

Weaponisation of Gender by Strategic Competitors and Potential Threats

Why does gender matter?

Gendered narratives are used by strategic competitors and threats in information threat campaigns, and play roles in the recruitment and culture of armed groups as well as their conduct of war. By developing a better understanding of how social and cultural dynamics influence the tactics, techniques and procedures of potential threats to the alliance, we can gain a cognitive edge, out-thinking our adversaries and strengthening our defence posture.



Gender in terrorism (and counterterrorism)

Gendered narratives are used to promote recruitment. Terrorist groups may promote women's participation as a tool of empowerment, or call upon men to act as protectors. Access to women as wives or slaves may also be promised, acting as a further incentive. Some groups use sexual violence as a tactic to control local populations through fear or as a tool of ethnic cleansing, such as by ISIS against the Yazidi population.

Stereotypical ideas about terrorists have operational implications. Female terrorists may have greater lethality as ideas about gender allow them to pass undetected through checkpoints. They also receive more media attention, spreading the impact of an attack.

Internet and social media

Internet sites and social media platforms play a role in the propagation of gendered narratives. Terrorist groups may recruit via the internet, or use it for digital extensions of their activities by threatening individuals or through technology facilitated gender-based violence. Adversaries also spread gendered narratives online as part of information threat campaigns, aiming to undermine societal resilience.

Masculinity

Gendered narratives can be used to prepare, justify, conduct and sustain warfare. Weaponizing ideas about masculinity may be a way in which states can do this, often by providing a script through which personal and national grievances can be tied together.

Case study: Russia

Russia's war on Ukraine can be read through a gendered lens. In this framework, the collapse of the Soviet Union is seen by Russia as a crisis of masculinity, and the war against Ukraine is presented as a way to regain great power status and national and personal honour.

Gendered crimes are also perpetrated by Russia, such as the bombing of Ukrainian kindergartens and maternity hospitals, and perpetrating conflict-related sexual violence. One example of this is the sexual torture of Ukrainian Prisoners of War - predominantly men - framed as an attack on their honour and masculinity.



Gender perspectives are an integral part of understanding how conflicts are prepared, legitimized, conducted and sustained. For NATO, this emphasises the relevance of cultural narratives as early warning indicators and in strategic intelligence, as well as investing in civil society to support societal resilience in countering information threats. Gender perspectives should also be considered in counter-terror operations.