incel

by Paola Giorgis

Abstract:

Italiano. Il termine '***incel'*** (*involuntary celibatary*, celibe involontario) è stato coniato negli anni 1990 da Alana (una donna queer che non hai mai voluto rivelare il proprio cognome) per lanciare l' *Involuntary Celibatary Project* (progetto celibe invontario). Questo progetto aveva l'obiettivo di creare una **risorsa** che servisse di **sostegno** a chi non riusciva a trovare un/una partner sessuale - poiché era al di fuori di norme di genere troppo rigide, perché non possedeva abilità sociali adeguate a creare relazioni, e così via.

Tuttavia, con grande sconcerto della sua ideatrice, ciò che era nato come risorsa inclusiva ha presto assunto una **piega misogina e violenta**, creando comunità e gruppi di **uomini arrabbiati** che considerano le **donne** la **causa primaria** di ogni loro frustrazione e fallimento.

Nell'ideologia incel, i **tradizionali ruoli di potere** sono stati rovesciati: le donne sono in cima alla scala gerarchica, e gli uomini sono delle vittime, condannati a uno stato di **subordinazione** e **sopraffazione** costante. Per gli incel, ogni donna è un **obiettivo potenziale** in quanto è la fonte di ogni male e catastrofe - è manipolatrice, assassina di bambini mai nati, ha troppo potere (sessuale), e contribuisce al decadimento della società.

Da frasi **misogine** e **sessiste online**, il passo ad **azioni violente** è stato breve. I casi più eclatanti sono stati quelli di Elliott Rodger (US, 2014) e Alek Minassian (Canada, 2018), salutati nei forum incel come 'i nostri eroi', 'i nostri martiri'. L'episodio più recente è avvenuto a Plymouth, UK (2021) a opera di Jake Davidson.

Inserita nel quadro sempre più ampio di **violenza contro le donne**, e chiusa nelle proprie **ossessioni e rivendicazioni misogine**, la sottocultura maschile dell'incel perde lo sguardo d'insieme, non vedendo che sentimenti di ingiustizia e discriminazione individuali fanno parte di più **ampie strutture socio-culturali di diseguaglianze** che (ri)producono **versioni** prefabbricate e stereotipate sia della **mascolinità** sia della **femminilità**.

Al contrario, le iniziative dei movimenti **contro** la '**mascolinità tossica**', tesi ad emancipare gli uomini da stereotipi legati alla mascolinità e alla virilità, colgono tale prospettiva, e analizzano in senso più ampio le **ideologie** che definiscono tali **norme socio-culturali**. I processi di problematizzazione della 'mascolinità tossica' sono quindi anche in grado di portare in primo piano le **strutture di potere invisibil**i o **date-per-scontato** che determinano la **relazione tra i generi**.

Etymology:

The neologislm '**incel**' is the contraction of '**involuntary celibatary**' (or, in an alternative spelling, 'involuntary celibacy') , a term originally coined for the *Involuntary Celibatary Project,* a forum set up in the late 1990s by Alana, a queer woman who has always refused to reveal her surname, to create a **support resource** for individuals who, for different reasons (from **strict gender norms** to **low or maladroit social skills**), were not able to find sexual partners. Her aim was to **create a community** and a self-help group.

Cultural specificity:

In Italy, the **neologism *femminicidio*** (a combination of the terms *femmina* = female and *omicidio* = murder) defines the **acts of violence** against women perpetrated in order to reproduce their subordination and the annihilation of their identity, up to slavery and death. From 2013, a **specific law** increases the general penalty for this kind of criminal offenses. The law was a response to the rapid increase of the episodes of murders against women over the last years. **Statistics** about *femminicidi* are **appalling**: according to ISTAT (*Istituto Nazionale di Statistica*), the National Institute of Statistics, there is an average of 150 women killed every year – one every two days.

