

The anti-feminist men's rights movement – lines of thought, networks and online rallying

by Hinrich Rosenbrock (2012)

Anti-feminist circles have rallied increasingly against an equity-based gender policy in recent years. These circles are a network-like amalgamation of various groups and individuals originating predominantly from conservative and liberal camps, but also in part from right-wing groups.

The explosive nature of anti-feminist ideologies is clear from the statements made by Norwegian assassin, Anders Behring Breivik. He believes that feminism jeopardises the so-called occidental culture inter alia in the form of political correctness. Breivik talks of a 'feminisation of European culture' and the 'radical feminist assault on our values.' This culminated for him in the reputed 'war against the European man'. It therefore demonstrates that anti-feminism extends to the far right thus bridging an ideological gap which can also increase the acceptance of other right-wing ideologies. However, 'everyday anti-feminism' has also proven highly problematic due to its overt or hidden misogyny, its rejection of new lifestyle choices for men and boys and its partly violent approach.

Anti-feminist circles have primarily been supported by two ideological concepts. The first constitutes an across-the-board anti-feminism. It represents a highly simplified and uniform image of feminism and puts it on a level with misandry or hatred of men. In contrast, the concerns of feminism, its various currents as well as the predominantly positive or open attitude towards cooperation with men, are barely known. On this basis, there is hardly any discussion with regard to content or criticism. The second concept involves the advocating of men's rights. Anti-feminist circles currently rely primarily on gender equity here since they regard men primarily as victims of 'femocracy', i.e. of a feminist authority or matriarchy. This represents a huge change from conventional anti-feminism which works on the assumption of male supremacy. At the same time, however, the advocating of men's rights within this movement cannot be separated from anti-feminist reasoning. By way of introduction, the most important groups in the anti-feminist men's rights movement will be mentioned briefly and compared. In Germany, these include agents, MANNdat and wgvdl.com, and in Switzerland, the Interessensgemeinschaft Antifeminismus is particularly significant. freegender, an anti-feminist far right-wing group, will also be discussed briefly.

agents is a group which outwardly advocates gender democracy and gender equality. Behind this is a biological gender construct, which builds on conservative and reactionary ideas and, in part, assumes homophobic traits. Furthermore, there is an anti-feminist rationale and for this reason, the principal ideology of the group contradicts the original notion of gender democracy. Overall, agents tries to assume a scientific semblance. However, fundamental scientific and methodological standards are not complied with consistently by its spokespersons. MANNdat con-

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fines itself for the most part to lobbying for men's rights. Instances of male discrimination are highlighted and partly engineered for this strategy in order to reinforce its own anti-feminist rationale. Its claim to represent the majority of men does not coincide with the attitudes of most men (see below).

wgvd.com (Wieviel Gleichberechtigung verträgt das Land) is an extremist group at the heart of the anti-feminist men's rights movement. However, even more extremist and more militant websites exist, but these are not quite so well networked.

wgvd.com serves to canonise anti-feminist arguments, emotional self-affirmation and communitisation.

IGAF is the leading anti-feminist group in Switzerland. It is situated more in the extremist than in the moderate camp, but at the same time tries to bridge the gap between the different positions. It aims to combine the anti-feminist movement into one network and has held international anti-feminism rallies for this purpose since 2010, which have been attended by speakers from the most diverse groups, including agens for example. free-gender.de represents the collaboration between the anti-feminist men's rights movement and the right-wing scene. Unlike other far right groups, their website only refers to gender policy. In doing so, it harks back to strong anti-feminism, particularly in the form of anti-gender-mainstreaming arguments. This group shows that it is possible to achieve recognition in the right-wing scene even with purely anti-feminist rallying. However, the networking of this website with other anti-feminist protagonists lags behind groups like agens, MANNdat, wgvd.com and IGAF.

It is striking that the majority of the anti-feminist men's rights movement claim to speak for (almost) all men. However, this self-assessment contradicts the stance adopted by most men. Carsten Wippermann, in his study on masculinity, which he carried out based on the Sinus–Milieu approach, came across four types of masculinity:

1. The strong primary breadwinner of the family (23 %): he accepts the role of breadwinner and values a loving mother and attractive and intelligent housewife. His model is based on the mutual recognition of man and woman under the symbol of gender difference.
2. The lifestyle macho (14%): He places emphasis on the superior, tough and independent male, has the ideal of an erotic, subordinate and caring female partner and a slight tendency towards equal opportunities for men.
3. The 'new man' (32 %): He endorses soft masculinity and values self-confident working women. With regard to gender equality, he is prepared to undergo self-transformation.
4. The post-modern flexible man (31%): He represents the 'strong male with female facets' and values a self-confident and ambitious female partner. He takes a relaxed view of equality and is interested in new paths.

