The Rise of the Incel Violence

A Feminist Exploration of How Incels and Incel Violence are Framed in American
Counterterrorism Policies and Strategies

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Abstract

In recent years incel (involuntary celibate) perpetuated violence has escalated in the United States. Incels are motivated by deeply rooted misogynistic assumptions, which dehumanises women and promotes degradation and violence towards the group. Despite evidence of escalation research shows that there still are limited perceptions of this violence as a serious threat. Drawing from ideas of feminist security theory (FST) this study conducts a feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) of incels in US counterterrorism policies and strategies between the years 2015-2022. It aims at answering two main questions: *How are incels and incel violence framed in US counterterrorism policies and strategies? Why are they framed as such?* The analysis shows a limited vocabulary and absence of language in describing incel and incel violence, suggesting that underlying power structures that prioritise certain issues over others are at work. The paper concludes that incels and incel violence are not, to a greater extent, framed as a security issue. From a FST perspective this is understood as mechanisms of different types of violence and gendered assumptions that marginalise women in security discourse and praxis.

Key words: incel (involuntary celibate), incels violence, misogyny, feminist security

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1   Introduction

In recent years the rise of incel (involuntary celibate) perpetrated violence has gained increased attention. Incels, primarily young men, who maintain resentment towards women because of perceived sexual rejection, have been associated with a series of violent acts against women (most of them in the United State (US)) and society at large (Hoffman, Ware & Shapiro 2020: Hoffman & Ware 2020).

Despite escalating violence perpetrated by violent incels, limited efforts have been made to bring this type of violence to the security table (Tomkinson, Attwell & Harper 2020). This paper examines the complex dynamics of how incel violence is framed in US counterterrorism policy and proposes to classify incel violence as a form of domestic misogynistic terrorism. By misogyny, this paper refers to Kate Manne's definition, which views it as a function to maintain a patriarchal order that punishes women who infringe on this order (2017: 72). Hence misogynistic terrorism, simply put, refers to terror motivated by the inclination of punishing women (Gentry 2020; Gentry 2022).

The limited efforts made against incel violence, display a need to expand the definition of "social organisation" as its current form fails to encompass all types of "organised" violence, which can manifest as a predictable and understandable pattern of violence by a social group of perpetrators (e.g men identified as incels) that may be underpinned by societal structures like gender inequality (True 2020: 86). A broader interpretation of organised violence may facilitate a better understanding of incel attacks as a form of "organised" violence. This expanded perspective highlights the importance of considering gender inequality as a factor and addresses the limitations of our current understanding of violence associated with incel attacks.

By employing a feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) and feminist security theory (FST) on American counterterrorism strategies and policies between 2015-2022, this paper tries to unveil the power dynamics that may be a factor in the framing of incels and incel violence as a security threat. Incorporating FCDA allows for an in-depth analysis of the

language, portrayals, and representations used in the discourse surrounding incels and Iicel violence. The discursive analysis is categorised into the following themes: *ideological motivations, origin of threat* and *target selection.* Then, FST provides a theoretical framework to examine how gender, misogyny and patriarchal power structures shape the securitisation process of incels and incel violence.

1.1 Purpose of Study

Given the escalation of incel-related violence and the general shortcoming to recognise violent Incels as a legitimate security threat at a national level in the United States, the paper aims at examining the perception of incel violence as a security issue and the underlying causes to this perception. A feminist understanding of the framing of incel violence as a security concern is vital for developing comprehensive and sufficient counterterrorism efforts. Furthermore, it argues why taking explicit action towards incel perpetrated violence is crucial for a wide-ranging security approach. By examining the discursive dynamics surrounding incel violence, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of security threats and the development of a more comprehensive and gender-sensitive counterterrorism approach.

The purpose is thus twofold: to describe the framing and provide a possible explanation of such. Due to this, the research questions are as follow:

1 – How are Incels and Incel violence framed in American counterterrorism policies and strategies?

2 – Why are they framed as such?

1.2   Definitions

1.2.1   Incels as Terrorists

To analyse incels in counterterrorism, it needs to be argued why they fit in such documents. While terrorism is highly debated, this thesis builds upon the definition of domestic terrorism provided by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) as it is the US that is the target of this research. According to the FBI domestic terrorism is "violent, criminal acts committed by individuals and/or groups to further ideological goals stemming from domestic influences, such as those of a political, religious, social, racial or environmental nature." (FBI 2020). In addition to this, the attacks should occur within American jurisdiction and target a civilian population (Ibid).

Based on the definition above, it is possible to contend that violent incels fall under the category of domestic terrorists. Vital is the ideological component as incel violence is driven by a set of misogynistic beliefs that seek to repress and subjugate women (Hoffman & Ware 2020). Naturally, they target a civilian population. In addition, all the attacks so far have been within the territorial jurisdiction of the United States (Ibid).

1.3   Thesis Roadmap

The thesis begins with a background on Incels, Incel ideology and the violence perpetrated by Incels. Then, an overview of previous research on misogynistic terrorism, Incels and securitisation is presented. It proceeds to present the theoretical framework of FST concepts that form the basis of the analysis. The case, material in form of policy and analytical framework of FCDA are then presented, which leads us to the analysis of the chosen documents. Finally, a discussion is being held on the topic of Incels and counterterrorism.

2 Background: The Incel Ideology and Violence

The thesis explores the framing of incels and incel violence in American counterterrorism policies as well as the underlying factors of such framing. To examine this, it is relevant to understand the origins of incels and the incel ideology. This section aims at explaining the ideology of incels and how it connects with violence.

