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Author/s:
Meger, S;Johnston, M;Riveros-Morales, Y

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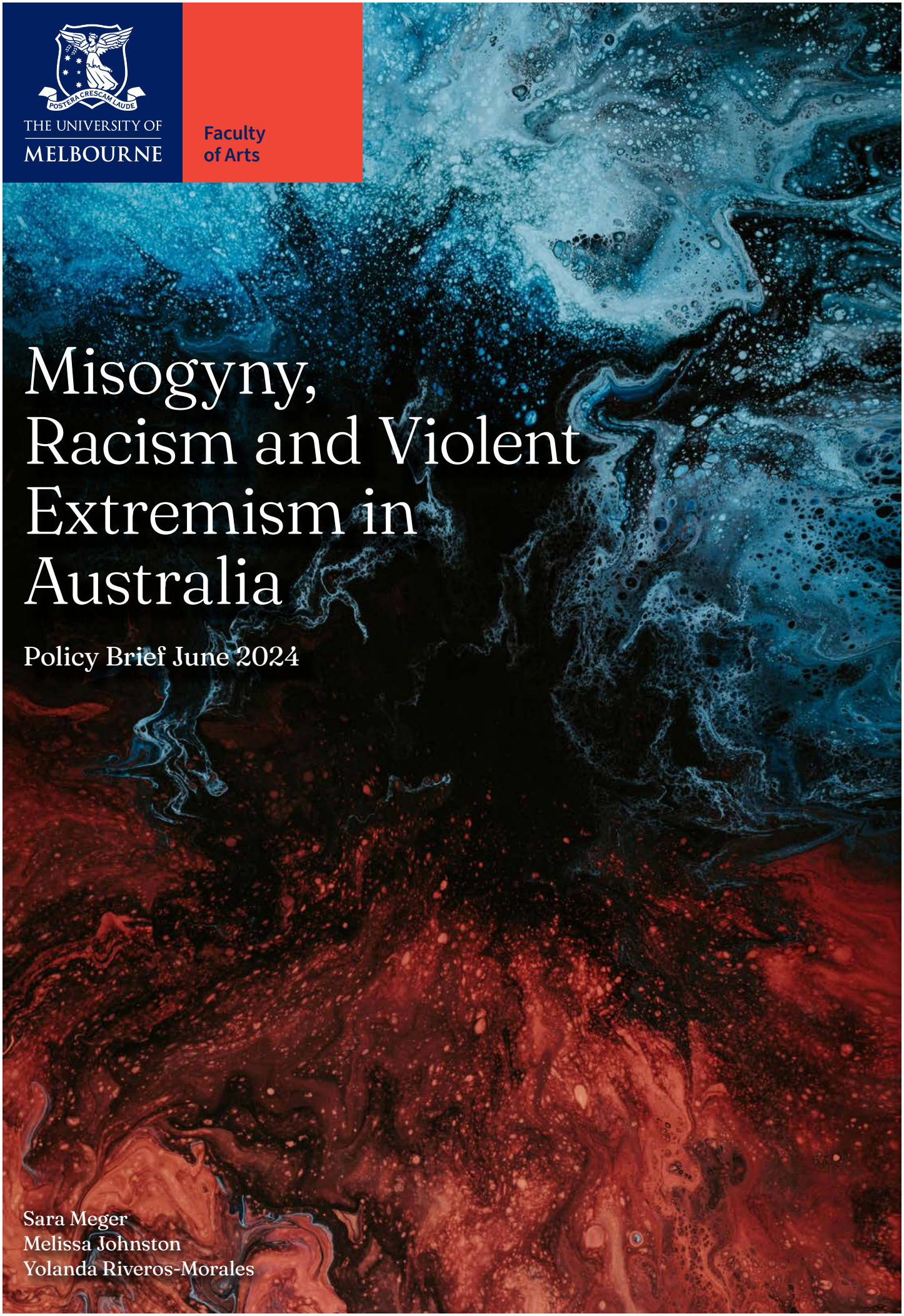

THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE
Faculty
of Arts
Misogyny, Racism and Violent Extremism in Australia
Policy Brief June 2024
Sara Meger
Melissa Johnston
Yolanda Riveros-Morales

Executive summary

Violent extremism has become one of the most pressing concerns for national security in Australia. Recognised by the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), the Australian Department of Home Affairs, and federal and state police as an acute and growing threat, addressing the motivations and pathways of radicalized individuals into violent extremism has become a top security priority. The first objective of Australia's *Safeguarding Our Community Together* counter-terrorism strategy is "preventing radicalisation of individuals before an attack takes place, and rehabilitating and reintegrating violent extremist offenders."

The Australian counter-terrorism strategy now recognises violent extremism as coming in many forms, and as politically, religiously, or racially-motivated. The Australian Government's approach to countering violent extremism focuses on addressing the societal drivers and developing early intervention strategies with vulnerable communities. However, the role of gender is largely unaddressed in this policy environment.

