

Antifeminist, manosphere and right-wing extremist sentiment among men who use domestic and family violence: masculinism, misinformation, and the justificatory logics of violence

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ABSTRACT

This paper charts the accounts of front-line workers in 'Australia' who work with men who use Domestic and Family Violence (DFV) on the extent, nature, and context of antifeminist and / or right-wing extremist (RWE) sentiment among their clients, and its overlap with 'manosphere' content and sentiment. It has previously been established that lone-actor terrorism and right-wing extremism that manifests in acts of public violence, have deep connections to male supremacy and the manosphere. However, despite the shared drivers of both DFV and lone-actor terrorism, there remains a dearth of research that interrogates the extent to which DFV users are also informed by manosphere or RWE content. The data reveals that service providers frequently encounter sentiment from their clients that strongly aligns with and draws on manosphere content and that we conceptualise as masculinist in sentiment: it is anti-diversity and anti-feminist, supports men recapturing a sense of masculism, and deploys 'alternative facts' to give credibility to the affective idea of male victimhood perpetrated by a system that is supposedly against men. We argue that some mainstream 'Australian' discourses amplify these sentiments; and that men's aggrievement needs to be carefully acknowledged without collusion in both DFV and countering violent extremism contexts.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 17 May 2024

Accepted 12 November 2024

KEYWORDS

Antifeminism; domestic and family violence; manosphere; right-wing extremism; masculinism

Introduction

The manosphere is an online space that circulates antifeminist and often gender-based violence-affirming content, capitalising on men's discontent and channelling the blame to women and feminism. It is widely known that many perpetrators of right-wing extremist (RWE) violence have been informed by manosphere content such as fathers' rights movements, and incel culture (Maloney et al., 2024), while antifeminism has been described as the 'uniting ideology' of RWE (Agius et al., 2022; Träbert, 2017, pp. 274–276). There is a

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growing literature on the nature of RWE and antifeminist sentiment online. It is also starting to be noted that most perpetrators of lone-actor¹ terror attacks have a background of domestic family violence (DFV) (Smith, 2019). Some conceptual moves have been made towards understanding the spectrum of violence from intimate to public terrorism (McCulloch et al., 2019), and ‘Australia’² is seeing a surge in public discourse making the conceptual links between misogyny, domestic violence, and public violence targeting women (*The Saturday Paper*, 2024). However, despite the shared drivers of both DFV and lone-actor terrorism, research has been less quick to interrogate the extent to which men who use DFV are also *informed by* manosphere or RWE content. The overlap between DFV, RWE, and the manosphere is often assumed, but under-researched, and outside of those who go on to perpetrate ‘public’ violence, little is known about whether manosphere ideas are taken up by men who use intimate (domestic and family) violence.³ As such, as part of a wider project on online men’s rights and right-wing extremist content in the state of Victoria, ‘Australia,’ we undertook in-depth surveys with service providers in the state who work with men who use DFV to determine whether antifeminist, manosphere, or RWE discourses are invoked by their clients, and how. This was motivated by anecdotal evidence in preliminary conversations with men’s behaviour change practitioners that manosphere ideas were increasingly visible in service and therapeutic environments with men who use DFV, and practitioners are ill-equipped to respond to or intervene in them and have concerns about their violence-affirming and radicalising potential.

‘Australia’ is unique in its response to DFV, and has an established national and state-based sector of government and non-government organisations and services to address both prevention and intervention that are guided by feminist principles. In particular, No to Violence (NTV) is ‘the largest peak body in Australia for organisations and individuals who work with men to end family violence’ (NTV, 2024) and is explicitly feminist in framework. NTV encompasses Men’s Referral Service (MRS) which is a national phone-based counselling and referral service for men who use DFV. Men can self-refer, but a unique feature in Australia is the large proportion of men who have used DFV who are referred to MRS, and sometimes then on to men’s behaviour change programs (MBCPs) by a magistrate. Australia is also beginning to focus more on RWE and its connection with violence, gender and masculinity (Agius et al., 2020; Roose, 2024). However, there is limited evidence on the specific engagement with or use of RWE discourse by men who use DFV in ‘Australia.’

We asked front-line workers who work with men who use DFV – most often as phone counsellors or MBCP group facilitators – to report on the extent, nature, and context of antifeminist and / or RWE sentiment among their clients. They reported subtle versions of the online manosphere discourses, references to specific manosphere groups, manosphere-originating language and disinformation, and shared sentiments. Sentiments included hostility to feminism and other aspects of social justice such as anti-racism or LGBTQ+ inclusivity that we conceptualise as part of a masculinist logic. Service provider participants noted mentions of some prominent manosphere and online father’s rights groups amongst both men who use DFV, and amongst workers, some of whom had even unwittingly referred their clients to such groups. Particular triggers for these kinds of sentiments and for expressing, seeking or accessing this kind of information was often linked to contact with family court, and issues around divorce or child custody. There was a shared affective dimension with the manosphere, of aggrievement

and a sense of victimhood. Most notably this manifested in a prominent conspiracist discourse around a system that is against men. This was backed by appeals to disinformation that is widely circulated in the manosphere to evidence and justify these affective claims. Some of these arguments, we note, also circulate in wider mainstream ‘Australian’ culture and populist media. This is particularly alarming given that this kind of logic about a discriminatory system has been tied to RWE and incel acts of mass violence which perpetrators see as revolutionary acts against this system (Pruden et al., 2022). However, we argue that this affective sense of victimhood needs to be carefully attended to with both men and boys who engage in the manosphere and men who use DFV, in order to address and acknowledge it without collusion. This is a crucial insight for understanding how such ideas affirm gender-based violence, and for considering how such logics or discourses may be responded to effectively before they escalate.