The incel subculture was founded in 1997, with the intention of creating a platform for individuals (women and men) who experienced problems developing romantic and sexual relationships with others (Van Brunt & Taylor 2021: 10). However, the group has developed into more complex branches, some of which promote the use of violence against their perceived objects of disdain. In its current form, the incel sphere is embedded in the manosphere, referring to a group of diverse misogynistic bodies (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, n.d). Incels consist primarily of heterosexual men, who experience deep anger and hopelessness because they cannot pursue romantic and sexual relationships with women, despite their desire to do so (Hoffman et.al 2020: 568). Misogynistic incels have been inspired by male supremacist culture, that teaches men that they are entitled to women for sexual and romantic fulfilment and that women are solely valued for their instrumentality to these ends (New America n.d).

The incel ideology is based on two main ideas. Firstly, is the belief that society intrinsically is sex and attractiveness hierarchised. This hierarchy, in general, is believed to favour women and exclude men who are not conventionally attractive (Incels, according to themselves) from any romantic or sexual relationships (Baele, Brace & Coan 2021: 1667; Hoffman et. al 2020: 567). Secondly, incels are convinced that women have established an uneven, exclusive dating pool to which incels will never have access because women make dating decisions on superficial factors (Hoffman et. al 2020: 568). Through this deterministic worldview, incels have subordinated themselves, which becomes the justification for their degradation of women (Halpin 2022). In other words, incels justify their anger and aggression towards women as a consequence of self-victimisation. The victim-narrative encourages incel's

resistance (violent and non-violent) to the perceived oppression by women to maintain their dignity and autonomy (Tomkinson, Harper & Attwell 2020: 154).

Alarmingly, is that evidence illustrates that incel-connected men are more likely to support violence (Scaptura 2019). Incels have become increasingly visible due to the violent actions of some of its members, including the 2014 Isla Vista shooting in California, where the self-identified incel Elliot Rodger killed six people and injured 14 others (Woolf 2014). In addition to the attack itself, Rodger gained attention for the manifest he published previous to the attack expressing the following as a motivation for his actions:

> "I will destroy all women because I can never have them. I will make them all suffer for rejecting me. I will arm myself with deadly weapons and wage a war against all women and the men they are attracted to." (Rodger 2014, 101).

Since Rodger's onslaught, multiple attacks, in the United States, related to incels have occurred (Hoffman & Ware 2020). Noteworthy is that measuring incel attacks are a precarious task, as it tends to intersect with other types of violence, for example, white supremacy (Gentry 2020). In addition, essential to keep in mind is that violent incels are not representative of the entire community, rather they have been radicalised and therefore turned to violent methods to solve their perceived grievances (Grunau et. al 2022).

3   Previous Literature

The previous discussions display the dangerous ideology of incels that has been the foundation of violent attacks. Despite several incidents, there still seems to be a reluctance to identify violent incels in counterterrorism strategies and policies. However, as incel violence has escalated there has been an increased focus across different academic disciplines, including terrorism studies, on the online subculture of incels. In the following section, previous research is presented. It consists partly of terrorism research on terrorism based on misogynistic motives, securitisation theory and counterterrorism related to incel violence.

3.1 Misogynistic Terrorism

With the rise of incel violence scholars have become increasingly interested in understanding its nature and implications. This paper is in the vein of Caron E. Gentry's (2022) premise that incel violence is of political nature. This is in contrast to Bruce Hoffman, Jacob Ware and Ezra Shapiro (2020), who state that the incel worldview is not overtly political, while still underscoring the incel responsibility of persecuting and repressing women with anticipated wide-ranging social consequences. Furthermore, Gentry (2022) highlights how the aforementioned authors do recognise the political violence of incels but still fail to categorise it as such. This omission, Gentry claims, may be the result of a patriarchal bias, which marginalises women's issues as private rather than political (2022: 213).

Moreover, Gentry defines terrorism as a method of political violence, although the precise definition of "methods" is unclear (2020:26). Political violence can be any violence committed to further political objectives (Bardall, Bjarnegård & Piscopo 2020). Thus, based on Gentry's (2020) definition, she suggests that misogyny is a form of terrorism that incorporates political violence. It is demonstrated how misogyny is inherently political and intends to subjugate and repress women. By way of explanation, misogynistic terrorism is a type of gender-based violence that targets women in particular and is inspired by a desire to

uphold a political system of patriarchal standards and masculine domination (Ibid:174). This definition of misogyny as political violence, and thus terrorism, is a core assumption of this paper. Moreover, it is recognised that misogynistic terrorism takes many forms, including mass shootings, bombings and other acts of violence that may have destructive consequences on women's lives and security (Ibid: 165-166). It is further emphasised that misogynistic terrorism, as that of incels, is intersectional and is connected to other forms of ideologies, such as white supremacy (Ibid: 165). In her writing, Gentry (2020) underlines the necessity of a gender-sensitive counterterrorism strategy that considers the distinct ways in which terrorist violence targets and affects women. This entails making an effort to increase the involvement of women in security and counterterrorism initiatives as well as paying more attention to how gender norms and power structures contribute to the issue of misogynistic terrorism.

3.2 The Gendered Limitations of Securitisation

There are scholars that contend that the securitisation of incels is a necessity. Although the Copenhagen School of securitisation at first glance is a productive analytical tool for the framing of incels and incel violence in American counterterrorism policies, there exists a gendered gap.

Firstly, there seems to be a lack of perceiving incels as an extensive threat, which has raised concerns in the academic field. As a response to the accelerating issue of incel perpetrated violence Sian Tomkinson, Tauel Harper and Katie Attwell (2020) propose and explore possible policy responses to misogynistic violent extremism and incels. The authors argue, in a similar way as Gentry (2020), that incels can be argued to be violent extremists since they utilise violence as a method to pursue ideological and political goals. Furthermore, they explain how violent extremism—the use of or support for violence to further ideological, religious, or political goals—has been included in the expansion and improvement of strategies against terrorism (Tomkinson et.al 2020:154). They do admit that misogynistic violence is nothing unfamiliar but do emphasise that incels are unique because they target both women and men as a result of their perception that women's sexual freedom has corrupted society (Ibid: 155). Though this is true, this paper focuses on the security of women.