Using novel survey data, our research analysed multiple underlying attitudinal drivers to radicalisation and tested the relationship between various attitudes and beliefs purported in the literature to drive radicalisation and their causal effect with support for seven forms of violent extremism amongst the Australian public.

Our research finds robust evidence of underlying drivers to radicalisation that can help us better understand the causes of violent extremism and formulate more responsive interventions to prevent violent extremism. Specifically, our research finds that – across the ideological and religious spectrums of those expressing sympathies for violent extremism amongst the Australian population – racist and misogynistic attitudes are strong and significant causal influences.

These findings have significant implications for existing preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) policy and strategy, as it provides evidence of not only the prevalence of these biased attitudes amongst the general population, but also shows the urgent need for a holistic approach to redressing racist and misogynistic attitudes as a matter of security urgency.

Key messages

- Gendered and racist attitudes are a significant, but overlooked and misunderstood, element driving support for various forms of violent extremism. This research advances understanding of how gendered and racist attitudes are connected to multiple forms of violent extremism.
- In Australia, attitudes hostile to women and supportive of violence against women, and racist attitudes make an individual much more likely to support various forms of violent extremism.
- Addressing the role of racial and gendered biases as underlying drivers to radicalisation leading to violent extremism and terrorism is a significant, but overlooked security concern for Australia.
- Misogynistic and racist attitudes need to be considered in risk assessment, preventative and rehabilitative work across ***all*** forms of violent extremism in Australia

Introduction

Australia features a variety of forms of extremism that are on the rise across the Global North. Though Australia has not had the number of terrorist incidents of other Western countries, of the incidents of terrorism and mass lethal violence perpetrated by Australians in the last decade – the Lindt Café siege (2015), the Christchurch Mosque shootings (2019), the Bondi Junction stabbings (2024), and the Wakeley Church stabbings (2024) – the majority have since been found to have gendered and racialized determinants. For example, the Lindt Café terrorist, Man Monis, had an active intervention order for domestic violence against him at the time of the attack and was on bail for murder and sexual assault (Commonwealth of Australia 2015). The Christchurch shooter's manifesto spoke at length about 'fertility levels,' 'birthrates' and the Great Replacement theory, which has both racialized and gendered connotations. And though the Bondi Junction mass stabbings that killed six people and injured 11 others has not been labelled a 'terrorist' incident, police noted that he explicitly targeted women and was described by his father as frustrated at his lack of dating success (Atkinson and Ritchie 2024; Maher and Franks 2024).

In spite of the common background factors anecdotally observed of racist and misogynistic attitudes and a perpetration of violence against women, Australian P/CVE strategy takes racism to motivate only *some* forms of violent extremism, and nowhere mentions gendered attitudes as a factor in violent extremism.

A growing body of scholarship suggests that gender ideology undergirds various forms of extremism and terrorism. Previous research (Johnston & True 2019; Pearson 2020; Kimmel 2018; Flood, Roose and Alfano 2020) shows significant overlap between misogynistic attitudes, gender attitudes, and violent extremism in three major areas:

» The backlash against gender equality, and the mobilisation of this backlash by violent extremist groups for recruitment;
» The role of frustrated, marginalized, and subordinated masculinities exploited in violent extremist recruitment; and
» The role of sexual and gender-based violence, including misogynistic hate crimes, as a factor in recruitment into violent extremist groups.

Our study sought to add empirical evidence to theories of attitudinal drivers of radicalisation from the Australian context. The research reported here examines ***why*** and ***how*** radicalisation into violent extremism occurs from a gender perspective. The evidence presented in this brief shows the significance and causal influence of misogynistic and racist attitudes for nearly all forms of violent extremism in Australia today.

This study goes beyond research on members of extremist groups or discursive analyses of their online presence to assess support for violent extremism among ordinary Australians. It measures various attitudinal predispositions for their causal relationship with support for seven forms of violent extremism salient in the Australian context.

Our findings show that sexist and racist attitudes are strongly predictive of support for violent extremism. They also find prevalence of some of the attitudes predictive of support for violent extremism are more widespread in the general population than previously thought.

These findings indicate the urgent need to address misogynistic and racist drivers of extremism for counter-terrorism policy and P/CVE scholarship.

Research Methods

This research aimed to examine the relationship between various attitudinal biases and support for violent extremism amongst the general public in Australia. This project was guided by the following core questions:

» What political attitudes are most predictive of support for various forms of violent extremism?

» Is misogyny a strong predictor of all forms of violent extremism?

» Is racism a strong predictor of most forms of violent extremism?

We conducted a survey of 1,020 people from across Australia using a pre-established panel and sampling aligned with Australian Bureau of Statistics population parameters for age, sex, location, and religion. The survey was used to measure the relationship between attitudes towards gender, race, religiosity and political authority and support for seven forms of violent extremism salient in this context.