Gendered drivers of male violence

Attitudes about violence and gender, bolstered or co-constituted by violence supporting contexts, as well as ideas about dominative binary masculinity, have long been understood as factors that contribute to men’s use of violence against women (Anderson & Umberson, 2001; Flood & Pease, 2009). Indeed, ‘Australian’ peak body OurWatch’s evidence-based authoritative account of the drivers of violence against women lists:

Condoning of violence against women;

Relationships in which men control decision-making and limit women’s autonomy, have a sense of ownership of or entitlement to women, and hold rigid ideas on acceptable female behaviour;

Rigid gender stereotyping and dominant forms of masculinity;

Male peer relations and cultures of masculinity that emphasise aggression, dominance and control. (OurWatch, 2023)

Men’s behaviour change programs and approaches in ‘Australia’ and elsewhere reflect these premises, focusing on challenging the entitlement thinking and gender norms that underpin men’s justification for their violence (O’Connor et al., 2021). These sentiments regarding gender norms, justifying violence, and entitlement are shared as well in the manosphere, but little empirical evidence about the relationship between the manosphere and men’s use of DFV currently exists.

The manosphere

Fathers’ rights and early men’s rights activism (MRA) is often understood as a precursor to the contemporary manifestations of the manosphere in both ‘Australia’ and elsewhere, with antifeminist ideas about ‘reverse discrimination’ as key narratives (Jones et al., 2020; Nicholas & Agius, 2018; Träbert, 2017). Anti-feminist fathers’ rights activism has a long history in ‘Australia’ as in other parts of the Anglosphere, with historical ties to early iterations of contemporary MRA. In response to the establishment of the family law court and law reform to address domestic violence in ‘Australia,’ some proto-MRA groups were established to advocate for men against what they saw as a systemic preference

for women and unfair disadvantage to themselves, such as DAWMA (Defence Against Women Marriage & Alimony) and FORCE (Fathers Organisation for Revolutionary Custody Entitlement) (Taylor, 1992). Such sentiment is still circulating among ‘Australian’ men (Agius et al., 2020), as well as globally, especially online in the ‘manosphere.’

The ‘manosphere’ is, then, described as the ‘digital manifestation of the contemporary Men’s Rights Movement’ (Jones et al., 2020, p. 2). This is an online ecosystem of anti-feminist and men’s rights communities that consider men to now be subordinated. This phenomenon has also been described collectively as the male supremacy movement (DiBranco, 2020) and ‘networked misogyny’: a ‘virulent strain of violence and hostility towards women in online environments’ (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016, p. 171). The cross-pollinating sub-groups are as diverse as father’s rights groups (Kaye & Tolmie, 1998) who claim victim status in the face of a discriminatory family law context; men’s rights advocates / activists (MRAs) (Träbert, 2017) who co-opt feminist language to claim that men’s rights have been eroded; pick up artists who assist disgruntled men with developing ‘game’ to access the sex with women to whom they feel entitled (Nicholas & Agius, 2018); redpillers who use the idea of the blue/red pill from *The Matrix* film to describe how they have awoken to ‘the “truth” that socially, economically, and sexually men are at the whims of women’s (and feminists’) power and desires’ (Kelly et al., 2021, p. 18); ‘MGTOW’ (men going their own way), male separatists who call for men to sever ties with women due to women being controlling; Incels (‘involuntary celibates’), an online subculture of men who share hostility towards women who they believe deny them sexual gratification or relations to which they feel entitled; and finally at the most extreme end, the blackpillers, incels who do not believe the problem can be individually changed and so advocate for suicide or mass violence (Kelly et al., 2021). Incel movements have garnered attention due to several high-profile cases of incel violence in Canada, the US and elsewhere. The key sentiments of the manosphere, then, are of ‘reverse discrimination’ feminism; male entitlement; and the reestablishment of traditional gender roles.

Gender, the manosphere, and right-wing extremism

Contemporary RWE in ‘Australia’ is a combination of some older sentiments of ‘anti-immigration, anti-establishment, and traditional western values’ (Hutchinson, 2021, 3) as well as ‘newer’ elements such as a more ethnically heterogeneous membership with a shared focus on Islamist culture as the threat to ‘Australia.’ While research in ‘Australia’ has focused on questions of ultra-nationalism, race, Islamophobia, and white supremacism (Hutchinson, 2019), DiBranco (2020, n.p.) argues that ‘The recognition of misogyny as a motivating ideology for far-right mobilisation and acts of mass violence has been slow to evolve.’ However, with the rise of the manosphere and incels, there has been a shift to acknowledging the misogynistic drivers of violence. Mike Burgess, the Director General of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), has acknowledged the threat of ‘violent misogynists,’ noting the ‘overwhelmingly male’ profile of those being radicalised. It is understood that ‘the online environment is a force multiplier for extremism’ (Hurst, 2021). Recently, then, it has become more common to make the links that ‘male supremacism can be seen both as a gateway to white supremacism and as sharing a similar user base online’ (Pruden et al., 2022, p. 217). Thus, Pruden et al. conclude that ‘white and male supremacist groups do experience cross-pollination

and should not be considered as operating in isolation' (2022, p. 219). Lewis et al.'s (2017) and Agius et al.'s (2020) studies in the state of Victoria are early examples of empirical evidence about the overlap between RWE and anti-feminist online sentiment.

In terms of *how* this gendered driver is shared, Copland (2023, p. 116) has proposed that,

both groups [the far right and the manosphere] argue that society has been 'feminised.' This feminisation, caused by the changes brought about by feminism, both argue, has not only weakened men but weakened society overall.

As well as sharing this sentiment, Lewis et al. (2017) identified that the key themes of contemporary Victorian RWE are ultra-nationalist; anti-migrant; anti-Islam; pro-traditional, heroic masculinity; anti-progressive people and ideas such as multiculturalism and environmentalism; and supportive of violence and militancy. Our previous content analysis of the comments on the most popular RWE YouTube videos vis-à-vis the most popular antifeminist YouTube videos from Victoria (Agius et al., 2020) found overlapping sentiments of hierarchy, order, power and a preference for 'tradition'; a belief that 'the system' works against them, and ideas of relative deprivation (that minorities and women benefit at their expense).