In light of this, the authors recognise a need to securitise incels and express concern that there is a lack of such. They do, however, identify that securitisation is not unproblematic. The risks of securitisation are illustrated through the example of the securitisation of Islamist extremism, as it caused the evolution of extraordinary measures resulting in the unnecessary persecution of individuals which in turn resulted in escalated violence. Additionally, it resulted in suspect communities, which cast suspicion on Muslims not engaging in violent values of Islamic fundamentalism (Ibid: 153). However, the authors make a point in securitising violent incels because the lack thereof would mean that democratic governments and civil societies risk falling back on conservative cultural attitudes often related to misogynistic crimes. Thus, maintaining the notion that this is an issue occurring behind closed doors and consequently is not a topic to be discussed in the public political debate (Ibid, 158).

To gain context, securitisation theory highlights how security threats are not a natural given, but are established through socially constructed processes (Buzan, Weaver & de Wilde 1998: 2014-205). Thus, the definition of security is found in the speech act, because speech has the capacity to frame social reality (Buzan et. al 1998: 26). To be securitised an issue needs to be portrayed as an existential threat by a securitising actor (the constructor of the issue), against a legitimate referent object (object in need of protection). Moreover, it has to be widely accepted by an audience. This underscores how the formation of referent objects is inextricably linked to the activity of securitisation (Ibid: 36).

In securitisation theory there is a distinction between international and social security. While international security is traditionally concerned with the existential threat to, traditionally, the state, government and society, social security puts emphasis on social justice and entitlement. Following the emphasis on social justice and entitlement, the threats are predominantly individual and thus only become a security threat when it threatens the disruption of society as an entity. The issue is at its roots not concerned with whether or not a threat is located on the social or international level, rather it is about how well an issue is presented to threaten the collective survival. (Hansen 2000: 289).

Lene Hansen (2000) questions the assumptions of securitisation because she claims that it lacks the concept of gendered security. Hansen underlines that securitising actors have the discursive power to determine what is a security issue, depriving marginalised voices of their

agency (2000: 287). Even more relevant, to this study, is the securitisation's emphasis on the survival of the collective entity. Without a gender lens, Hansen argues that securitisation overlooks the security needs of individuals of that collective. This critique is a reason that securitisation will not be used as a main analytical tool.

4   Theoretical framework

The previous research displays the lack of women in terrorism studies and the gendered limitations of securitisation theory. It emphasises the relevance of viewing misogynistic violence as a separate form of terrorism, affecting society as a whole, which needs to be considered a security issue. It also displays the gendered limitations of securitisation theory. Hence, the aim of exploring the framing of incel violence and the underlying reasons is of interest. To analyse, the paper provides concepts from Feminist Security Theory (FST). More specifically, it is preoccupied with FST's notion of the reconstruction of security and violence. The aim of FST and its reconceptualisations is to unveil an understanding of the underlying structural factors contributing to a specific framing of Incels.

4.1 Feminist Security Theory

Feminist Security Theory (FST) aims extensive criticism towards the male traditional security paradigm for its gender-blindness, meaning the lack of recognition of gender as a variable for social practices and knowledge production in the political and social sphere (Shepher 2013: 12; Tickner 2020: 130). Global gender inequalities unveil that politics and the international are still a man's world, and it has resulted in women often being marginalised in the praxis of security (Peoples & Vaughan-Williams 2021: 50). This has called for feminist reconceptualisations of security and violence.

Security and violence are two interrelated notions paramount to this thesis. As men traditionally have obtained positions of power in politics and international relations this has shaped what security and violence are (Ibid). Traditionally, security is centred around the protection of state borders and national values from an external physical threat. Additionally, it emphasises the need for military defence (Tickner 1997: 624). These conceptualisation of security and violence are problematic as it assumes that the notion of the state is neutral, when in fact it is shaped by masculine power structures that favour male experiences, which are maintained through language and praxis (Ibid: 614).

Thereupon, FST challenges the notion of security and violence as neutral terms as they are embedded in gendered hierarchies that favour male experiences. Instead, FST calls for more inclusive conceptualisations of security and violence and a broader understanding of how different social identities such as gender are formative variables. Subsequently, social identities construct hierarchies that define *what* (in this thesis, what kind of violence) and *who* (recognition of the vulnerability of different individuals to certain violence) is regarded in security discourses (Wibben 2020: 116). Gendered factors are thus a vital factor in the experiences of different forms of violence (Ibid).

Essentially, security in feminist terms is the absence of all forms of violence, including physical, structural and symbolic violence (Tickner 1997: 624). While the former might be obvious, structural might not be as self-evident. In feminist studies, structural violence is the patriarchal dominance of men over women, which reproduces and allows gendered violence, in which physical violence is a component of gendered norm systems (Frazer & Hutchings 2020: 201). Additionally, the diverse forms of violence prove the persistence of violence as a continuum at all levels of society (True 2020).

The thesis follows the feminist conceptualisation of violence and security as more inclusive and comprehensive notions. It argues that incel violence is a form of structural violence against women, as the ideology of incels is harboured in misogyny which perpetuates gender inequality and objectification of women. It is further assumed that the reinforcement of structural violence, and consequently violence against women, occurs when the harmful Incel ideology is accepted, promoted or neglected.

To summarise, the traditional approach where security is centred around the protection of borders against external threats of physical violence, is inherently a masculine domain as a result of gendered norms. Instead, feminist scholars aspire to expand *who* and *what* should be included in the concept of security. Rather than putting the state and nation as the main reference object, FST contends that the focal point should be on the individual and include social, political, economic and environmental dimensions in order to embrace women and other marginalised groups (Tickner 1997: 624).

5   Method and Material

The theoretical framework of FST and its reconceptualisation of violence and security is a foundation for the analysis of how incels are framed and why. Below, the case of the United States is presented and motivated. Followed by a discussion on the material and analytical framework of feminist critical discourse analysis.