Most anti-feminist men's rights activists do not fall into the category of strong primary breadwinner since these men accept responsibility for their family and affirm their appreciation for their wives who look after their home. Anti-feminists rather reject this form of family since they would see this as working men being exploited by workshy women. Consequently some activists want to 'enlighten' young men about the risks of marriage and prevent them from getting married. The lifestyle macho group matches the anti-feminist line of thought and propagated forms of behaviour most closely. Therefore, anti-feminist men's rights activists only speak for a small minority of men. In summary, the men's rights movement in Germany involves a relatively small group of people, however, their political impact should not be underestimated. This is based primarily on the fact that people who hold different political views are sometimes subjected to great intimidation, important institutions in the field of equal opportunities are attacked and delegitimized and attempts are made to disrupt or dominate gender debates in the media. Overall, arguments based in part on hatred and the (personal) putting down of political opponents are firmly anchored as a strategy in the anti-feminist men's rights movement.

Ideologies and strategies of the anti-feminist men's rights movement

As already noted, the movement is based on men's rights and anti-feminist arguments. Anti-feminism is directed here against men and women and attempts primarily to malign and delegitimize the term 'gender'. The rationale of the men's rights movement harks back to anti-feminist ideological strands which it uses to differentiate itself from other forms of advocating men's rights. Its specific rationale is based on male victim ideology, i.e. the notion that men are currently the victims of feminism, equal opportunities policy or a 'femocracy'. The male victim ideology outwardly advocates equity which it demands for men. However, it is not without problems for various reasons. The vision of male discrimination hides or understates forms of female discrimination. This tendency is supported by the structure of male discrimination. Ignoring gender-specific inequality at the expense of women also leads in this direction. Accordingly, male victim ideology comes to the unjustified conclusion that men in today's society are discriminated against more than women and apports the blame for this trend primarily to feminism.

This theory can be explained using the example of the term 'femocracy'. This word expresses a rejection of the German political system since it ostensibly indicates female rule. However, if you consider the percentage of women in the German Bundestag (32.8%), it quickly becomes clear that it cannot be demonstrated in this way. As this example illustrates, the public participation of women is already interpreted by large sections of the anti-feminist movement as 'femocracy', i.e. they are not willing or in a position to differentiate between the public participation of women and dominance by women. Consequently, equal opportunity commissioners are attacked in the same way as women in associations or female judges, who are assumed, without substantial evidence, to lack qualifications and to be biased by virtue of their gender. Many anti-feminists therefore not only oppose equal opportunities policy and quotas, but are also outraged if women hold public offices and

decision-making positions.

Anti-feminism is not characterised by dealing with the content of feminism, but rather more through affective defence against it. Thus, feminism is presented as a homogenous unit and at the same granted omnipotence. For example, large sections of the anti-feminist men's rights movement work on the assumption that feminism is involved in controlling politics, the justice system and in part also the media. Overall, the anti-feminism described here aims to delegitimize feminism and gender equality.

Moreover, feminism is denied legitimacy in that it is described as 'misandric'. In order to be able to classify these prejudices against feminism better, brief reference is permitted here to various feminist streams and their view of men. Unlike anti-feminist representations, the SCUM-Manifesto of radical feminist, Valerie Solanas, published in 1967, played no role in Germany. The deterministic stipulation of men as perpetrators and women as victims has also been strongly criticised within the feminist movement. Consequently, Frigga Haug and Tina Thürmer-Rohr, for example, worked on the complicity of women in tyranny. The emancipatory cooperation of women and men, in particular, has increased since the 1980s. Feminists and men work together in the Green Party, in the SPD and in social movements.

They have developed and adopted concepts such as gender mainstreaming, in order to forge alliances with men campaigning for equity. Gunda Werner and Halina Bendkowski created the basic approach to gender democracy at the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung. Thus, the preoccupation with problems of men has become part of gender research and equal opportunities policy. The arguments used by the anti-feminists in terms of content are emotionally charged. These go as far as open hatred of feminists being nothing unusual. This hatred is to some extent combined with misogyny. The risk to the physical and intellectual integrity of women is accepted again and again in the process. This is demonstrated inter alia through the fact that IGAF and people from the wgvdl.com platform (intend to) collect and publish the addresses of women's refuges. The fact that by doing so they could destroy safe havens for women and are thus willing to not only risk the health, but possibly also the lives of women, shows which forms of misogyny can be assumed.