The manosphere and DFV

While scholars have emphasised the relationship between DFV and public violence or lone-actor terrorism (McCulloch et al., 2019; Smith, 2019), and the manosphere is associated with public violence, much less has been written about the relationship between the manosphere and DFV. Exceptions to this include Thorburn (2023) who has indeed proposed a causal relationship between engagement in the manosphere and use of IPV. He charted the reddit narratives of (ex)partners of manosphere participants who state that their partners began or escalated their intimate partner violence after engagement in the manosphere. There is also emerging research on the impact of manosphere narratives such as those of Andrew Tate on younger men, arguing that manosphere content like his does not cause, but rather, amplifies the problem of violence against women (Henry & Witt, 2024). This may well be the case among adult men, wherein individual men's existing attitudes, behaviours, and justifications are bolstered by their access to affirming online content.

Additionally, in Finland, Venäläinen (2022) undertook similar work to us (Agius et al., 2020), analysing MRA discourses on Finnish online discussions about women's violence against men, and asked practitioners to respond. She found that men made highly affective claims of being neglected victims in response to gendered analyses of violence against women, and used faux-factual strategies to strengthen these claims. In Venäläinen's case, these 'affective-discursive' strategies had made their way into the sense making of violence crisis social workers who were susceptible to accounts of ostensible discrimination against men.

However, aside from Venäläinen and Thorburn, there is very little research specifically on adult men who use DFV and their engagement with, or knowledge of the manosphere or its discourses. To understand and prevent men's use of both private and public gender-based violence, then, it would be useful to know the extent and role of engagement with the manosphere by perpetrators, and how its logics are taken up. This would assist practitioners, such as men's behaviour change practitioners, to be prepared

for the kinds of discourses men are exposed to and drawing on. Additionally, as most perpetrators of public violence tend to have a background of DFV, intervening in the logics, justifications, and ideologies circulated and reinforced in these spaces with men who use DFV is an important intervention.

Methods

We undertook an online survey with front-line workers in Victoria, Australia, who work with men who use DFV.⁴ The survey questions were largely qualitative and open-ended, but two used a basic 5-point scale. These were selected to make the survey more efficient as this is an over-burdened group. The survey, hosted on Qualtrics, asked workers to provide details of the prevalence (quantitative) and nature (qualitative) of the men's anti-feminist and anti-diversity sentiment, including references to anti-feminist or far-right extremist online groups or discourses. The questions are in Appendix. The frontline workers ($n = 18$) were recruited from key service providers in the men's violence sector through purposive snowball sampling via professional newsletters and organisational email lists, in particular state-wide newsletters of No to Violence, the national peak body for organisations and individuals who work with men to end family violence. The recruitment material and screening targeted 'front-line workers who have contact with men who use DFV in Victoria.' Most of the respondents were men's behaviour change practitioners who undertake either one-on-one counselling or groups with men who use DFV who have self-referred or received an Apprehended Violence Order.

There are important limitations of this data collection method. The sample is clearly too small to be representative, but the qualitative results reported in [Figures 1–4](#) were a fast way to elicit an impression of the landscape, as per these accounts. Additionally, the analysis relies on practitioners' capacity to recall their clients' talk and is necessarily mediated through their interpretations; and, finally, these practitioners were only able to report on what men they have worked with reveal to workers in professional contexts,

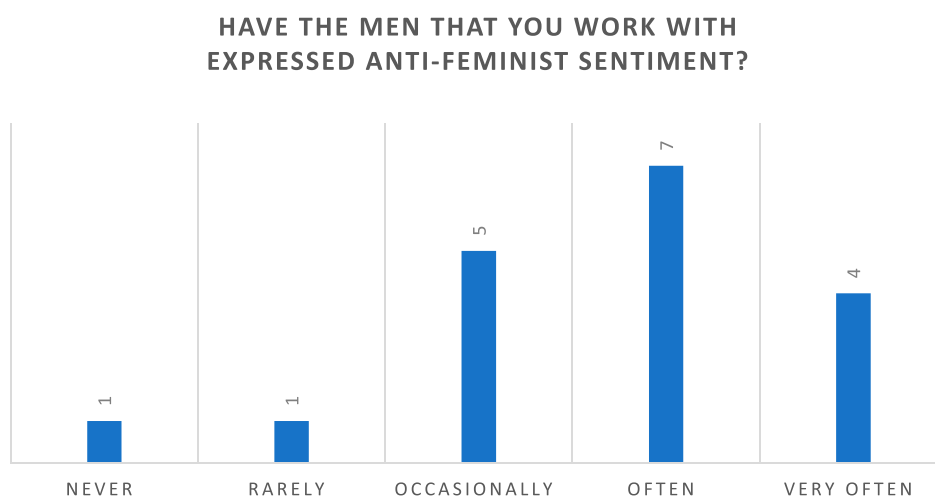


Figure 1. Frontline worker survey question. 'Have the men that you work with expressed anti-feminist sentiment?'