5.1 Case Study and Case Selection

This study is a single-n study of American counterterrorism policies and their framing of incel violence. A case study approach emphasises the understanding of processes as they occur in their context. Consequently, case studies provide the researcher with possibilities to develop a comprehensive understanding of the issue, making it easier to describe and explain a circumstance (Kohlbacher 2006:26). In the case of framing of incels in American counterterrorism, it is thought to provide a deep exploration of the mechanisms and discourses surrounding the framing of incels and incel violence. Thus, further uncovering patterns, relationships and factors that might influence the framing of incels as a security threat within the American counterterrorism context.

Furthermore, essential for a case study is the justification of the choice of the case to avoid the risk of selection bias (George & Bennett 2005: 22). Hence, it is required to have precise criteria for the selected situation in order to reduce the risk of this. Thus, in this instance, the incidence of incel-related violence—i.e., violence committed by people who identify as or have officially been established as incels—could be a relevant factor. With this criterion in mind, despite the transnational nature of the incel community (Radicalisation Awareness Network 2021:11), the United States is considered the case to investigate as it is the country that has experienced the most incel attacks compared to any other country (Hoffman & Ware 2020). Noteworthy, is that it is precarious to measure the misogynistic violence of incels as it often intersects with other types of violence (Gentry 2020).

Case studies are often criticised for shortcomings in generalisability (external validity) (Flyvbjerg 2003). Despite the lack of generalisability case studies can provide useful insights into specific contexts (Halperin & Heath 2020: 234). This makes case studies relevant for contributions of new hypotheses or insights (Ibid: 237). Since the concept of incel violence as terrorism is relatively new, the case study of the United States is relevant to possibly provide new understandings and observations about this type of violence, how it is portrayed and how to deal with it. Flyvbjerg (2003), however, argues that the strategic selection of the case can strengthen the generalisability. By, for example, proving a hypothesis wrong through the most beneficial case, then it would be possible to contend that it would be false for similar cases (2003: 190). While this might not be completely true to this study since there are several underlying social factors that may contribute to differences between cases, it might still give us hints of what to expect or not to expect.

5.2 Material

The thesis' material is composed of a diverse range of populations of primary sources as well as secondary sources. To explore the framing of incels in American counterterrorism policies and strategies documents from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and presidential administrations have been gathered between the years 2015 and 2022. Gathering data from national and legal policies and strategies over time enhances the triangulation of data, which could argue to enhance the credibility and validity of the research (Halperin & Heath 2020: 334).

Noteworthy, is that there are some limitations to this type of material. One is the fact that this study depends on data that is readily accessible to the public and might not fully represent the practices that these organisations have implemented in reality. In connection to this, it is crucial to note that there may be information not presented as it may be sensitive to national security, especially in relation to national policies and strategies.

Furthermore, the data is aimed at covering a period between 2015 and 2022. The reason why the starting year of the investigation is 2015 and not 2014 when Rodger committed the attack in Isla Vista, is based on the simple fact that there were no documents from the above-mentioned actors from 2014. Also noteworthy, is that there are no documents from

each year. This is not necessarily an issue as the aim is not to explore changes over time. There is still enough material within the chosen timeframe to be able to conduct an analysis and draw conclusions from the findings.

Another point to be highlighted is that not all of the policies are aimed explicitly at counterterrorism. The White House's National Security Strategies (NSS) are the basis of the analysis. The executive branch of the United States produces NSS on a regular basis that outlines its goals for addressing various national security issues, including terrorism. While the focal point is on national and legal strategies and policies that may exclude other crucial documents from smaller actors, I argue that national and legal strategies and policies have a greater impact on a nation's response to the threat of terrorism and what is perceived as a terror threat. Hence, they are important and relevant to examine.

Finally, there are reasons to underline the different political ideologies at work between documents. Differences between the ideological backgrounds and values of presidential administrations might explain differences between policies and thus different framings of incels and incel violence. Thus, it makes it a politicised question, but it can be relevant as it still can display the different discourses that are permeated by different power dynamics.

5.2 Analytical Framework

To effectively analyse the positioning of incels in American counterterrorism Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) will be employed. The approach is an intersection of critical discourse analysis (CDA) and feminist studies that seeks to bring nuance to the complexities of power and ideologies in discourses that maintain gendered hierarchies (Lazar 2014: 182; Lazar 2007). CDA does highlight power structures in discourses, however "gender" in this method simply becomes the topic of the study, while FCDA is fundamentally influenced by advancements in critical feminist theory and practice (Lazar 2014: 182).

According to FCDA, the social practices that are reflected and constituted through discourse are profoundly gendered, which aligns with the primary purpose of exploring power relations that systematically favours men over women (Ibid: 184). This gender ideology is an active belief system that appears natural and accepted by society. Through discourse, it is

maintained by making ideological assumptions appear normal, thus hiding the power imbalances at work. To relate to the paper, it can be contended that the priority of certain threats over others maintains gender hegemony through discursive action. This makes the analytical framework intrinsically interlinked with the theoretical framework of FST. FCDA provides the empirical tools in this paper for analysing, and FST provides the theoretical framework for critically examining gendered security challenges. FCDA and FST work together to improve our understanding of how gender influences security narratives, policies, and practices, as well as to advance gender equality and inclusive security agendas.

An FCDA involves both the overt direct communication and the latent meaning hidden in the usage (or non-usage) of language. Hidden meanings are especially interesting as researchers can identify hidden biases, preconceptions, and power dynamics that are not immediately obvious (Lazar 2014). The discursive analysis will be built on the representation of the incel issue as well as the potential absences in the usage of language concerning the incel issue. Thus framing is interlinked with FCDA. The focus of FCDA, in this research, is to identify how incels and incel violence are portrayed in the counterterrorism discourse. The linguistic aspects investigated will be about finding relevant terms (e.g. misogyny, incels) in relation to three themes, but also the absence and prioritisation of certain language. By examining the framing, one can identify how gender and gender power issues are constructed and conveyed in language.