These we identify as:

- **Religious violent extremism** – the idea that violence is justified to establish a religious order based on principles of one's faith.
- **Ethnically-motivated violent extremism** – the idea that violence is justified in defence of one's ethnic group.
- **White supremacist violent extremism** – the belief in violence to enforce white dominance.
- **Economic revolutionary violent extremism** – the belief in the justness of violence to redistribute wealth and reduce economic inequality.
- **Economic reactionary violent extremism** – the belief in the justness of the use of violence to resist economic redistribution and protect private property.
- **Incel violent extremism** – the ideology that violent vengeance is justifiable in response to women's rejection of men's sexual advances.
- **Anti-feminist violent extremism** – the belief that violence is necessary to resist the damaging effects of feminism on society.

Given the recent emphasis amongst policymakers on the role of ideology within varieties of violent extremism, we focus on attitudinal measures and individual support for – or sympathies with – various forms of violent extremism in Australia.

Dependent variables	Question
Religious VE	Q33. Violence is justified to realise God's vision on earth for proper religious order, like a caliphate
	Q34. Violence is justified to establish a proper religious order and make people submit to the authority of God and the Bible
Ethnic VE	Q36. If someone criticises or undermines my ethnic group, then it is ok to use violence against them.
White VE	Q37. It has gone beyond a joke. All we are saying is that it's okay to be white, and we get cancelled. It just shows that violence is the only way for white people to have a fair chance in the world.
Economic revolutionary VE	Q38. The rich will not give up their wealth easily. Organised violence including against people is the only way to redistribute wealth to the poor.
Economic reactionary VE	Q39. In a communist state, it is okay for landowners to use violence to take back their private property
Incel VE	Q40. It is understandable that young men who are rejected by women and starved of sex resort to violent vengeance
Anti-Feminist VE	Q42. Feminism is damaging to our society and should resisted by force if necessary

For each of these forms of extremism, we test the relationship with seven attitudinal variables (sexism, racism, acceptability of violence against women, gender roles, religiosity, and authoritarian attitudes) for their ability to predict an individual's support for each form of extremism.

Further demographic and population variables were also tested with our seven forms of violent extremism, including: education, income, religion, urban/rural geography, and state.

We used logit analysis to quantify strength and direction, and establish a relationship between variables and evaluate the relevance of multiple explanatory factors. We seek to explain the likelihood for support for various forms of extremism within our sample.

Findings

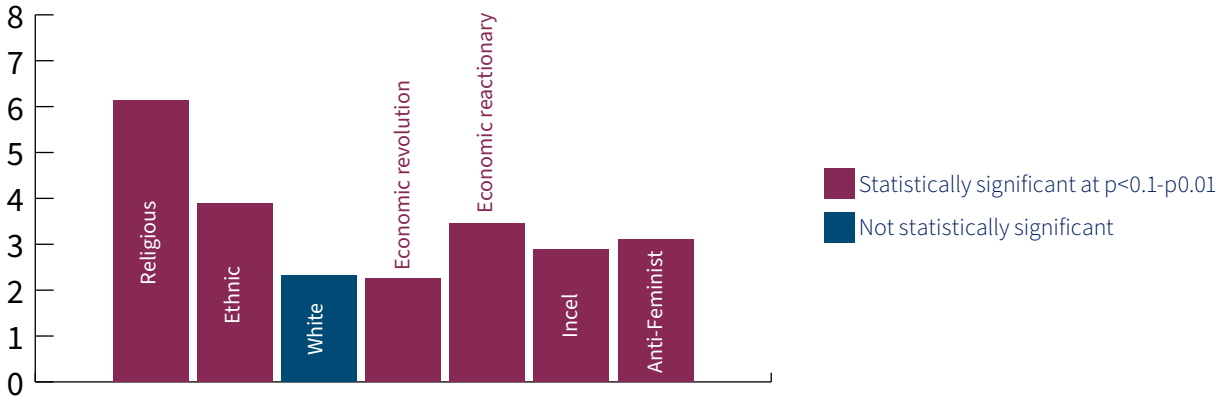
Finding 1. Misogyny is a strong and significant predictor of most forms of violent extremism

One of the key findings from our survey research is that hostile sexist attitudes and attitudes permissive of violence against women are strongly associated with most forms of violent extremism in Australia.