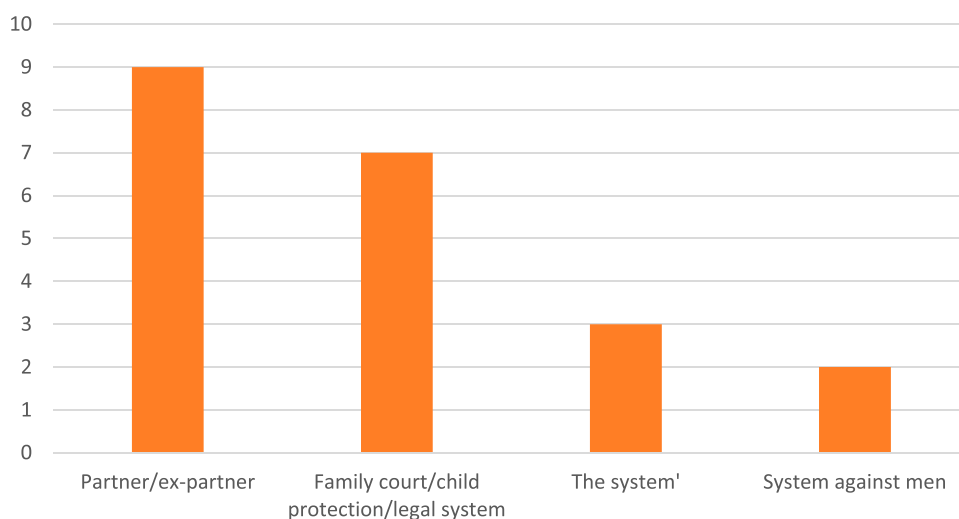


Figure 2. Frontline worker survey question. 'What or who is / are the main target/s of anger or disgruntlement for the men that you work with?'

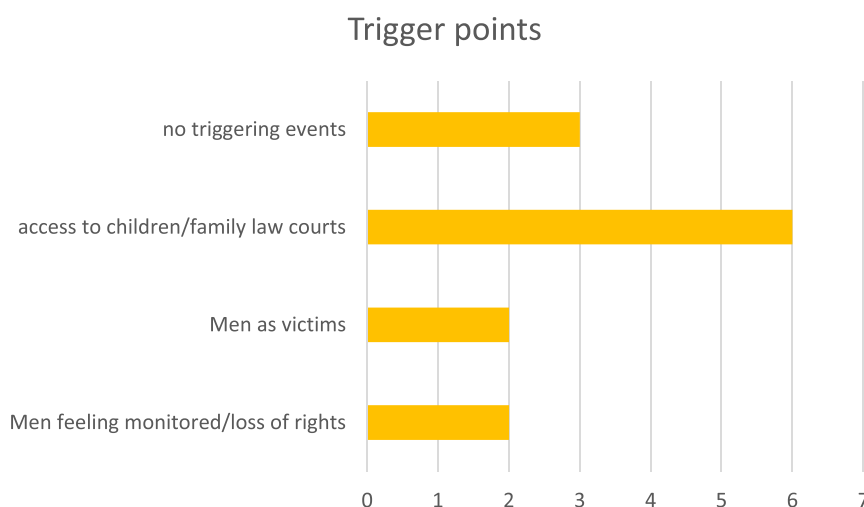


Figure 3. Frontline worker survey question. 'Are there particular events, experiences or processes that seem to trigger more radical sentiments from the men you work with?'

a limitation noted by one of our respondents who stated 'disclosures in group are guarded however. I suspect men who have extremist views are unlikely to engage in men's behaviour change programs (MBCP). Those that may have been present have flown under the radar – perhaps expressing their beliefs to other men during session breaks.' Despite this, all but one participant was able to recount antifeminist sentiment and many, broader anti-diversity or RWE sentiment, which will be outlined in detail below. Notably, in contrast to Venäläinen (2022) we did not find any of the sympathy with 'reverse discrimination' claims made by men, with all practitioners who mentioned this describing it as antifeminist. This may well be due to the feminist principles at the

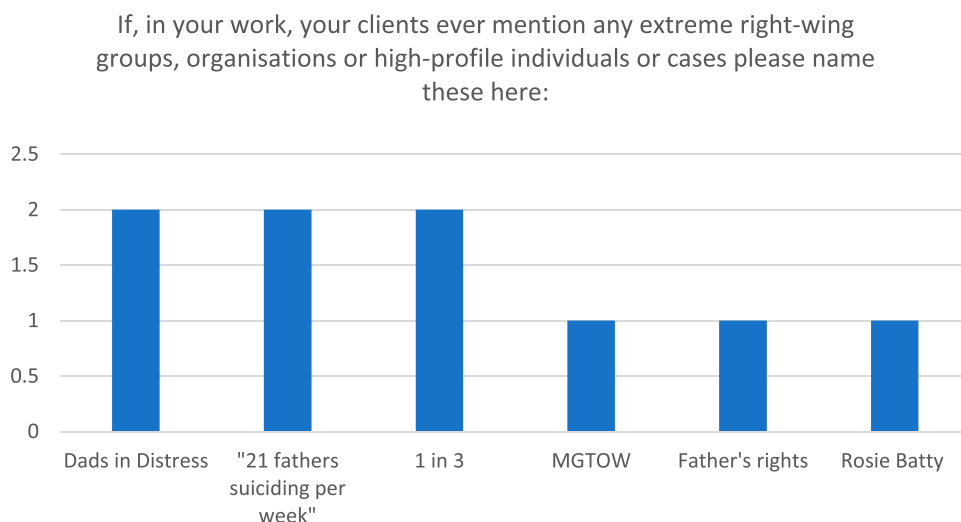


Figure 4. Frontline worker survey question. 'If, in your work, your clients ever mention any extreme right-wing groups, organisations or high-profile individuals or cases please name these here.'

core of the Victorian Men's Behaviour Change field.⁵ Instead, our respondents were able to offer valuable and, until now, uncharted insights into how manosphere ideas play out in real life among men who use DFV.

We thematically analysed the responses that practitioners charted among their clients abductively (Thompson, 2022), with our analysis partially shaped by our research on the themes, 'common language' (McGlashan & Krendel, 2023) and specific groups or pages identified by extant literature on the manosphere and online RWE content (Hutchinson 2021) especially that focused on how these themes manifest in 'Australian' contexts, and a concurrent attentiveness to emerging themes. Survey responses were exported to Excel and the team familiarised themselves with the data and made notes on possible themes. From there, themes were developed in collective discussion informed by all team members' initial coding. We were looking for 'socially shared interpretative repertoires and positionings that mobilise affects' (Venäläinen, 2022, p. 1128), i.e. we were interested in the themes that emerge from or overlap in both the manosphere and among men who use DFV. This is important because cross-pollination supports the possibility of exposure from one direction to another, as well as amplification and escalation (Agius et al., 2020). This is supported, for example, by the escalation of father's rights groups and discourses into antifeminist 'men's rights.'