Noteworthy is, however, the lack of reliability in cases of FCDA as it is based on interpretations of the researcher. This means that if the study was to be conducted again, it risks providing another result based on the bias of the researcher, thus undermining the external reliability (Bryman 2016: 465). By highlighting researcher bias and being transparent in every step of the study, it may however strengthen the credibility of the study.

5.3 Operationalisation

With FCDA, this paper explores the framing of Incels and Incel violence from a feminist conceptualisation of security and violence. Broadly, the concepts of security and violence in FST maintain the need for expansion of *what* and *who* security should regard. In this thesis, *what* refers to what type of violence is perceived as a threat and *who* reflects on the

vulnerability of individuals to violence. Related to the framing of incels and incel violence, from a feminist perspective, three themes have been identified:

Themes	Ideological motivations	Origin of Threat	Targets
Operationalisation	*What* underlying ideological motivations to terrorism are perceived as a threat? In connection with incels, it is argued that this should be misogynistic or gender-based violence. Further linked violence, it is contended that it should be highlighted as systematic and structural violence, as structural patriarchal violence enables and fuels Incel violence. In addition, it can be argued that patriarchal structures create biases that influence how different motivations behind terrorism are prioritised.	This is connected to ideological motivations. It is about how the threats (and *what* threats) are perceived as domestic or international. Based on the previous argument that Incels are a domestic terrorist threat, it can be noted that how incels are portrayed as a domestic threat in counterterrorism strategies may reflect broader societal attitudes (and structural power dynamics) towards gender-based violence and its significance. This categorization can be seen as significant because it shapes the perception and prioritisation of the threat posed by incels. By framing them as a domestic threat, attention is directed towards addressing and mitigating the impact of their activities within national borders.	This coincides with the *who* aspect of the security perspective and asks whether it is the state or the individual that is the focal point. In the case of incels, according to the FST, women should be emphasised as being vulnerable to this type of violence. However, it is important to note that a balance can be necessary to not promote gender stereotypes about the vulnerable woman.

Identification through FCDA	In the policies the following terms or absence of terms in the context of threats the following will be investigated: *misogyny, misogynistic violence, ideology/extremism, incel violence*	In the policies the following terms or absence of terms in the context of origin of threats, the following will be investigated: *domestic and homegrown terrorism,* especially in relation to incel and misogynistic terrorism.	In the policies the following terms or absence of terms in the context of targets of terrorism, the following will be investigated: *women, vulnerable, protection, support,* but also *homeland* and *nation.*

Table 1.

6   Analysis

To answer the question of how incels and incel violence are framed in the policies and strategies FCDA is relevant as it is open to the gendered dynamics in language and the use of language. Thus, the discourse analysis is centred on identifying representation and/or absence of terms related to incels (see section 5.3). To understand why the particular framing exists, the paper assumes the conceptualisations of security and violence from FST. The following analysis is divided into sections of each theme identified in relation to Incels and counterterrorism: *ideological motivations, origin of the threat* and *targets.* Each theme section commences with a presentation of quotes being representative of the discourse. It is followed by the employment of FST.

6.1 Ideological Motivations

Ideological motivations are concerned with *what* forms of violent extremism are considered a threat in the security discourse and whether these relate to violence perpetrated by incels. The objective is to determine if the policies acknowledge and take into account the misogynistic ideology that incels adhere to as a distinct security issue.

6.1.1 The Framing of Threats

Virtually, all analysed documents discussed which ideological background to terrorism was seen as the dominant threat. In relation to incels and incel violence, this would be for example ideologies based on misogyny. Predominantly in the policies from the Obama and Trump administrations (White House 2015; White House 2018) as well as the 2016 strategy of DHS ideologies posing a threat were discussed in generic terms (apart from Islamism). Ideologies that were not inspired by Islamic fundamentalism, were imminently discussed as "other" violent ideologies. DHS of 2016 only mentioned the importance of "countering domestic terrorist ideology."(DHS 2016: 3), without further specifications.

The Obama administration expresses how they intend to "...prioritize collective action to meet the persistent threat posed by terrorism today, especially from al-Qa'ida, ISIL and their affiliates. In addition to acting decisively to defeat direct threats, we will focus on building the capacity of others to prevent the causes and consequences of conflict to include *countering extreme and dangerous ideologies."* (White House 2015: 7). Similarly, it is possible to deduce that the Trump administration intends to "...broaden our range of partners to combat radical Islamist terrorism, Iran sponsored terrorism, and *other forms of violent extremism."* (White House 2018: 1).

However, for transparency, the Trump administration does at one point in the policy, specify by giving a few examples of "other forms of violent extremism" that include racially motivated extremism and animal rights extremism (Ibid: 10). Yet, misogyny is not highlighted as such a form of extremism. Other policies and strategies (DHS 2020; White House 2021; White House 2022) broaden the concept of "other" violent ideologies. The DHS conveys the need to "address a wider variety of threats" and "domestic terrorist ideologies (DHS 2020, 9 & 4), which is followed by relatively extensive discussions on the different threats, including white-supremacy and anti-government extremism (Ibid: 9-10). But still misogyny or similar ideologies that coincides with Incels are not mentioned.

Moreover, the threat is also "more ideologically diverse and geographically diffuse than that of two decades ago", claims the Biden-administration in the policy of 2022. While there is no further specification of what this means, they do refer to the first-ever published policy against domestic terrorism also published by the Biden-administration a year previous to the aforementioned policy (2021). In the policy aimed at countering domestic terrorism (2021), ideologies that pose a threat are discussed and specified to a greater extent. It is primarily concerned with the threat of the detrimental ideology of white supremacy (White House 2021). Remarkably, however, this is the only document that explicitly mentions Incels in relation to terrorist ideologies.