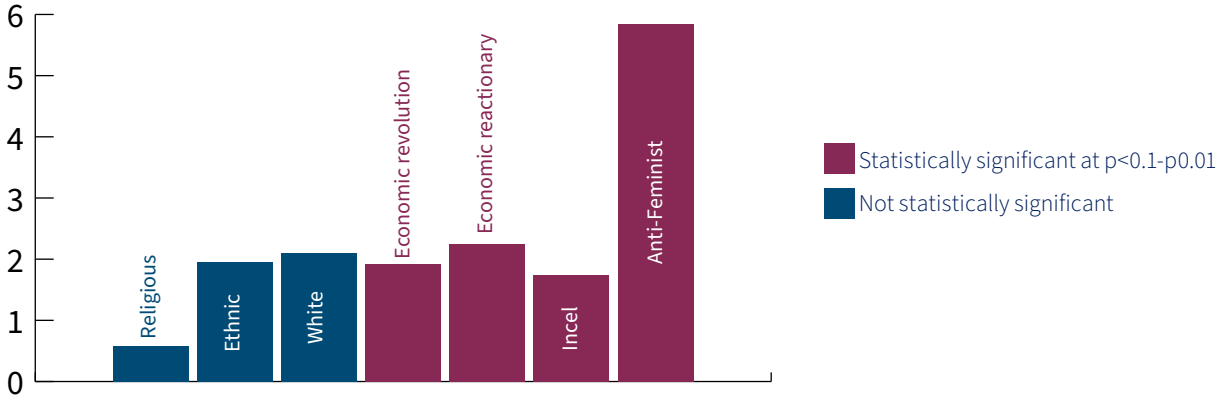
People who believe that perpetrating violence against women is sometimes or always permissible are **6.13 times more likely** to support religious violent extremism, **3.89 times more likely** to support ethnically-motivated violent extremism, and **3.47 times more likely** to support economic reactionary violent extremism.

Those respondents who expressed agreement with hostile sexist attitudes were **1.91 times more likely** to support economic revolutionary violent extremism, **2.25 times more likely** to support economic reactionary violent extremism, and **5.84 times more likely** to support anti-feminist violent extremism.

Violence Against Women and Odds ratio of support for VE



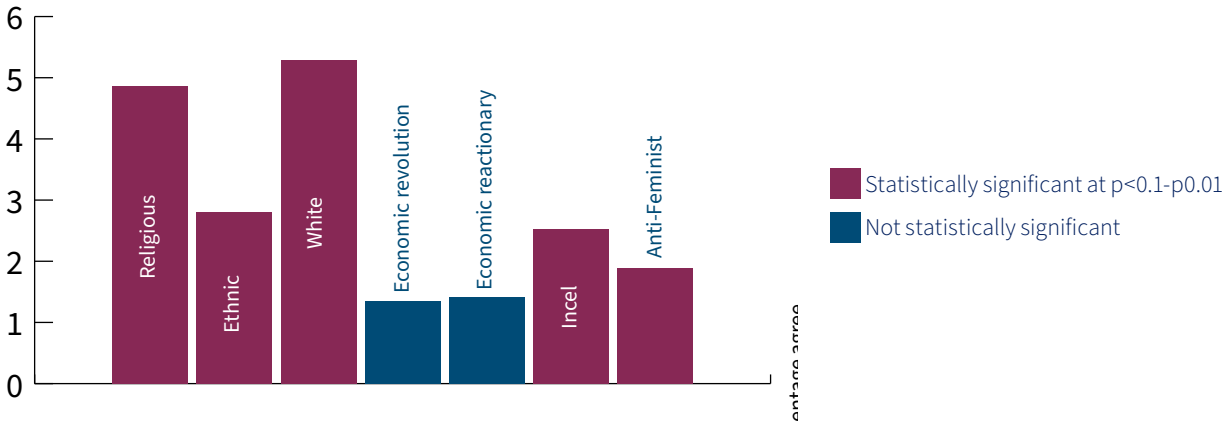
Hostile sexist attitudes and odds ratio of support for VE



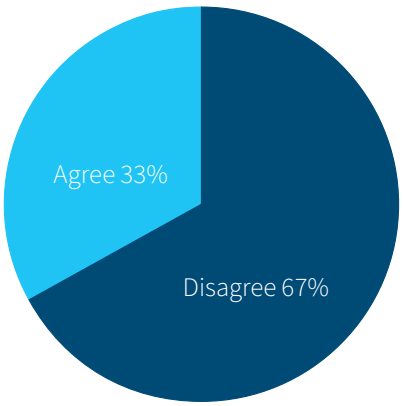
We also found that attitudes about gender role adherence resulted in a respondent being **4.86 times more likely** to support religious violent extremism, **2.8 times more likely** to support ethnically-motivated violent extremism, **5.28 times more likely** to support white supremacist violent extremism, and **2.52 times more likely** to support incel violent extremism*.

Hostile sexist attitudes also had a very high prevalence within our survey. **Nearly 33 per cent of our respondents agreed** or slightly agreed with statements expressing hostile sexist views.

Gender Role Adherence and odds ratio forsupport VE



Percentage of respondents expressing hostile sexist attitudes



*For full results of attitudinal variables and odds ratio of support for each form of violent extremism, see Appendix tables on page 13 of this report.