Though ***femminicidi*** and **incel ideology** stem from the same root of **misogyny** and **patriarchy**,

femminicidi originate in the **familial context**: the murders against women are perpetrated by (former) boyfriends, partners, husbands, and the trigger is usually the woman's decision of putting an end to the relationship. What is also peculiar about the *femminicidio* is that it is an **interclass phenomenon**, with no difference in the social status or the education of the perpetrators.

Alongside with *femminicidi*, the **incel ideology** is growing in Italy too, being usually linked to neo-Nazi groups that plan attacks against Jews and women.

Problematization:

Back to incel idelogy. Much to Alana's disbelief and regret, what originated as a resource for **lonely people** soon took a **mysoginist** and **violent turn**, creating a large **online community** and **movement** of **angry men** who **despise** and **target women** considering them responsible for all **failures** and **rejections** they have experienced in their life. All **women** are potential targets, since they are **manipulative, serial killers** of unborn babies, **liars**, they exercise **(sexual) power**, they are the **source of all evils**, and contribute to the **decay of society**. **Incel ideology** believes there has been a **shift in power:** women have taken over the world, and men have been pushed to the bottom.

Here are some of the most **violent episodes** connected to the **incel ideology**:

- **2014, California**: self-identifying himself as an incel, Elliott Rodger killed 6 people and wounded 14 as a retaliation for his being refused romantic advances;

- **2018, Toronto**: linked to Incel Rebellion community, Alek Minassian killed 10 people with a van; in several posts on incel websites, both Rodger and Minassian were celebrated as 'our incel heroes', and 'our incel martyrs';

- **2021, Plymouth**, UK: Jake Davidson killed 5 people, including his mother and a three-year-old girl before committing suicide. He did not directly relate himself to the incel (sub)culture - actually, it seems he was lately trying to quit the toxic community. However, in several Reddits and Youtube videos, he expressed misogynistic views and used the **incel jargon**, defining himself as fatally '**blackpilled**' - a man who, by genetics, is condemned to remain virgin and excluded from the social community - notwithstanding his strenuous efforts to improve his appearance ('**looksmaxxing**', in incel vocabulary).

Considerations are still being held on whether **incel attacks** can be legally treated as **terrorist attacks**, even though they have a **self-referential nature**, and **inceldom** is a very diversified movement, with **no fixed doctrine**, **no belief in higher authority**, and **no leader**.

As many **ideological constructs** grounded on false premises, **incel beliefs are hard to eradicate** since they have deep personal, interpersonal, and structural roots. **Violent incels** transform into **perpetrators** since they perceive themselves as **victims** - of women, of society, of genetics, etc. Some have been victims of bullyism and other forms of discriminations and rejections; others find in women the scapegoats for all their fears, losses, and inadequacies. Incels feel that they deserve more, that life owes them something, that they have been deprived of what life has given to others.

Yet, whether such a personal and interpersonal condition is real or imagined, it produces real feelings of suffering. Incels believe themselves to b treated as 'others', and it is such an '**othering**' that triggers their anger, frustration and, to some, justifies violent retaliation: **incel idelogy** is therefore nurtured by the vicious circle of self-victimization and thirst for revenge.

In incel ideology, the divisive pattern **Us-vs-Them** starts from the other end: it is '**Them**' **(i.e., women)** who (are perceived to) perpetrate injustices and discriminations against '**Us**' **(i.e., men)**. Therefore, it is 'Them' who create 'Us'', and not viceversa.

Personal **frustrations**, or **psychological** – when not **psychiatric** – disorders, fuel the **incel ideology**, releasing anger from the keyboard to the real world, often following the toxic pattern that transforms hate speech into hate crime (Müller & Schwarz, 2018).

Yet, too much entangled in its own **misogynistic** obsessions, the **incel ideology** misses a **wider perspective**. Personal feelings – of injustice, discrimination, etc. – do not occur in a void, but they are rather **inserted in** (and are the **by-product** of) socio-cultural structures of **inequality** and **discrimination.**

Concentrating their energies and aggressive attentions against women, violent incels miss the fundamental issue that their supposedly revolutionary actions are very much **consistent and compliant** with the **reproduction of inequalities within societies**.