The key themes that emerged from the data will be outlined in detail below, but in summary practitioners recounted that most men expressed misogynistic attitudes and antifeminist sentiment, if not explicit antifeminism, and characterised feminism as man-hating. These sentiments were also expanded to other types of diversity and there was a pervasive theme that men, especially white men, perceived of a system that perpetrated 'reverse discrimination' towards them. Men tend to appeal to dis/misinformation to back their feelings of victimhood, especially at times of particular aggrievement or accountability, which we discuss as a tricky phenomenon due to the need to attend to men's emotional suffering without colluding in violence affirmation which can escalate.

Results

The nature of men's antifeminist sentiment

... any man I have worked with or met personally over the last 20 yrs (and very occasional) who has articulated men's rights politics has turned out, on making contact with his partner, to be abusive. (Survey respondent)

This first section will outline the nature of the antifeminist sentiments expressed by men who use DFV, as encountered by service providers. It is shown how this sentiment is then abstracted from individual to group or structural targets, leading to the common, and potentially more radicalising idea of a system that is against men.

The nature of the sentiment described by participants reflects that of manosphere sentiment, a key distinction being that the sentiment expressed in therapeutic settings is often more implicit and muted than that online. Workers reported that their clients understood that explicitly expressing anti-feminist or right-wing extremist ideas in professional settings might be detrimental, particularly where custody and court action may be contingent. However, frontline workers did identify anti-feminist *sentiment*. Only one of the participants stated that the men they work with had never expressed antifeminist sentiment, with most stating it was expressed often (see [Figure 1](#)). Unsurprisingly, given the widely accepted gendered drivers of DFV (Flood & Pease, 2009), among the most explicit misogynistic sentiment was the emotion of anger directed at ex/partners, with practitioners often describing men calling them liars or 'lying b**s.' Claims of victimhood by perpetrators have long been noted as a key challenge for men's behaviour change and other service providers working with men who use DFV, wherein 'MBCP participants attempt to convince others that they are victims in the DFV situation' (Reimer, 2020, p. 5). Regarding men's partners, respondents also described hearing traditional gendered sentiments such as 'That women are weaker than men and a man should be the head of the family' or 'I put meat on the table she needs to take care of the kids and the house.' One practitioner said they heard about women in terms of "'in their place" / "Tend to my needs" / Objectifying women.'

As well as this direct anger at ex/partners, the antifeminist sentiment took several key forms, often in tandem, that echoes that of the online data: general disgruntlement at women, disgruntlement at a perceived feminist perspective on DFV that they were being exposed to, and a sense that feminism is a form of reverse discrimination or anti-male. When asked, 'What or who is / are the main target/s of anger or disgruntlement for the men that you work with?' 13 of 17 respondents replied 'women' either as an abstract group or specific women. For example: 'Women and children'; 'their children's mothers'; 'female workers or female partners and ex partners'; 'Females working at DHHS' (child protection); Rosie Batty⁶ (see [Figure 2](#)). Their anger at ex/partners is abstracted out to feminised systems as per Copland's (2023) description of the shared sentiment of the manosphere and far right. An exemplary description of how gendered norms and antifeminism are used to justify, victim-blame, and minimise, and how the anger at ex/partners and feminist systems co-exist was made by a practitioner:

it's gone too far, PC police, she's crazy, she's got mental health issues, she's as bad as me ... women are weak, she's not a lady, it's her fault, she should know what I'm like, she was doing it to wind me up, the magistrate was a woman that's why I'm here.

Given the presence of this antifeminist sentiment, then, when asked what the men they work with perceive feminism to be and what they dislike about feminism as they see it, the dominant themes were that it has gone too far because gender equality has already been achieved, and / or that feminism is about man-hating. In answer to the questions, 'If they [clients] have expressed anti-feminist or more broadly anti-women sentiment, what, briefly, do you think they usually understand feminism to be?' and the follow-up question, 'Please briefly explain the usual nature of this sentiment, i.e. what do they dislike about feminism as they see it?' 12 of the 18 responses included reference to feminism being understood by their clients as 'man-hating.' One response was that, 'Those that have mentioned feminism do so to "vent" about men's rights being restricted, and that women are getting more power, men are being ignored and blamed/victimised.' Other answers included 'Telling men what to do'; 'Feminazi'; 'Dykes, Bitches and Ball breakers'; 'Man hating'; 'reducing our rights.'

Alongside explicit misogyny or antifeminist sentiments were articulations of post-feminist, neoliberal sentiment of gender-blind equalism (cf. Gill, 2018) that is resistant to the structural analyses the (mostly feminist) programs or organisations encourage, that denies the gendered aspects of DFV. For example:

I have facilitated MBC for three years. Few men have directly addressed feminism. It is more common for men to articulate 'women can be just as violent as men' when discussing FV as gendered violence.

The equalism invoked by men, either by denying the structural sources of gender inequalities, or by claiming feminism has now reached its goals, allows for the rationale that 'women's rights... they correlate with denigration of men's right.'; feminism wants 'women to be more powerful than men. Equality exists already and why are women still making a fuss about it.' We will return to this below in discussing how it underpins the affective sense of victimhood and a system that is discriminatory against men, after outlining how these feelings about women also exist in relation to other minoritised people or groups.

Anti-diversity sentiment and masculinism

... really it is white men that are now oppressed.

