

Opinion: Yes, the incel community has a sexism problem, but we can do something about it

June 12 2023, by Michael Halpin and Finlay Maguire



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

A judge in Ontario's Superior Court has ruled that a 2020 attack on a Toronto massage parlor was an [incel-inspired act of terror](#). This is the first time that an incel-related crime has been labeled a terror offense.

Law enforcement groups in Canada and the [United States](#) have identified incels as a growing terror threat.

A number of online communities and [social media influencers](#) engage in misogynistic rhetoric. [Incels](#)—short for involuntary celibates—are one of these communities. Incels are men who see themselves as unable to establish romantic relationships with women. Incels [believe they are victims of lookism](#), which they define as a social bias in favor of attractive people.

Incels have been connected to [hate crimes](#) against women and [celebrate attacks](#) that target them. Despite the link between incels and violence, public figures like [Jordan Peterson](#) defend incels and see them as unfairly marginalized.

Online misogyny

To better understand incel misogyny, [we analyzed](#) every comment made on a popular incel discussion board over a period between 2017 and 2021. In total, we collected more than 3.5 million comments. [Some incels](#) say they are not misogynistic, but we found that misogyny is widespread within the incel community.

In the comments we analyzed, incels used misogynistic slurs nearly one million times. They use misogynistic slurs to describe women 3.3 times more often than non-misogynistic terms. More than 80 percent of discussion board threads contained at least one misogynistic slur. Some users only referred to women using misogynistic slurs.

Our research is not just about the number of misogynistic slurs that incels use, but also the types of slurs they use. Many of these terms are explicitly hostile and dehumanizing. Slurs like "foid" are used to label women as uncaring machines, while words like "roastie" aim to body

shame sexually active women.

While our data shows that incels hate all women, incels particularly target racialized women with sexist and racist terms. Incels dehumanized and sexualized racialized women by saying they were sexually available to all [white men](#). Incels labeled women "race traitors" for dating outside their race.

Why are incels targeting women? Incels argue that women and society treat them like subordinate, failed men and "beta males." As we argue, incels [weaponize this subordination](#) by saying women should be rented, bought and sold like property to "solve" the "incel problem." Incels see themselves as the "real victims," who are being attacked by women, feminism and society. They think eliminating women's rights will improve society.

What can we do to address online misogyny?

Our study shows that incels do not become misogynistic within the incel community. Instead, they are already misogynistic when they arrive in the community. This suggests that men are becoming misogynistic in other communities, such as men's rights groups like [Men Going Their Own Way](#) and those formed around online influencers like Andrew Tate. These communities can serve as a pipeline for incels.

Efforts to disrupt [online misogyny](#) will need to focus on multiple communities and the networks between them. Simply shutting down [online forums](#) or discussion boards is not likely to be effective. Incels and other communities pop up in new locations, and these groups see [censorship](#) as validation of their beliefs.

Instead, academics, policymakers and the public need to directly challenge misogyny. We can engage with and challenge incel

communities to disrupt their ability to operate as [misogynistic echo-chambers](#).

We also need to keep supporting organizations that advance gender equity. In addition to organizations that advocate for women, we also need to support groups for [men that challenge sexism](#) and [promote healthy and positive](#) ideas about masculinity.

We can amplify the voices of [men who have left the incel community](#). We can also identify and support men who decide not to join the incel community, particularly because our data suggests that the men who did not make misogynistic comments appeared to leave the community.

All of us can challenge how science is misused to create misogynistic misinformation. A page on the incel website we analyzed provided links to hundreds scientific studies that they believe support their sexist claims.

Many of these studies were misinterpreted, misquoted or presented out of context. We can adapt existing tools, such as [online fact-checkers](#), to more efficiently counter such incorrect and misleading misogynistic claims.

What can incels do? The site we studied tells its members to not persecute, harass or attack others. Based on our research, those rules don't seem to apply to attacking or harassing women. To the extent that incel communities care about misogyny, they need to do better at challenging it in each other.

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