological and environmental framework by extremist elements must make us reflect both for its theoretical and socializing scope and for the practical and operational implications that affect the security agencies responsible for monitoring and identifying a potential security threat.

## **7. Conclusion: Risk assessment and gender perspectives in the extremisms digital domains**

The preliminary results that emerged from this first study on the relationship between gender and processes of extremism, in which gender is understood as an agent of socialization and a factor capable of catalyzing very different forms of extremism, can be declined according to three theoretical and methodological perspectives.

The first concerns the consideration of the way in which gender is theorized according to sociological theory and declined in the context of digital and on-life life (Floridi, 2014).

In the contemporary world, the processes of socialization as well as those of radicalization and adherence to extremist visions take place in the digital dimension that represents a mixture of the dimensions and characteristics of off-line and on-line life.

The digital dimension is in fact central to the construction and development of personal and social gender identity, so attention must be paid to the digital socialization processes of identities in the contexts of digital communication ecosystems.



The digital communication dynamics underlying the processes of socialization spread and socialize gender culture and therefore also the practices of the relationship between genders, belonging to and recognition of an idea of gender and cultural and representative practices of gender.

This theoretical perspective actually underlies methodological and operational determinants for the identification and understanding of possible new threats constituted around the concept of gender and its narratives. This represents a first factor of strategic importance, for the development and consideration of methods and techniques for monitoring and analyzing digital communication ecosystems that consider this multidimensionality and its equally multiple modes of expression and socio-cultural representation.

In fact, the second perspective opens up to the vision of gender which can, in the light of the cases considered, be defined in its varieties as an agent of socialization even between different forms of extremism, a catalyst of narratives and instances that intersect between elements of gender, culture, politics, economics, geopolitics and international security.

In addition, digital communication strategies and narratives that are produced with reference to gender issues can be part of cognitive warfare, strategic communication and disinformation such as the case of Algerian boxers Imane Khelif and Taiwanese Lin Yu Ting at the recent Paris 2024 Olympics (Lucini, 2024).

These events are not new in the digital landscape and refer to other cases that occurred in 2020 and on which the attention of a report by ISD - Institute for Strategic Dialogue, which in 2022 supported the central role of social platform companies in the spread of hate content towards athletes of other kinds:

At the very least, however, social media companies must ensure that prominent media outlets and public figures are not able to generate support or gain traction with such content. One such way of achieving this could be through actively monitoring accounts that have shown to be repeat offenders on this issue, such as those highlighted in this research. (ISD, 2022)

It is in this context that the gender issue, originally anchored in socio-anthropological dimensions, manifests its geopolitical and international significance.

In this regard, the need emerges for security agencies to monitor the appropriation and use of gender in extremist digital contexts, as this issue, as already noted in the cases explained above, can become a risk factor for security, fueling hatred and social violence, although this phenomenon cannot always be counted in the context of more structured extremist and terrorist phenomena.

This leads to the third perspective, namely the consideration that the current state of potential extremist threats that have as their ideological substrate the variously explicit gender issues requires a different vision about the assessment of risk and the extremist threat, refining the methods, techniques and tools of Digital Humint from a gender perspective to be able to better answer the question: Which gender for which extremism?

In particular, the declination of this question refers to two further declinations of the same.

On the one hand, there is the need to be aware that current extremism and terrorism risk assessment tools (Lucini, 2022 b), the TRA-Is-Terrorism Risk Assessment Instruments consider gender in its binary meaning. Similarly, little attention is paid to the gender of the personnel who use these tools. In this regard, the theories relating to Cultural Studies dating back to the middle of the last century already highlighted how gender of belonging influenced the vision and interpretation of social practices.

On the other hand, but connected to the previous point, the need to include a reflection on gender theories, in particular feminist theories that can define the cybersecurity domain and guide the identification of digital extremism (Bengtsson Meuller, E. (2023) is considered.

In Bengtsson Meuller's (2023) study, it is argued that there are cultural and social biases in the field of cybersecurity and the way in which forms of online extremism and abuse are defined and identified.

In addition, the author focuses on the role that gender vision has in practices of preventing and countering extremism:

Current P/CVE and cybersecurity areas' (including national policies) disengagement with gendered and racially oppressive structures means that strategies and activities that strive to counter extremism are effectively built on male supremacist logic and consequently lack impactful intervention measures.

This underlines the need to consider, both from a theoretical-methodological point of view and from a training point of view for the personnel involved, gender perspectives and their repercussions in the definition of extremist digital communication ecosystems and the risk of extremism.

In general, therefore, the issue of gender, as emerged from this preliminary analysis, assumes strategic importance, especially as gender contrasts can become an activator and catalyst of other digital extremist dynamics and be exploited by international actors present in the broader geopolitical scenario of current cognitive wars and disinformation practices.

Finally, in agreement with Baele et al. (2024) and their research question "Is AI-Generated Extremism Credible?", it argues for the need to deepen the

issue of gender in relation to the possible new socio-cultural constructs and related communicative products developed by AI technologies and how these can potentially be exploited by extremist phenomena of other origins, but which intercept the destabilizing potential of gender issues debated in the broader framework of cognitive warfare.

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Largo Gemelli 1, 20123 Milano - tel. 02.72342235 - fax 02.80.53.215  
e-mail: editoriale.dsu@educatt.it (produzione) - librario.dsu@educatt.it (distribuzione)  
redazione: redazione@itstime.it  
web: www.sicurezzaerrorismosocieta.it  
ISBN: 979-12-5535-352-2