This hatred of feminism is also aimed explicitly at emancipatory men. Men, who support feminism or who are identified merely as political opponents are referred to as 'Lila Pudel' (Purple Poodles). This discrediting denies those affected their independence, their masculinity and their humanity.

There is a contradiction in the self-staging here. The anti-feminist men's rights movement takes it upon itself to speak for all men whilst at the same time it discredits a large number of men, with other views and in other living situations, as traitors of their own gender and dehumanises them by using the term 'Lila Pudel'. Moreover, it is noticeable that the anti-feminist men's rights movement focuses very strongly on rejecting the term 'gender'.

In contrast to the outcomes of anthropological and social scientific research, which emphasises the differences between gender constructs in various societies, only modern gender dualism is discerned. It is deemed a biological given and therefore as a social (compulsory) standard that must be implemented. Instead of viewing the variability of the gender concept as liberation from gender-related and social constraints, the possibility of behaving other than in a traditional manner is forcibly reinterpreted. Freedom in the sense of this argument means adhering rigidly to (scientifically unprovable) 'natural' parameters. In the process, not only the stances of the majority of men, who want more equal relationships, are ignored, but the route to individual life styles and areas of freedom – also for men and boys - is blocked..

Gender mainstreaming, which aims to include men in gender policy, is firmly rejected. Moreover, this measure is presented as an EU instrument of power where recourse is often made to nationalistic arguments.

In addition to these ideologies which are constitutive of the anti-feminist men's rights movement one must also mention homophobic and racist sub-discourses. Although these ideologies are not shared by all people in the movement, a great many of those involved do espouse them. The anti-feminist men's rights movement pursues various strategies in order to anchor its beliefs in public thinking or to exclude those who think differently from discussions thus disrupting equity-based gender debates on equality.

'Hate speech' needs to be mentioned initially in connection with this. 'Hate speech' is based on hatred. People who hate have no empathy of any kind towards those that are hated and thus lose a great many of their inhibitions. Hatred expresses strong hostility, i.e. demarcation, and generally an 'us' and 'them' situation; this results in the formation of a collective identity. Furthermore, hatred can also be interpreted as a 'desire for hierarchy and wholeness'. For those people who hate others, this emotion offers an advantage that allows them to believe that they are not responsible for their problems and shift the blame for these onto a scapegoat. Whilst propaganda attempts to persuade its target groups, 'hate speech' runs them down and intends to hurt them. The aim is absolute victory, the identity of the counterpart or even the person is to be destroyed. 'Hate speech' is used by many members of the anti-feminist men's rights movement in various forms, but is used primarily in extremist wings. It starts with insults in forums and general fantasies of violence against feminists, then moves into 'wanted posters' or photos on the Internet and targeted slandering of individuals and ends with targeted threats beyond the Internet. 'Hate speech' is often used as an instrument of intimidation. Even feminist bloggers are increasingly becoming victims of degradation, criticism and insults. Intimidation is sometimes associated with serious threats of violence, such as threats of rape and murder against bloggers and their children. But editors and journalists too are venturing increasingly into the focus of anti-feminist men's rights activists. They are often approached individually in the online forums of the respective newspapers and slandered. These represent attempts to discredit them and dissuade them from expressing their opinion publicly.

However, intervention in these forums also has the purpose of creating a type of hegemony over other forum members and their opinions. It is designed, firstly, to disseminate individual opinion and secondly, it serves to form groups and communities. In addition, other forum members are also intimidated and individual emotions can be channelled. Reference should be made in particular to the Spiegel-Online forum in this respect. Intervention is coordinated partly via wgvdl.com which calls upon people to join the discussions.

A further strategy is the attempt to delegitimise and attack equal opportunities institutions and shelters for women and children. Reference is made in this connection to the intimidation of equal opportunities commissioners, for example through wanted posters or hate mail and the already mentioned publication of the addresses of women's refuges.

Overlapping with Far and New Right

As can already be seen from the examples of Anders Breivik and free-gender, there is significant overlapping with arguments and in part also with networks of the Far and New Right. This proximity is also linked to the fact that neo-Nazi thinking generally includes anti-feminist arguments. This is due inter alia to the fact that the ethnic community and with that the basis of right-wing ideology is based on a clear gender-specific and biologically justified gender order: man as the nation's warrior and woman as mother and sustainer of values.