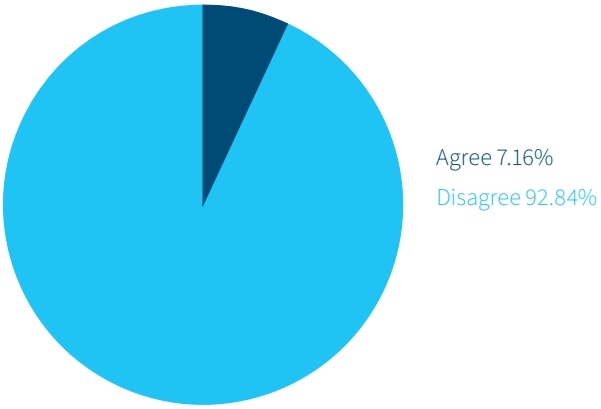
Finding 2. Racism is a very strong and significant predictor of all forms of violent extremism in Australia

Our second key finding is that racism is very strongly and significantly predictive of all forms of violent extremism in Australia. Consistent with earlier research findings (Vergani et al. 2023), we found that racist attitudes were predictive of support for political violence across the political spectrum in Australia.

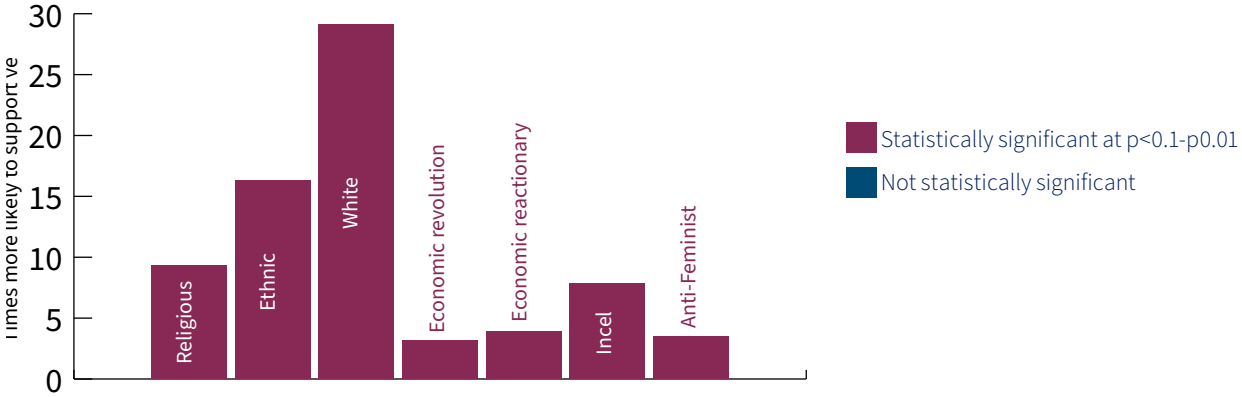
While we had anticipated that racism would predict support for some forms of violent extremism – namely, white supremacist and ethnically-motivated violent extremism – we found that racist attitudes were a very strong predictor of support for all seven forms, including economic revolutionary, economic reactionary, religious violent extremism, incel violent extremism, and anti-feminist violent extremism.

Looking at the marginal effects, those respondents who agreed with racist attitudes are between 11 and 19 percentage points more likely to support the various forms of violent extremism than individuals who do not hold such views.

Percentage of respondents expressing racist attitudes



Racist Attitudes and Odds Ratio of Support for VE



Finding 3. Anti-Feminist Violent Extremism is the most prevalent form of violent extremist attitudes in Australia

We were surprised to learn that more of our respondents expressed some degree of support for anti-feminist violent extremism than any other form of violent extremism. Nearly fourteen per cent of respondents agreed with the use of violence to resist feminism, compared to less than 5 per cent for religious violent extremism or white supremacist violent extremism.

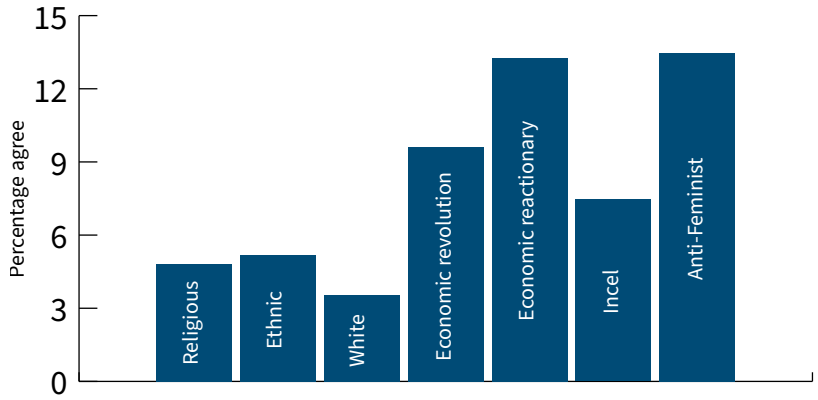
While the literature on misogyny and violent extremism have focused almost exclusively on incel VE, this finding suggests these attitudes are more widespread amongst the general population than previously believed.