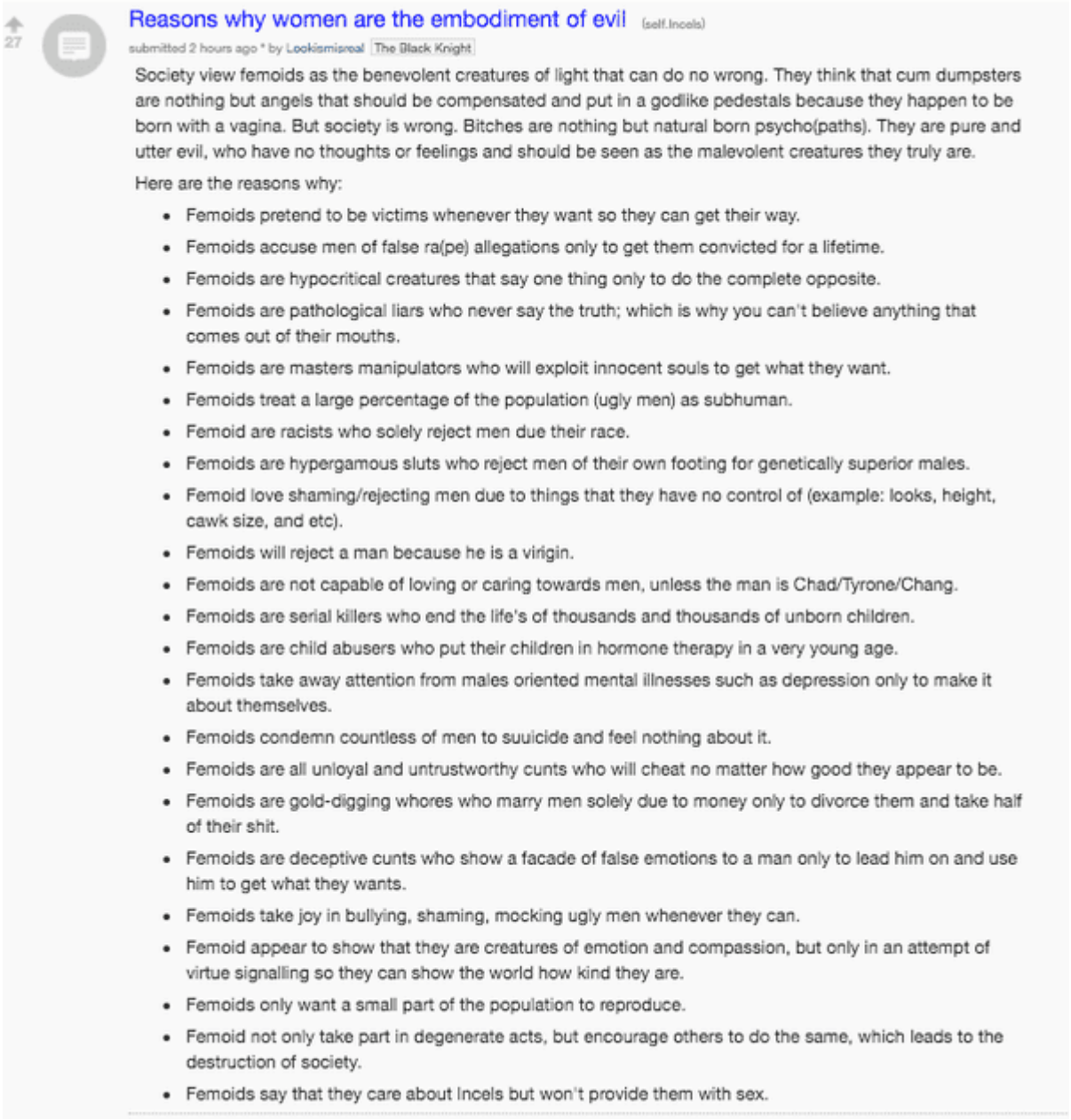
Though they consider themselves 'rebels' – they advocate for a '**Beta Rebellion**' (that is, the rebellion of the non-Alpha men) – the revolt of violent incels perfectly **fits in** with the systems and the structures that **reproduce inequalities**, discriminations and injustices within societies. In a few words, their **rebellion** against injustices is **perfectly functional** to the **perpetration** of injustices.