The data confirmed that the sense of aggrievement and reverse discrimination logic invoked by men who use DFV also extends to and overlaps with other axes of inequality and reflects wider far-right talking points. For example, one participant answered:

They may scoff or get angry at the group facilitators who are doing an acknowledgement of country.⁷ They may speak about women as liars, or as men being the real victims, that feminism is going 'too far.' Similar sentiments are said in racial terms. That really it is white men that are now oppressed.

Other sentiment that echoes RWE talking points included that 'you can't say or do anything anymore' and criticising 'Gender identity politics' and 'bloody greenies or lefties.' The specific nature of 'Australian' racism that is characteristic of 'Australian' RWE described by Hutchinson (2019) was also clear, with the anger at Acknowledgements of Country above, and practitioners identifying extremist right-wing sentiment against 'Aboriginal People, or Muslims, or Black people' and 'African gangs,' which is a specific trope in 'Australian' media (Majavu, 2020). One practitioner stated that 'the

men can often “other”, they can talk about minority groups in racially derogatory terms blaming them for their response.’ Likewise the frontline workers, many of whom work from explicitly feminist frameworks which is best practice for Men’s Behaviour Change Programs in Victoria (NTV, 2024), can see a connection between antifeminism and other types of discriminatory logics: ‘White, male privilege has been reinforced with an underlying xenophobic, homophobic, and misogynistic sentiment.’ Men are thus making the links between different minoritised groups, but not in terms of the shared causes of these groups’ oppression but, rather, as a coalescing pattern of unfounded privileging of every group except them. As one practitioner described, ‘I work in a rural setting where the population are primarily of an Anglo-Saxon or Mediterranean background with very few other ethnic people groups, coupled with conservative family values, can create a seedbed for the concerns identified in this survey.’

This mode of thinking can best be understood as characteristic of masculinism. The notion of a masculinist logic is a way to understand the gendered nature of this framing. Masculinism can be defined as ‘an underlying *ethos* or totalising worldview that implicitly universalises and privileges the qualities of masculinity, and in doing so subordinates and “others” alternative ways of understanding, knowing and being’ (Nicholas & Agius, 2018, p. 5). The concept was popular in the 1980s (Brittan, 1989; Cohn et al., 1993) and has since been used in International Relations and Sociology to understand the dominant gendered ethos of hierarchy (Hooper, 2012; Young, 2003). Used in this way it is a pervasive but implicit ethos that values and universalises all things coded masculine, e.g. force, individualism, hierarchy, order. The concept of masculinism can explain the shared logics that underpin all forms of othering:

By masculinism in general I mean the assertion of masculine dominance over the feminine and also the practice of taking this first ‘superiority’ as a point of reference to assert other forms of supremacy which apparently have nothing to do with the duality of the sexes. This masculinist attitude consists in disparaging both women in general, other men ... and indeed other forms of discourse. (Le Doeuff, 2007, p. 78)

Masculinism denies and ‘normalises ongoing structural forms of inequality’ (Nicholas & Agius, 2018, p. 6), a phenomenon clearly seen in our data that shows men draw on neoliberal fantasies of equality, and practitioners describe attempts to consider structural inequalities or privilege, such as those of settler colonists, or men, as being perceived as discriminatory. It does this by rendering a very particular worldview as universal and natural: that of individualistic rationalism alongside naturalised hierarchy. This can be seen in equivocating claims by men who use DFV around men’s and women’s use of violence in a relationship that is at odds with research on how most intimate partner violence operates (Mingo & Fernández, 2023). This denial of systemic privilege, then, allows for the conceptualisation of a system that favours women or ‘minorities’ and is now against men.

Affective ‘facts’ and victimhood: ‘a system against men’

Male suicide is caused by feminists.

Extant research shows that anti-feminist and far-right sentiment is fuelled, justified or underpinned by a felt sense of aggrievement towards a perceived ‘system’ that is now against those who formerly held privilege, and an invocation of victimhood (Venäläinen,

2022). As well as claiming to be the victim of ex/partners rather than a perpetrator, as noted above, a common theme in our data that reflects wider literature on both the manosphere and lone-actor terrorists is the conceptualisation of a *system* that is conspiring against men as the victims. By invoking an idea of fairness and equalism that belies structural analyses that is a classic component of masculinism (Nicholas & Agius, 2018), the argument is then made by men that ‘the system,’ is against men, including the legal and family court and child support systems. When asked ‘What or who is / are the main target/s of anger or disgruntlement for the men that you work with?’ (see Figure 2), an exemplary survey response was ‘the courts, the systems that are “against men”.’ Family law court was mentioned 14 times, and DHHS (child protection) 7 times throughout the survey. The sentiment was that ‘women are already equal, and anymore reforms/movements to support women mean that men are treated badly and unfairly in the new systems’; ‘the system is heavily weighted on the female side.’ Like Venäläinen in Finland (2022, p. 1229) then, we found ‘somewhat milder forms of [misogynistic rhetoric] highlighting men’s status as victims that circulate both in online and offline contexts.’ These implicit logics and ideologies become reinforcing when those who hold anti-structural, traditional and equalist views of gender believe ‘the system’ works against them, fostering a sense of ‘aggrieved entitlement’ (Vito et al., 2018), which is related to ideas of relative deprivation such as that minorities and women benefit at their expense (Wilson, 2022). This is a key discourse of the manosphere, bolstered by common misinformation that is spread through key online groups or discourses.

Such rhetoric is tricky because, while it is entirely based in the affective sentiment outlined above, it expresses itself as a ‘milder form’ and, by appropriating some social justice language and appealing to carefully curated and (mis)interpreted (mis)information, can ‘retain ... a sense of reasonableness and fairness that make such understandings appear as cultural common-sense’ (Venäläinen, 2022, p. 1229). We have previously made the links between these kinds of manosphere narratives and the populist rhetoric of affect and commonsense that are very appealing to mainstream media (Nicholas & Agius, 2018). As in manosphere discourse, men described by our participants had sought to legitimise their feelings of disadvantage via appeals to ‘facts’ that suit their narratives of victimhood. Venäläinen (2022, p. 1235) describes this as ‘factualisation, enacted, for instance, by referring to scientific research findings – in line with the pseudo-scientific tenor commonly deployed in men’s rights’ advocacy.’ This is characteristic of masculinism which sees itself as a rational and logical, fact based and neutral perspective against the perceived bias and emotion they frame feminism with (Mingo & Fernández, 2023).