It is stated that "Other domestic terrorists may be motivated by single-issue ideologies related to abortion–, animal rights–, environmental–, or *involuntary celibate–,* violent extremism…" (Ibid: 9). While this is a significant advance in the perception of Incels as a security threat, it is relevant to note that no further specification of the single issue ideology of Incels is

provided. From the perspective of FST, this framing (or non-framing) of misogynistic ideologies raises the question about the awareness of gendered prospects in extremism.

6.1.2 A Feminist Analysis

Except for the 2021 policy on combating domestic terrorism, the lack of specificity regarding incels as an extremist ideology alludes to the patriarchal power structures that manipulate security discourses. As FCDA highlights, the absence of language also holds immense discursive power. Therefore, it can be argued that this framing emphasises the unequal power dynamics at play between different forms of extremism that indicate the influence of dominant structures that prioritises certain threats over others.

The shortcoming of explicitly target misogyny in relation to incels and incel violence might reflect a vaster neglect of gendered forms of violence within the security discourse. This is an example of the gender-blind nature of traditional security measures. According to FST, violence is embedded in gendered power structures. The absence of language relating to incel violence as a threat could be an indicator of underlying social structures that fail to recognise gender-based violence of this type, which could further reflect a lack of understanding of how misogyny drives the violence of incels.

Further related to the broad conceptualisation of violence, it is crucial to admit that violence is ingrained in social structures. The lack of language regarding incels and incel violence in the security discourse may discount the structural violence embedded in incel ideology, such as the normalisation of misogyny. Thus, it can represent the failure to recognise systematic factors that are contributors to incel violence. It echoes the notion of violence as a continuum, as proposed by True (2020), which highlights violence as a phenomenon with roots in an extensive system of power. The lacking use of language that specifically identifies misogyny as a comprehensive threat and condemns the objectification of women within the Incel ideology can unveil the power imbalances at play. In addition, it is illustrative of the patriarchal, and other intersecting structural, biases that prioritise some threats over others. This prioritisation unintentionally upholds current gendered power structures that in turn normalise violence against women by failing to explicitly discuss the gendered aspects of incel violence.

It is vital to discuss the specific mention of incel violence as a "single-issue ideology" as it is the only time incel is specified in this setting. While this framing to a certain extent poses incel violence as a threat there are reasons to scrutinise the choice of wording. Labelling violence as a "single-issue ideology", might overlook gendered dynamics that are elemental to understand the phenomenon. As presented in section 2, incels often hold misogynistic beliefs and resentment towards women. These can be argued to derive from deeply rooted gendered power imbalances. Hence, failing to acknowledge the gendered aspects overshadows a larger context of violence against women. Furthermore, categorising incel violence as a "single-issue ideology", can be argued to emphasise the notion that incels are exclusively driven by sexual frustration or rejection, simplifying the issue.

Finally, portraying incels as a "single-issue ideology" under counterterrorism measures, or failing to acknowledge them explicitly, may perpetuate structural violence against women. These strategies may inadequately respond to the special obstacles and hazards faced by women by ignoring the gendered features of incel violence and neglecting to address the underlying structural issues.

6.2 Origin of the Threat

The theme of the origin of the threat is interrelated to the theme of ideological motivations. The paper argues for the domestic nature of the threat posed by incels, referring to the definition of domestic terrorism established by the FBI. This classification is significant as it can be argued to shape the perception and prioritisation of the threat posed by incels. Framing incels as a domestic threat directs attention towards mitigating the impact of their activities within the national border, which challenges the traditional paradigm that are more concerned with external threats.

6.2.1 The Framing of Internal Threats

In the document there is a general agreement of the existence of "homegrown" terrorism. The Obama-administration expresses the need of   "...countering homegrown violent

extremism…", albeit in the context of preventing people from joining conflicts overseas (White House 2015: 8). The Trump-administration recognises the rise of domestically driven terrorism by disclosing "Notably domestic terrorism in the United States is on the rise, with an increasing number of fatalities and violent nonlethal acts committed by domestic terrorists against people and property in the United States." (White House 2018: 10). In some cases, like DHS 2016, it is less evident. However, a need to "Prevent movement and operation of terrorists within the United States." (DHS 2016: 13), could be a way of suggesting responsibility for deterring domestic threats.

Other US counterterrorism policies and strategies also highlight the increased threat by domestic terrorism. For example it is stated that "we face sharply increased threats from a range of domestic violent extremism here in the United States" (White House 2022: 30). The need for more responsibility to counter this type of threats is recognised as they "...face a growing threat from domestic terrorism and other threats originating at home…" (DHS 2020: i). It is, in addition, admitted that domestic threats have been responsible for more deaths than Foreign Terrorist Organisations (FTOs), by stating that domestic threats "have caused more deaths in the United States in recent years than have terrorists connected to FTOs" (Ibid: 10).

In one document the issue of domestic threats is discussed in detail (White House 2021). Firstly, the policy is introduced by the statement that "Domestic terrorism is not a new threat in the United States." (White House 2021:5). Furthermore, it should be noted that this is the policy on countering domestic terrorism that mentions incels as a threat (see. 6.1.1) .

6.2.2 A Feminist Analysis

As portrayed above, domestic terrorism and threats are recognised in the counterterrorism policies and strategies. Domestic terrorism is often positioned as a new emerging threat in need of preventative work. While emphasising the growth of domestic threats and the need to counter "domestic violence extremism" display the recognition of awareness of such issues, it can be seen as problematic. The language used to display the issue of domestic threats can, however, be argued to be gender-neutral because of the overall lack in connecting this to misogynistic violent ideologies, which fails to address incels as a threat.