As a result of the strongly biological justification for this gender order, the term 'gender' in particular is attacked more and more vehemently by right-wing circles. At the same time there are hardly any references to the masculine victim ideology. Although there is a crisis of masculinity for the right too, this does, however, fulfil a specific function: in order that the masculine warrior image can be perpetuated, there also need to be opponents. Besides threats, which emanate from outside one's own 'people', above all there is an internal loss of values here, which is also demonstrated in the crisis of masculinity. Masculine victim ideology, on the other hand, would be tantamount to a concession of weakness and is therefore barely recognised. Thus, virtually all ideologies, which are constitutive of the anti-feminist men's rights movement, can also be found in right-wing circles. However, they usually have less significance in the right-wing scene. This does not apply to homophobic and racist arguments, which are only shared by part of the anti-feminist men's rights movement, whereas they are significantly more widely spread in the right-wing scene. Attention must therefore be drawn to the fact that it is entirely possible that closer cooperation between the anti-feminist men's rights movement and the Far/New Right may be on the cards. This conclusion can be drawn not only from the content of agreements, but rather more from the first alliances that have already been formed. Various protagonists in the anti-feminist men's rights movement have used the New-Right newspaper, Junge Freiheit, for their publications. More and more links to far right websites are also appearing particularly on wgvdl.com. At the same time, Gabriele Kuby, a writer for Junge Freiheit, spoke at the IGAF 2nd International Anti-Feminist Rally in Switzerland. Thus, the New Right

and the anti-feminist men's rights movement support each other both on an organisational level and in terms of content in their efforts to cover subjects outside already existing circles. There is a considerable risk in this network for democratic and emancipatory gender debate and for a democratic society. It should not be forgotten, however, that there are also other reasons for criticising the anti-feminist men's rights movement. A few of its members can be classified as anti-democratic and against the constitution since they reject the principle of equality and prevent a democratic discourse. These views are held particularly in extreme wings, where, for example, the abolition of the right of women to vote or the establishment of a male head of household is discussed. In addition, there is the intimidation of individuals and the threat of violence towards children is not shied away from either.

Possible handling of the anti-feminist men's rights movement

The outcomes presented here clearly show that the anti-feminist men's rights movement may pose a risk to an equal and democratic society in spite of its small size. It is characterised by strong anti-feminism, which in part extends to hatred of men and women who think differently. It also seeks - through its assertion that it speaks for a large number of men- to lay claim to power, which bears no relation to the democratic majority or to the attitudes of the 'male majority'. Its involvement in gender debates, which is often accompanied by intimidation, threats of violence and fantasies of murder, can create a climate where non-likeminded people are intimidated and silenced thus preventing or suppressing qualitative discussion. This raises the question of how to deal with the anti-feminist men's rights movement. It can be answered rudimentarily here on various levels. It is important in this process to neither over- nor underestimate the anti-feminist men's rights movement. As an individual, for example a blogger, there have previously been few options for protecting oneself against attack. Making contact with other affected parties and like-minded people is recommended. The legal route, in particular after taking out legal protection insurance, is a strategy for dealing with slander and threats. Dealing with anti-feminist strategies in project or working groups may be a good idea. This applies particularly to disputes involving anti-feminist interventions in online forums, which are characterised by 'hate speech'. It can be demonstrated using examples that it is possible in a group, through factual (counter) information about equal opportunities policy, women's refuges or the Protection against Violence Act, for example, to counter populist rallying cries and attacks and return to qualitative debate. At company level, the providers of commercial forums, such as Spiegel-Online, must be included in the responsibility. They must ensure that criminal acts like threats, insults and hate propaganda do not happen and do not appear. At civil society level, progressive approaches are important. These will be supported mostly by gender policy protagonists and institutions such as the Bundesforum Männer. These groups represent men's policy work, which develops approaches based on equity and free decisions. A strengthening of these groups would offer interested men more points of contact and clearly show the one-sidedness of the anti-feminist arguments. At the same time, the gender debates would be reinforced by these groups and the trends towards a destructive gender

battle promoted by these groups would be stemmed. The networking of various equality and emancipatory players facilitates a quick response to potential anti-feminist intimidation and threats. At a political level, the implementation of equal rights stipulated in the German Basic Law must be pushed forward in order to promote freedom, equality and individual fulfilment for men and women in the gender dialog.



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