The data from the survey support previous findings that anti-feminist claims are often made using ‘alternative’ data, or particular interpretations of data from preferred sources (Agius et al., 2020). Mentions of specific myths, misinformation, groups, websites and talking points may shed light on key sources that bolster or feed this sense of grievement and entitlement. The frontline worker surveys suggest that at certain trigger points, men seek out information that affirms their felt sense of grievement. For example, ‘Due to feminism men are killing themselves and are being taken away from their children’; ‘Male suicide is caused by feminists.’ Indeed, some key themes of the USA-centric discourse of far-right extremism were common in Australian data that demonstrate that the misinformation is spreading. The survey results (Figure 4) revealed that those who work with men who use DFV have heard references to two father’s rights groups that

are renowned for spreading misinformation about custody and child support issues (Dads in Distress and Father's Rights), one MRA group (MGTOw), one manosphere celebrity (Jordan Petersen) and two fake statistics that are popularly spread in and from the manosphere, and have made their way into right-leaning mainstream media and political discourse. One is the myth that 1 in 3 victims of domestic violence is a man, with a practitioner stating that 'Two men that I have known referenced statistics I suspect have come directly from <http://www.oneinthree.com.au>.' The other is that 21 fathers in Australia suicide per week due to custody and child support issues, with a respondent describing, 'If I have the title correct, #21 has been referred to mostly as an online site for men who are critical of the feminist movement citing the statistic that 21 men a week take their lives as a result of their treatment within, primarily, the family court system.' Both myths have been traced back to their sources and their complete lack of evidence (Gilmore, 2015; McPhedran, 2017) but they have taken hold as truisms among certain communities. One practitioner commented that 'They (participants / clients who use DFV) often discuss rates of male suicide, comparing these to rates of homicide towards women, attributing suicide to parental alienation or family violence perpetrated by women.' Key to these myths is that they are disguised as legitimate sources with supposed authority figures to lend them credibility, and they use the language of expertise, a tactic that has long been used by Father's Rights activists (Kaye & Tolmie, 1998). This is alarming, especially in a service vacuum where men are suffering, vulnerable, and seeking validation for their feelings. Indeed one respondent stated 'Dads in Distress was mentioned by a community health nurse colleague who specialises in men's health – he had heard this was a good place to refer men in trouble with family court.' Dads in Distress is widely listed by legitimate sources as a service provider of peer support for men. It did, however, grow from and continues to have close ties with men's rights activism and other RWE groups (Sparrow, 2018). As with some other movements that centre legitimate struggles of men, and 'may seem to tap into relevant, gendered social dynamics, and thus ... appear as worth addressing for the sake of social justice' they often 'reveal their close entwinement with a highly exclusionary, anti-feminist stance' (Venäläinen, 2022, p. 1230). What these kinds of affective faux-rational argumentations achieve is 'a politicisation of victimhood through which gender(ed) anti-feminist politics are unfolded' (Mingo & Fernández, 2023, p. 899).

Masculine suffering and relative deprivation

One man said that more women need to die at the hands of men so that the system understands that men are in crisis and need help.

This is a tricky issue, as men are suffering. One respondent acutely described the feelings of relative deprivation that are wrongly targeting feminism as the cause of men's issues: 'It's a lack of understanding of what feminism is, they're coming from courts or broken homes & then "fighting" for material / children, etc.' However, we caution against collapse into polarised thought here that simply capitulates to zero-sum relative deprivation logic disguising affective loss of privilege, as per some classic literature on the 'crisis in masculinity' (Ralph, 2023, p. 3). This kind of faux-moderate anti-feminist sentiment about men's losses is deeply embedded in mainstream / establishment 'Australian'

culture. As *The Saturday Paper* argued when linking the high rate of women murdered by male partners and a lone-actor terror shooting of 5 women in 2024, ‘These killings do not happen in isolation: they happen within a culture that permits them’ (*The Saturday Paper*, 2024, n.p.). In ‘Australia’ this antifeminist culture is reinforced to aggrieved men in many domains: from the manosphere, through peer support groups of disgruntled men, but also in wider mainstream culture. ‘Australian’ commentator Bettina Arndt has published widely, including in mainstream right-wing newspapers, on how feminism has ‘gone off the rails’ and bemoaning the ‘current male bashing culture’ (Arndt, 2023, n.p.). She has sympathised with and made excuses for men who have used violence or committed murder against their families, and paedophiles, suggesting they are the victims of a hysterical feminism or a feminist family court system. She has had substantial political support, being awarded an Order of Australia honour for ‘significant service to the community as a social commentator, and to gender equity through advocacy for men’ (Worthington, 2020, n.p.). There is plenty of evidence about men’s mental health and high suicide rates, but more careful sociological analysis puts this down to the restrictions of traditional masculinity rather than the gains of women via feminism. Reflecting on a similar capitulation to these logics by Finnish social workers, Venäläinen (2022, p. 1242) argues that this is dangerous because

in the contemporary postfeminist cultural climate, the affective potential attached to a concern over discrimination against men plays a central role in the spread of moderate forms of anti-feminism, thereby facilitating their infiltration into everyday understandings about gender, feminism and societal power.