As often happens, it is a convenient shortcut **to find a scapegoat** (women, in this case) rather than trying to understand which are the **socio-cultural mechanisms and structures** that underpin the frustration and the discrimination of individuals and groups. Instead of using their energies towards these ends, envisioning **critical analysis** and **struggle to counterbalance** the **ideologies** and the **interests** behind the promotion of **prefabricated versions of 'masculinity'** and '**femininity**' (which frame and condition **both** men and women), violent incels content themselves of **attacking individual women** who are often **more powerless** than they are. We therefore have **victims** (real or supposed) **attacking other victims**, while the system of injustices progresses and reproduces itself undisturbed on its own way.

Communication strategies:

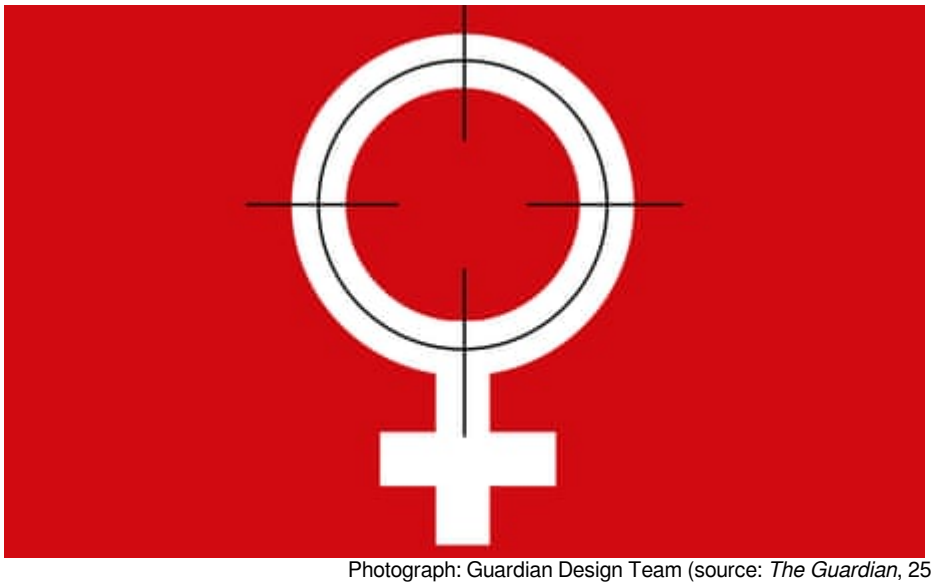
It has to be noted that not all incels are necessarily violent. Actually, many of them are simply sad and lonely men suffering from **isolation and depression**, as reported in an article by *The Washington Post* in 2015.

However, the incel ideology expresses itself more and more in **real-life violent acts,** putting into deeds what it expresses in words on several websites such **Incel.me**, **Incel Rebellion** and the like, where violent comments and opinions against women are expressed as in the example below:



A sample post on Reddit's incel page from November 2017. Photograph: Reddit/Reddit/r/incels (source: *The Guardian*, 19/06/2018)

Below is an image that efficaciously represents the incel movement, where the **feminist emblem** is turned into a **gun's target**:



Photograph: Guardian Design Team (source: *The Guardian*, 25/04/2018)

According to **Laura Bates**, the founder of the *Everyday Sexism Project*, who has been collecting online episodes of everyday sexism reported by women and published a book with the same name, there are **ample connections** between the **incel movement** and **Neo-nazi groups**. To her, young men get radicalized into white supremacy groups starting from anti-feminist forums. She says:

"You can see it in the overlap of the lexicon – the entire dense, complex language they've created for themselves [red pills, blue pills as in The Matrix, black pills to denote suicidal certainty] – is very similar across both groups. A lot of white supremacy is predicated on this obsession with birth rates and replacement theory, the idea that white women need to be forced into sexual servitude and raped, in order to bear white, pure babies. The incel movement is obsessed with sterilising or forcing abortions on black women. And some groups explicitly say – they call it 'adding cherry flavour to children's medicine' – that you target kids of 11-up with anti-feminist memes and jokes, and that's the gateway to white nationalism."

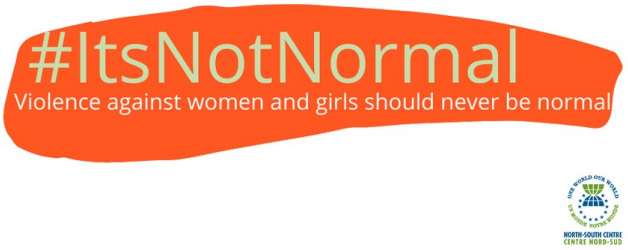
The perfect connivance between **violent incels** and **right-wing movements** is thus grounded in a deep misogynistic and patriarchal vision of society and relations between genders. Though both movements claim to be revolutionary, they actually reproduce and maintain the status quo by **perpetuating systems of hierarchies**, where there is always someone who enjoys a position of privilege at the expenses of someone else.

Bates, who has been targeted by misogynistic abuse in the last years, sustains that the incel movement is an **uncensored violent online community** that perpetrates terroristic attacks on women and celebrates women's killings. However, she notices, while authorities all over the world have watch lists of potential terrorists, violent incels **are not being filed**, and only in one case an **incel massacre** has been treated as a **terrorist attack**.

Subversion:

Incel (sub)culture is part of the wider – and worryingly much widening – landscape of violence against women. To counteract against such a trend, and favour a more equitable relation between genders, **several projects** are carried out.

A notable one is for example that promoted by the **Council of Europe** for women empowerment and against the '**normalisation of violence against women**' (#ItisNotNormal – violence against women and girls should never be normal).
Recognizing that violence against women remains widespread in all member States of the Council of Europe, the Council of Europe promotes **different activities** based on the **four pillars of the Istanbul Convention** of 2011 *Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence*: **prevention**, **protection**, **prosecution**, and **coordinating policies**. If a country has ratified the Convention, it has to take several factual measures for each of the four actions (e.g., awareness raising campaigns, centres against rape and sexual violence, specific legislation and effective police investigation, inter-agency cooperation).



www.coe.in

Besides more general initiatives, there are also **dedicated events** that devote their attention to the **incel phenomenon**, as in particular the **Symposium against radicalized masculinity** organized in May 2021 by the Østfold University College, Norway, as well as centres of study such as the **Centre of the Study of Radicalisation** at King's College, London. UK. In a podcast by *The Guardian*, **Florence Keen** who, at King's studies the incel phenomenon as an example of radicalization, affirms that though there are **many nuances and differences** within the incel movement, the **common thread** that runs throughout this ideology is, as in Davidson's case, "*a deep amount of **grievances against the world*** [overlapping] *with the incel subculture* (…)*, landing the blame on women, and using **dehumanizing language for women** as a whole*". After analysing in detail incel ideology, its **language** and its **consequences** in real life, Keen concludes by saying that though "not all inceldom should be treated as an extremist or even terrorist movement", its **codes**, **means**, **motivations**, and **purposes** must be addresses and understood**.**

At the other end of **incel ideology** stand the discussions and the initiatives **against** '**toxic masculinity**'. Initiatives and studies **problematizing toxic masculinity** consider how men feel pressured and conditioned by **socio-cultural norms** and **ideologies** about **masculinity** and **virility**. To **depotentiate the effects of toxic masculinity**, the media, psychologists, and self-help groups attempt to go to the roots of such norms and problematize them in order **to emancipate males** from stereotyped images, attributions, and expectations - e.g., men cannot show emotions, they cannot express vulnerability, etc. By so doing, the process of problematizing toxic masculinity also foregrounds the **invisible** and taken-for-granted **structures of power** that determine the relationships between genders.