Support for anti-feminist VE was highest amongst 18-29 year-olds, of whom 19 percent agreed with legitimacy of violence to resist feminism. Men were also much more likely than women to express support for anti-feminist VE.

» 19.4% of male respondents agreed that feminism is damaging to our society and should be resisted by force if necessary.

Were policy to define violent anti-feminist beliefs as a form of extremism, it would be the most prevalent form in Australia and ought to be seen as a significant extremist threat.

Prevalence of Support for Violent Extremism



Finding 4. Young people and men are more likely to support violent extremism of all forms

Across all forms of violent extremism in our survey, younger people were more likely to express support for violent extremism. For each additional year of age, the odds of support for any form of violent extremism reduces.

A pattern was also evident in the data that 18-29 year-olds and 40-49 year-olds were most likely age groups to support each form of violent extremism. The frequency of support dipped for 30-39 year-olds, and then dropped from 50-59 year-olds and above across most forms of violent extremism.

Our data also shows a **clear gender gap in levels of support for violent extremism.** Across all forms and age categories, male respondents were more likely than female respondents to support each type of violent extremism. The table below shows frequency of expressions of support for the different forms of violent extremism, disaggregated by age groups and sex.

Frequency of Respondents Expressing Support for Violent Extremism

VE Forms	18-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70+	Male	Female	All
Religious VE	5.7	7.7	7.2	3.4	1.9	0.9	6.7	3.2	4.9
Ethnic VE	9.3	7.2	7.2	2.8	0.6	0	7.3	3.2	5.2
White Supremacist VE	11.9	8.6	7.2	5.5	4.5	2.6	9.6	5.3	7.4
Economic Revolutionary VE	13.7	12.4	9	8.3	8.3	0.9	13.3	6.2	9.6
Economic Reactionary VE	17.6	17.2	14.5	9	7.1	9.4	19.4	7.6	13.23
Incel VE	11.9	8.1	9.6	4.1	3.2	4.3	9.6	5.5	7.5
Anti-Feminist VE	18.9	14.4	18.7	13.1	5.1	6.8	19.4	8.3	13.6

Given that misogynistic and racist attitudes were strong predictors of support for violent extremism, we were not surprised to find that younger people were also the most likely in our sample to express racist attitudes across two of our three measures for 'racism.' Respondents were asked:

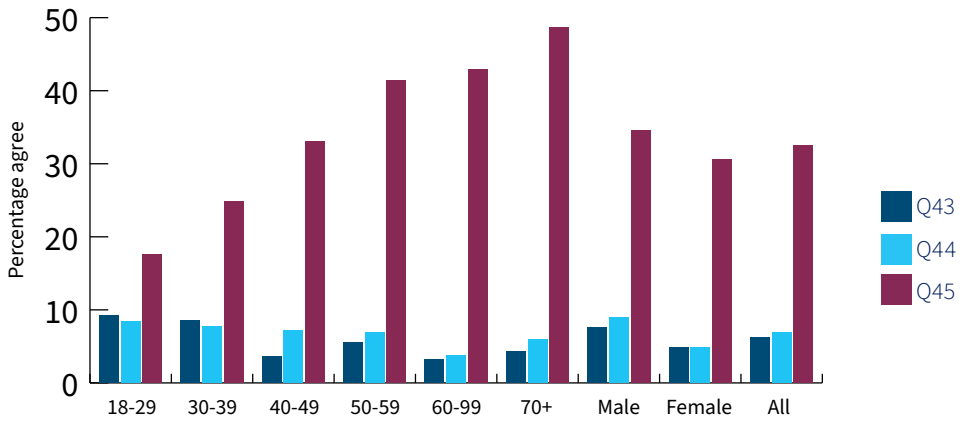
Q43. Usually, the lighter someone's skin, the more natural intelligence they possess.

Q44. Darker skinned people are more suited to unskilled labour than lighter skinned people.

Q45. Migration is a hot topic. While I don't mind if there are migrants from developed countries, like white expats, I'm not okay with just anybody coming here.

For questions 43 & 44, younger cohorts were more likely to agree with the statements. It was only for the question regarding restricting immigration that the frequency of agreement increased with each age category.