However, firstly, it can be argued that recognising the increased threat of domestic terrorism is a milestone. By admitting to the emerging terror threat of domestic actors, FST's concept of security could be employed. Even more so, regarding the policy specifically targeting domestic threats (White House 2021), which mentions incels (albeit on one occasion). This inclusion of incels in this specific policy indicates an understanding of the gendered ideologies and power structures that may underlie this form of violence. It recognises that incels are driven by a deeply ingrained misogynistic mentality, and pose a significant domestic threat that must be addressed.

Nonetheless, the failure (in general) of specifically connecting incel violence and domestic terrorism mirror a far-reaching issue of male-centric perspectives that dominates counterterrorism policies and strategies. The discourse conveys a narrow understanding of terrorism by not explicitly recognising incels as a form of domestic terrorism. From the perspective of FST security involves the inclusion of more threats than the external overt physical one. It further emphasises the need to view security through a gendered lens. Incel violence, that is predominantly targeted at women, demonstrates the need of incorporating more perspectives to security. Not recognising incel violence as a form of domestic terrorism can be argued to be a reflection of wider social norms and beliefs that marginalise women. This connects to FSTs focus on structural violence, that is the indirect forms of violence and inequality rooted in social structures. Relating to incel violence, structural violence is found in the perpetuation of misogyny in society. Thus, absence of language that recognises incel violence as domestic terrorism unveil the failure of acknowledging structural factors sustaining this form of violence, which reinforces existing gender power inequalities.

This exclusion derives from a limited understanding of security, which frequently elevates traditional forms of violence and external threats above the gendered components of violence inflicted by incels. One can contend that the lack of acknowledgement also underscores the limitations of current US counterterrorism frameworks in identifying and approaching emerging threats that do not fit the conventional model. Thus, incel as a domestic threat, dispute standard assumptions on security and entail more nuanced and gender-aware approaches to counterterrorism frameworks.

6.3 Targets

The theme of target selection is interested in identifying who the counterterrorism policies and strategies consider are in need of protection. Since icels' primary target pool consists of women, it would be necessary for counterterrorism policies and strategies to address and realise the vulnerable position of women. Especially, in regards to the type of violence Incels perpetuate.

6.3.1 The Framing of Targets

In the 2016 strategy of DHS it is stated that the aim is to "reduce the vulnerability of the United States to terrorism" (DHS 2016: 7). This could be interpreted as a reference to the vulnerability of the state and nation. This is a discourse that is prominent in other documents as well. The policy provided by the Obama-administration discusses the need to "defeat threats to the homeland" (White House 2015: 7), suggesting the importance of protection of the state. Another way to phrase this has been identified. To illustrate, the Trump-administration phrase that their prioritisation of efforts against terrorist groups are "based upon the threat they pose to our homeland and vital national interests." (White House 2018: 11).

In the same documents one can also find other ways to frame targets. For example "We will be champion for communities that are too frequently vulnerable to violence, abuse and neglect – such as ethnic and religious minorities; people with disabilities; Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) individuals; displaced persons and migrant workers." (White House 2015: 20) can be found in the policy of the Obama-administration. The same document also expresses the need to "...reducing scourge of violence against women around the globe…" (Ibid). In the policy provided by the Trump-administration (2018) a need to protect "...soft targets..." (White House 2018: 19) are expressed, but in that context not further elaborated on. The 2016 strategy of DHS is even more vague by stating that a critical task is to "Identify possible terrorism targets and vulnerabilities" (15).

While the 2022 policy from the Biden-administration does not discuss specific vulnerabilities of terrorism targets, they did provide a comprehensive understanding of this in their policy of

2021 aimed at diverting domestic terrorism. The policy shows a far-reaching understanding of how violence affects different societal groups. An representative extraction that shows this understanding is:

"We have seen certain communities among our diverse nation – including racial, ethnic and religious minorities; immigrants; LGBTQI+ individuals; *women and girls*, as well as law enforcement public servants, and government officials –who have been deliberately and most often targeted by domestic terrorists and who, in turn often have paid the steepest price." (White House 2021: 30).

Correspondingly, the 2020 strategy from DHS highlights how "Domestic terrorist attacks and hate crimes sometimes overlap, as perpetrators of prominent domestic terrorist attacks have selected their targets based on factors such as race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, *gender* and gender identity." (DHS 2020).

6.3.2 A Feminist Analysis

The extracts from the different counterterrorism documents display different discursive framings of targets. One dominant feature is the state-centric approach, characteristic for the traditional security paradigm. As FST explains this prioritises the protection of the state and nation, two concepts that are inherently masculine. Phrases like "defeat threats to the homeland" (White House 2015: 7), suggest a focus on security of the state. According to FST, this would be a reflection of a male-dominated view of security, which puts the state and its interests at the forefront. This simplistic conceptualisation of security may omit the gendered dimensions of violence and also the specific vulnerabilities to this sort of violence. In this case, this would mean the neglect of realising that women might be more vulnerable to the violence of incels. Not confronting the gendered components embedded in violence or not challenging patriarchal norms and power inequalities, could be seen as a form of structural violence. The employed language in some of the documents may reinforce unequal power structures and limit opportunities to address the root causes of violence against women perpetrated by incels.

Another discursive dimension reflects a more comprehensive understanding of who should be regarded in the security discourse. There are references in some of the documents that highlight the need to protect "soft targets" (White House 2018: 19) or even women and other groups. While this recognises women in a broader context of security, the framing needs to be critically examined whether they adequately address underlying factors to this vulnerability. It might be necessary to transcend above the mere recognition of women as vulnerable and address the structural inequalities that enable incel violence. One can contend that the usage of the term "soft target" can be problematic as it unintentionally might fortify gender stereotypes that maintain that women are intrinsically vulnerable. Thus, highlighting the need to address systemic factors that might contribute to incel violence against women and society.