Therefore, though incel ideology and movements against toxic masculinity concentrate their attention on male frustrations and distress, they cannot be more different. **Initiatives against toxic masculinity can depotentiate incel ideology** from its very roots, offering alternative and more nuanced versions of what it means 'to be a man', as well as **widening the perspective** towards a more **comprehensive analysis of power structures** and **socio-cultural ideologies** that frame and condition **all genders**, culturally defining the relations between them.

Besides studies and initiatives that challenge stereotyped of masculinity rather interesting **voices against toxic masculinity** are rising from the music context of punk-rock, and even from what has always been traditionally one of the emblems of the macho culture, that is **hip-hop**.

Solo **singers, bands** and **hip-hop artists** combine a critical and creative approach that **challenges toxic masculinity from within**. Such an approach can be of particular support for young men at risk of radicalization, since it offers a **broader perspective** of how **individual** distress and frustration are determined by the **framework of ideologies** that permeates our societies, also showing ways to **reject stereotyped versions** of both masculinity and femininity.

Here are some noteworthy examples.


(image from:https://rockedintorni.forumfree.i)

IDLES: in their album *Joy as an act of Resistance* (2018) the British punk band satirizes toxic masculinity ("Never Fight a Man with a Perm") and encourages males to release emotions and express vulnerability ("Cry to me"). In "Samaritans", the band displays how toxic masculinity gets inculcated, listing some of the norms and expectations young boys are indoctrinated about': "*Man up, sit down / Chin up, pipe down / Socks up, don't cry / Drink up, don't whine / Grow some balls" (…) "The mask of masculinity / Is a mask, a mask that's wearing me*."

Sam Fender: the young British singer tackles controversial issues of mainstream culture about hypermasculinity ideology that instructs young men to suppress emotions and empathy (track: "Dead Boys"; Youtube video "About racism, toxic masculinity and white privilege").


(image from: https://www.radiofreccia.it/notizie/articoli/sam-fender-ha-vinto-il-brits-critics-choice-award/)


[Photo by: Ian Coulson] image from: https://www.altpress.com/news/as-it-is-second-reimagined-ep/

As It Is: in their third album *The Great Depression* (2018) the Anglo-British pop-punk-emo band invites young teens who, for a variety of reasons, are struggling and suffering, to seek out for help and challenge societal norms and expectations - track: "Stigma (Boys Don't Cry)".

Henry Jamison: in his album *Gloria Duplex* (2019), the North-American singer looks back to childhood not in anger but in tenderness, to explore innocence before it becomes conditioned by the societal norms that define how a boy should turn into ‘a man’, and explores the connection between masculinity and privilege (tracks: "Boys" and "Florence Nightingale").


(image from: https://www.henryjamison.com/)


(image from: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/oct/23/toxic-masculinity-men-privilege-emotions-rizzle-kicks)

Jordan Stephens: British hip-hop musician and actor, who is also famous for having launched the campaign #iamwhole against harmful language and negative stereotypes that surround mental health, has taken several steps against toxic masculinity, as for example in his Youtube video where he encourages young men to challenge socio-cultural stereotypes and expectations on what means 'to be a man'. In a more personal and comprehensive reflection, he describes his sudden breakup and what is wrong in men's relationship with emotions in his article for *The Guardian* entitled "Toxic masculinity is everywhere. It's up to men to fix it".