Thus, there is a need for *careful* consideration of the affective origins of these feelings of aggrievement that underpin some men’s use of violence, and alternative narratives to the causes and solutions available in the manosphere. This is most starkly illustrated by the response that ‘One man said that more women need to die at the hands of men so that the system understands that men are in crisis and need help.’ As father’s rights (Taylor, 1992) literature demonstrates, there is an escalation of violence whereby men feel the need to ‘respond’ to the perceived systemic discrimination against them, sometimes in violent ways, and the danger is that exposure to affirming online content can at least validate this feeling, creating what Fürstenberg (2022, p. 1) calls a ‘digital wolf pack.’ Men’s Behaviour Change Programs have long been grappling with the fine line of acknowledgment without collusion (Reimer, 2020), articulating the need to carefully unpack the affective underpinnings of men’s use of DFV. Likewise, the literature on deradicalisation and countering violent extremism has long acknowledged the emotional role of participation in extremist groups and ideology (Van Den Bos, 2018). It is imperative now, with the growth of gendered-violence-affirming extremist spaces online, that these fields come together (Agius et al., 2020).

Conclusion: public and private violence

This research makes an important empirical contribution that demonstrates that, in ‘Australia,’ men who use DFV are invoking affective logics, arguments, and justifications shared with those in the manosphere and wider RWE online content. In some cases it is clear that these sentiments are a direct echo of these online spaces and the ideology they promote.

Masculinist logics are invoked in both contexts, and bolstered by populist media, that allow for an argument that ‘Australia’ has a discriminatory system victimising men. This idea shares much in its form with justification for other forms of terrorism: the sense of being part of a movement that seeks to change an unjust system (Van Den Bos, 2018).

The invocation of a ‘system’ against men, and clear knowledge of MRA and RWE discourses by men who use DFV in this context poses the question of whether violence or violence-justification is bolstered or even accelerated by the frameworks found in these online contexts, as suggested by Thorburn (2023). It is conceivable that a man referred to a MRA-sympathetic men’s support group when facing family court for use of DFV could then be exposed to radicalising content, and find his feelings of victimhood affirmed by an ideological framework provided by RWE. For Mingo and Fernández (2023, p. 901) ‘the claims to victimhood and the performance of wounded identities are what fuel the latent political inclinations and organisation among the men in the manosphere.’ Likewise, Venäläinen (2022, p. 1231) charts the escalating impact of “collective rage”, cultivated by affective online practices relying on notions of men’s privilege as under attack.’ If this is the case, it may be that strategies to counter these logics in DFV contexts could do well to be in dialogue with preventing and countering violent extremism strategies.

This may well be timely. As previously referenced, in 2024, ‘Australia’ is seeing a surge in public discourse explicitly naming the shared gendered drivers of private and public violence against women. In May 2024, quality weekly newspaper *The Saturday Paper* ran an editorial listing the women murdered by intimate partners in Australia thus far in the year, along with the massacre in a shopping centre targeting and killing 5 women, describing them as ‘the misogyny killings.’ It quoted the shopping centre killer’s father’s comment that ‘He wanted a girlfriend and he’s got no social skills and he was frustrated out of his brain,’ demonstrating the aggrieved entitlement thinking and resentment that leads to anti-women sentiment common also to users of DFV and the manosphere outlined above. It is crucial that we understand their shared drivers, and thus strategies that may be shared by each to prevent or counter radicalisation and both intimate and public violent extremism.

Notes

1. We note that ‘the common term “lone wolf” for these kinds of terrorists is ... a misnomer, as they are embedded in digital “wolf packs”’ (Fürstenberg, 2022, p. 1).
2. The authors would like to acknowledge that the settler colony of so-called Australia continues to occupy stolen land and sovereignty was never ceded. I would like to pay my respects to Aboriginal elders past and present who have occupied and cared for the lands and waterways for over 60,000 years. In this paper the settler colonial name for these lands will appear in quotation marks to acknowledge this.
3. In line with Boyle’s (2019) call to consider specificity in language around gender and language, we have specified in this project the focus on men who use violence, and described the type of violence as domestic and family violence. We have not specified the target, as, while the vast majority of DFV is perpetrated by men, this allows for perpetration by men in same-sex relationships, underpinned by the same drivers of masculinity.
4. Prior to data collection, ethics approval for the project was obtained from the Swinburne University Human Research Ethics Committee (Ref: 20191261-1655).

5. The peak body for those working with men who use DFV, No To Violence, have a key principle that 'We are a pro-feminist organisation and we acknowledge the gendered nature of family violence.' This informs most best-practice in 'Australia.'
6. Rosie Batty is a high-profile, prominent victim-survivor advocate in 'Australia.'
7. Acknowledgement of country is commonly undertaken at the commencement of gatherings, events, or meetings in 'Australia' as a way to show awareness of and respect for the Traditional Custodians of the land.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This research was supported by the Victorian Department of Justice and Community Safety.

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Appendix. Survey questions

What or who is / are the main target/s of anger or disgruntlement for the men that you work with?

Have the men that you work with expressed anti-feminist sentiment?

Very often

Often

Occasionally

Rarely

Never

If they have expressed anti-feminist or more broadly anti-women sentiment, what, briefly, do you think they usually understand feminism to be?

Please briefly explain the usual nature of this sentiment. i.e. what do they dislike about feminism as they see it?

If, in your work, your clients ever mention any father's rights, men's rights or antifeminist groups, organisations or high-profile individuals or cases please name these.

Have the men that you work with expressed extremist right-wing views?

Very often

Often

Occasionally

Rarely

Never

If yes to above, who or what is usually the target of the extremist sentiment that you hear?

If, in your work, your clients ever mention any extreme right-wing groups, organisations or high-profile individuals or cases please name these here.

Do your clients refer to specific websites or online social media groups when expressing extremist and/or anti-feminist sentiment?

Do specific phrases or keywords recur if your clients are speaking negatively about women or expressing anti-feminist sentiment?

Please briefly outline a typical or specific example of the sentiment of clients expressing antifeminist and / or extreme right-wing views.