Prevalence of Racist Attitudes



Finding 5. A large proportion of Australians express misogynistic and violent attitudes towards women

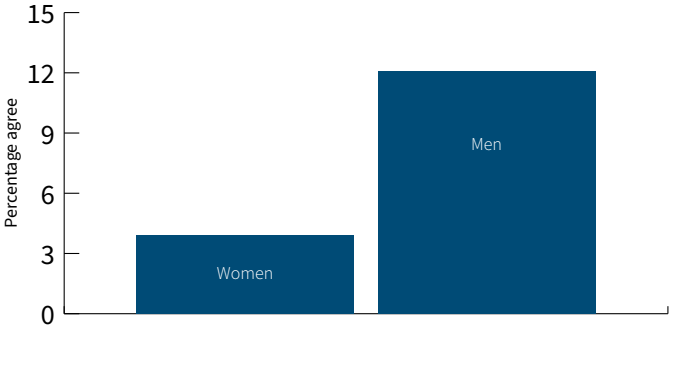
We used as a measure of 'incel violent extremism' a question asking respondents to what extent they agreed or disagreed that:

Q. 41 When women have the freedom to choose which men to mate with, they breed with stupid, degenerate men, which produces stupid, degenerate offspring. Women should not have the right to choose who to mate with. That choice should be made for them by civilized men of intelligence.

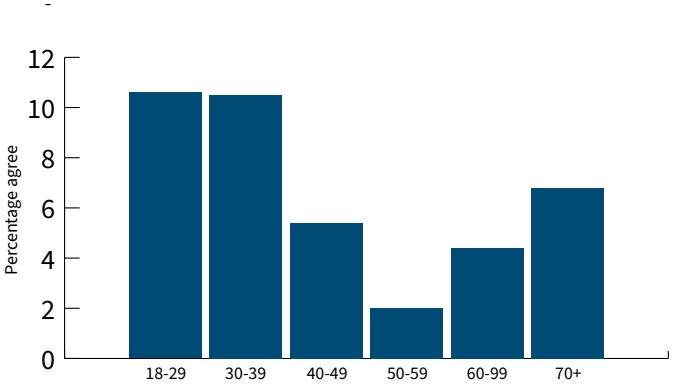
A surprising proportion of respondents agreed to some extent with this sentiment drawn from Incel manifestos. **Over 12% of all male respondents in the sample agreed** that women's sexual autonomy should be denied.

There is also a concerning trend that young respondents are more likely than older ones to disagree with women's sexual autonomy. **People aged 18-39** were much more likely to agree with restricting women's right to choose her sexual partners than older respondents.

Proportion of Men and Women Who Agree with Restricting Women's Sexual Autonomy



Proportion of People Who Agree with Restricting Women's Sexual Autonomy by Age Range



We included in the survey a series of questions designed to measure attitudes permissive of violence against women. A full list of the questions are provided in the Appendix, on page 10.

A significant number of respondents agreed with beliefs that women often lie about sexual and physical violence -- **roughly half of all male respondents expressed agreement** with these sentiments. **Nearly a third** of all respondents – and more men than women – also agreed that female victims of male violence are partially to blame for the abuse they experience. Across 'traditional' forms of violence against women, young respondents were more likely than older respondents to express agreement. However, on questions related to likelihood of false allegations and victim blaming, older respondents were more likely than younger to express disbelief.

- **51%** of male respondents think women going through custody battles make up or exaggerate claims of domestic violence.
- **49%** of male respondents agreed that women often make up sexual assault accusations.
- **31%** of respondents agreed that a woman who doesn't leave an abusive partner is partner responsible for ongoing abuse.
- **27%** of respondents agreed that sometimes a woman makes a man so angry that he hits her when he didn't mean to.
- People aged **40-49** and **70+** were most likely to agree on most questions regarding the permissibility of violence against women.
- However, **18-29 year-olds** were most likely to agree that physical violence by men against their female partners can be excused.
- **18-29 year-olds** were also most likely to agree with polygyny, honour-based violence, marital rape, and female circumcision

Implications

Consistent with feminist and sociological analyses on the causes of violent extremism, our research supports the view that extremism is a social process and that attitudinal factors shaped by society are a key determinant of an individual's support for violent extremism.

The two attitudinal factors we found most significant in the Australian context are gendered attitudes and racist attitudes.

We were surprised by how prevalent anti-feminist violent extremist attitudes were in the responses. Nearly 14 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the use of violence to resist feminism, compared to only 4.3 per cent supportive of religious violent extremism and four per cent supportive of white supremacist violent extremism.

What this data shows us is the urgent need for policymakers in Australia to take more seriously the gendered and racist causes of ***all forms*** of violent extremism (not just Incel violent extremists or white supremacist violent extremists). Thus, regardless of the political content of the group's ideology, both racism and sexism play significant roles in motivating individuals to support all forms of extremism.

The other significant implication from our research on the prevalence of anti-feminist violent extremist attitudes, hostile sexist attitudes, and attitudes permissive of violence against women is that it indicates a high degree of risk to women's security in Australia.

Our research finds that the sentiments expressed by perpetrators of terrorism – like Marc Lépine who stated he was acting for "*political reasons… to send the feminists.. to their Maker*" – are more widely shared amongst the general population than previously thought.