On a similar note are the words by the Australian writer **Tim Winton** who, in his article in *The Guardian* (09/04/2018) calls out to adult men's responsibility to provide new and more nuanced versions of manhood:

"*Can we wean boys off machismo and misogyny? Will they ever relinquish the race, the game, the fight, and join the dance? I hope so. Because liberation – a process of disarmament, reflection and renewal – isn’t just desirable, it’s desperately necessary. In our homes, in business, and clearly, and most clearly of all, in our politics.* (...) *Boys need help. And, yes, men need fixing – I’m mindful of that. Males arrive in our community on the coattails of an almost endless chain of unexamined privilege. I don’t deny that for a second. But patriarchy is bondage for boys, too. It disfigures them. Even if they’re the last to notice. Even if they profit from it. And their disfigurement diminishes the ultimate prospects of all of us, wherever we are on the gender spectrum. I think we need to admit this.* (...) *And it’s men who need to step up and finally take their full share of that responsibility."*

Discussion:

- Which are, in your culture, stereotyped versions of masculinity and femininity?
- Watch and comment the videos: which is, according to you, the most relevant to challenge stereotyped versions of masculinity?

TWO IMPORTANT LINKS:

- ***Domestic Violence Resource Guide***. It has a **full global list** of **international help centers and organizations for women** all over the world.
  Huge thanks to B.S. for sharing the info!

https://www.mysticmag.com/psychic-reading/domestic-violence-resource-guide/

- ***The Empowering Internet Safe Guide for Women*. Made by women for women,** this guide **empowers women to navigate the internet** without fear. You can find **common occurrences** in which **women are subject to harassment in their daily lives** – on social media, at work, while dating, and more – as well as **tips** and **advice on how women can take control.**
  Huge thanks to S.R. & friends for their work and for sharing this guide!
  https://www.vpnmentor.com/blog/the-empowering-internet-safety-guide-for-women/

  A RELEVANT RESOURCE

  This article provides resources for recognizing and escaping domestic violence, from its earliest subtle signs to actual violent acts. Huge thanks to Maria, a high school student from the US, for sharing this resource!
- Domestic Violence Prevention and Resources

  TV series:

- ***Adolescence*** (2025). Written by **Jack Thorne** & **Stephen Graham**. Directed by **Philip Barantini.** Starring: **Stephen Graham**, **Owen Cooper**, **Erin Doherty**. In four episodes, the series displays **what means to be/come a man** in the digital era - **expectations**, **desires**, **failures**; the **father/son relationship**; how **cyberbullism** shapes **toxic masculinity**. A must see!

References/Further Readings:

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Links:

- COE, Council of Europe, Istanbul Convention: https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/home
- Everyday Sexism Project: https://everydaysexism.com

- Interview to Florence Keen (podcast): https://www.theguardian.com/news/audio/2021/aug/19/plymouth-attack-misogynist-incel-culture-podcast
- ISTAT (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica): https://www.istat.it/it/files/2018/04/Analisi-delle-sentenze-di-Femminicidio-Ministero-di-Giustizia.pdf
- Symposium on Incel: https://www.hiof.no/om/aktuelt/arrangementer/konferanser/international-symposium-on-incels-2021.html
- Women Empowerment - Against the normalisation of violence against women: https://www.coe.int/en/web/north-south-centre/women-empowerment/-/asset_publisher/GHUxd4Rw6XAD/content/cartoons-to-denounce-the-normalisation-of-violence-against-women-?inheritRedirect=false

Videos:

- **IDLES**: "Never Fight a Man with a Perm" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dEe4i2osF5A; "Cry to me" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oeiqpSoiQFI; "Samaritans" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=si2pZRifgIo
- **Sam Fender:** "Dead Boys" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FcO8uV2n3Ys: "About racism, toxic masculinity and white privilege", https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fmc7RgvOHec
- **As It Is:** "The Stigma (Boys Don't Cry)", https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SxV1Jwg9xCk
- **Henry Jamison**: "Boys" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xz4g10Zo1Ns; "Florence Nightingale" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EIkgcX45jKU
- **Jordan Stephens**: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kamDDChUn0A

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