However, it is important to also recognise that women are, to a certain extent, in need of more protection in regards to incel ideology and incel violence. Beyond the emphasis on international threats and male-oriented violence, FST advocates for a more comprehensive vision of security that takes into account the experiences and worries of excluded groups. Thus, the mention of women as vulnerable suggests the need for support of women and other marginalised groups within counterterrorism action. This reflects an awareness that security is not merely the protection and support of the state but also encompasses the insecurities and experiences of different social groups, including women.

7   Discussion

Aiming at describing and understanding the framing of incels in US counterterrorism policies, the analysis displays some interesting findings. Three themes were identified in the material: *ideological motivations, the origin of the threat* and *targets,* all of which coincided with different aspects of feminist understanding of violence and security.

Findings unveil that policies tend to discuss threats in generic terms, and do not specifically acknowledge incels or their misogynistic ideology as a distinct security issue. Additionally, it is acknowledged that domestic terrorism is an increasing issue, however it is not related to incels. Finally, the recognition of targets in the policies suggest protection of the state, but also individuals. Vulnerabilities are to a certain extent recognised, however, women are not highlighted in the wake of incel violence. Despite that the study has not aimed at comparing or identifying a change over time, it is crucial to note that there has been indications of a broadened understanding of the incel violence. However, it is too early to state if it in fact is an indication of a substantial change in awareness or just a "temporary" change in vocabulary. Even if it is a change, the degree of awareness and if it has real implications for how incel/misogynistic terror threats are treated now and in the future cannot be evaluated on the limited information. Until further updates or specifications on incel terror have been published by the DHS or the next White House administration the perception is that there is a lack of awareness from a FST perspective. Overall, it is integral to confront the androcentric bias that influences counterterrorism operations and to explore the underlying premises that influences counterterrorism documents and to explore power dynamics that may determine the framing of security concerns.

How incels are framed as an extensive (non)threat will have implications for the effectiveness of prevention frameworks (Gentry 2020). By not recognising the unique threat posed by violent incels does not only exclude women and women's issues from the security sphere, but it does risk the security of society as a whole. Even if this paper has focused on the targeting of women by incels, one should be aware that violent incels hold resentment towards men who succeed in the dating pool. Furthermore, the underestimation of the threat by violent

incels could impede effective anti-radicalisation tools that address the root causes of the issue, one of which is underlying misogyny that fuels patriarchal structures that is a reason for violence against women (see 4.1).

While the study has unveiled interesting findings in the US counterterrorism strategy it still has limitations. The first concerns the generalisability of the study. As a case study it is difficult to draw general conclusions, so to gain a global understanding of the perception of incel violence further research could focus on the comparison of cases. In addition, the study lumps women as a homogenous group, which is a simplification of a complex reality. It is crucial to recognise how other social identities intersect with different motivations behind violence. It highlights how individuals can experience different forms of oppression simultaneously. For example, white supremacy seems to intersect with misogynistic violence (Gentry 2020). However, the sole focus of women in this thesis has been a conscious choice. By addressing the root of the problem, which I argue is the gendered issue of incel violence, we gain a basic understanding of the issue which can be nuanced by further research. To be noted for further research is the importance to look into how women and other marginalised groups are incorporated in the framework of action against terrorism, and not just as potential victims, so as not to deprive them of agency, which would perpetuate patriarchal assumptions about the victimised woman.

It is also important to consider alternative explanations not stemming from the feminist perspective. There are two main factors that have not been included in this study, which could have had an impact in the establishment of the counterterrorism documents. Both political motivations and the time aspect cannot be ignored. As briefly discussed under section 5.2, differences in the discourses regarding incels and incel violence may be found in differences in political beliefs. There are differences in how, for example, Obama, Trump and Biden choose to discuss the problem of misogynistic incel terrorism. As these are political actors with different political goals, it can be discussed whether the discourse on problems, such as Incel, changes with changes in presidential administrations. At the same time, this is not necessarily a problem as it can still reveal underlying power dynamics in and created by the discourses.

What is more difficult to determine is how the documents are products of their time. For example, Obama's focus on international terrorism and Islamism (especially ISIS) may have

to do with the fact that this was relevant at the time he was in office. Moreover, the phenomenon of incels was relatively new, at least it was new in relation to the serious violence that has escalated today. The Biden-administration, on the other hand, has seen the growth of incel violence and therefore might have decided to specifically mention incels as an issue in the 2021 policy. Admittedly, this time aspect has a major impact on what is prioritised on the security agenda. At the same time, although incels have not always been a widespread issue, the failure to address violent misogynist ideologies that target women can still underscore an overarching problem: the marginalisation of women in security praxis.

8   Conclusion

The aim of this study has been twofold. One the one hand it aimed at exploring how incels and incel violence is framed in US counterterrorism policies and strategies. On the other hand, it sought to provide a feminist explanation of this framing. The central questions has thus been:

1 - How are incels and incel violence framed in US counterterrorism policies and strategies?

2 - Why are they framed as such?

Through a feminist critical discourse analysis it can be concluded that incels and incel violence are *not* perceived as a significant terror threat. According to the FCDA, but also the FST, this implication can be explained by underlying gendered power structures based on a traditional view of violence and security where women and other groups have been marginalised. Even when incels have been mentioned in the discourse, the language used has been insufficient in addressing gendered power dynamics. The lack of clear reference to or specification of incels highlights the need to confront and eliminate these patriarchal systemic inequities and reflects the exclusion of gender-based violence from security priorities.

The failure to value incel and incel violence as a threat is worthy of discussion in counterterrorism policies and strategies has implications for successful prevention. Overlooking the significance of the threat violent incels pose risks a complete understanding of the security landscape and incels as a growing domestic issue. Failure to explicitly discuss and evaluate the threat of incels can lead to an underrepresentation of gender-based threats within security discourse. This can further cripple the relevance of addressing violence against women and gender equality in society as a whole.

To conclude, the escalating terror attacks of incel violence underscore the urgency of adopting a feminist understanding of violence and security. Addressing the unique dynamics of gender-based violence will provide an improved and more holistic security for all.

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