Were Australian authorities to recognise anti-feminist beliefs as a form of violent extremism, it would represent the most prevalent form of violent extremism in Australia and ought to be seen as a significant threat to national security. It also indicates the urgent need for authorities to work across issue areas of terrorism, extremism, social cohesion, and violence against women to better identify and prevent violent extremist radicalisation.

Recommendations

- Australian security and policing agencies should develop and implement evidence-based awareness-raising activities on the role of misogyny and racism in countering and preventing violent extremism in Australia.
- Australian authorities implementing P/CVE programs should co-operate with programs on gender-based and family violence to develop better risk assessment tools, early warning systems, and rehabilitation and reintegration programs for violent extremist offenders.
- Australian Commonwealth and state governments should include civil society actors working on racism and gender-based violence in decision-making bodies on preventing and countering violent extremism.
- The Australian Commonwealth and state governments should create working groups or cluster programming that includes civil society sectors working on racism and gender-based violence as key stakeholders in formulating policy and programming aimed at addressing violent extremism.
- The Australian Commonwealth and state governments should provide enhanced funding to educational and social resources to combat hostile sexist attitudes, attitudes permissive of violence against women, and racist attitudes across society as a national security priority.

Appendix

Odds ratio of attitudinal variables and support for all forms of VE

Violent Extremism forms	Attitudinal Variables						
	Benevolent sexism	Hostile sexism	Gender Role adherence	Violence against women	Racism	Authoritarianism	Religiosity
Religious	1.137	0.584	4.859***	6.131***	9.322***	2.358	2.898*
Ethnic	2.036*	1.961	2.797**	3.893**	16.285***	2.204*	1.141
White	2.048	2.104	5.281***	2.318	29.126***	1.647	2.062
Economic revolution	1.238	1.913**	1.354	2.251*	3.144***	2.032***	1.913*
Economic reactionary	1.257	2.252***	1.409	3.465***	3.895***	1.610*	1.529
Incel	0.82	1.737*	2.523**	2.889**	7.855***	2.116**	1.601
Anti-Feminist	0.713	5.841***	1.880*	3.100**	3.521***	2.849***	1.890**

Survey Questions Measuring Attitudes Towards Violence Against Women

Q16. Physical violence (pushing, slapping, punching, kicking, choking) by husbands or partners towards female partners can be excused in some situations.

Q17. A male partner would be entitled to use physical force (pushing, slapping, punching, kicking, choking) if his female partner argues with him, or refuses to obey him

Q18. Sometimes a woman can make a man so angry that he hits her when he didn't mean to.

Q19. A female victim who does not leave an abusive partner is partly responsible for the abuse continuing.

Q20. Women who wait weeks or months to report sexual assault are probably lying.

Q21. Women often make sexual assault accusations as a way of getting back at men.

Q22. Women going through custody battles often make up or exaggerate claims of domestic violence in order to improve their case.

Q23. If a woman is drunk and starts having sex with a man, but then falls asleep, it is understandable if he continues having sex with her anyway.

Q24. The marriage contract generally entitles a husband to have sexual relations with his wife, even if she does not want to.

Q25. Parents should be free to choose to circumcise their female children

Q26. A father or brother is entitled to use physical force (punching, kicking, slapping, pushing, choking) or violence against a daughter or sister to punish her for bringing dishonour on the family

Q27. A man should be able to have more than one wife, but a woman should not have more than one husband

Frequency of Respondents Agreeing with Permissibility of Violence Against Women

VAW Questions	18-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70+	Male	Female	All
Q16	14.1	10	6.6	3.4	2.6	1.7	9.6	5.3	7.4
Q17	7	6.7	4.8	2.8	1.3	0.9	5.5	3.4	4.4
Q18	26.9	23	30.2	26.2	32.1	40.2	33.5	21.7	27.4
Q19	28.2	27.8	33.1	26.2	32.1	43.6	36.9	25.5	31
Q20	13.2	12	12.7	9.7	18.6	28.2	19.6	10.6	14.9
Q21	34.4	32.1	42.2	32.4	32.4	52.1	48.6	29.7	38.7
Q22	33.5	39.7	42.8	40	45.5	47.9	51.2	31	40.7
Q23	10.6	9.6	11.4	11	21.8	21.4	17.8	9.6	13.5
Q24	10.6	7.7	8.4	4.8	6.4	7.7	11.4	4.5	7.8
Q25	17.6	12.4	13.3	6.9	7.7	10.3	15.9	8.3	12
Q26	7.9	3.8	2.4	2	1.9	0.9	4.5	2.8	3.6
Q27	8.8	6.7	6	1.4	0.6	0.8	8	1.7	4.7

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Contact

Sara Meger
Senior Lecturer in International Relations
School of Social and Political Sciences
The University of Melbourne
Parkville, VIC 3010 Australia
sara.meger@unimelb.edu.au

unimelb.edu.au