

Best Practices in Gendered Right-Wing Extremism Prevention

The Task Force on Gendered Right-Wing Extremism Prevention

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1 Introduction

Gender roles are an essential part of far-right culture. The images of the "German Man" and the "German Woman" are basic building blocks constructing the reactionary "*deutsche Volksgemeinschaft*". Indeed, right-wing extremism would falter without prescriptive, restrictive biological gender roles. Pedagogical work confronting right-wing extremism must keep this relationship in mind and develop appropriate answers thereto. Anti-extremist, anti-neo-Nazi work must address society as a whole, independent from age, education, class, etc. In fact, right-wing extremism is a problem that cannot be addressed through education and social work alone. Prevention thereof is a fundamental goal of social-pedagogical action in the areas addressed by SGB VIII¹. A *multiperspective strategy*, incorporating figures from politics, industry and civil society, is absolutely indispensable. Our work must support a strong democratic culture inclusive of diverse lifestyles and backgrounds and independent critical thought.

2 Fundamental Requirements

In pedagogical anti-extremism work (specifically, anti-right-wing extremism work) we distinguish between primary, secondary, and tertiary right-wing extremism (RWE) prevention. Primary RWE prevention is the work done in primary schools and other community organizations to educate citizens, especially children, and "immunize" against neo-Nazi recruitment: civics courses, a comprehensive historical curriculum, and education that emphasizes diversity and tolerance. Secondary RWE prevention describes outreach efforts to young people identified as already sympathetic to RWE

or ultranationalist movements. Tertiary RWE prevention concerns work with convicted offenders or those who have already committed hate crimes or acts of terrorism. Before we delve too deeply into gendered RWE prevention, we would like to lay out the following assumptions underlying all successful RWE prevention approaches:

1. Projects and initiatives should take place over the *long term*. Experience of the last two decades, as well as practical research, shows that one-off or short-term efforts have little effect on the beliefs or actions of targeted individuals.
2. Federal or state funds—but also those from other sources—have made possible a wealth of effective pilot projects in the past years. Such projects are a valuable instrument and the funding thereof spurs innovation in anti-RWE praxis. At the same time, projects and models that have proved themselves as effective should not be blindly discarded, losing valuable experience and competence, in favor of the new. There is a bias with government funds towards totally new projects that, in our experience, undermines effective praxis. Long-term project *support*, with modifications and updates to core methods as necessary, is an essential partner to pilot projects.
3. Educators are professionals, and as such should possess all necessary training and qualifications to their profession. Opportunities for further vocational training and education should be offered to ensure that those active in praxis remain up-to-date in their field.
4. Successful youth work must reflect the lessons of social-pedagogical work of the past. This observation is by no means new. At the end of the 1990s, many in the field observed the failure of contemporary youth-work approaches in communities where RWE approached hegemonic cultural dominance (Cf. i.a. Scherr, Radvan 2010, Lehnert/Klose 2006). Such approaches have been thoroughly critiqued in the intervening years, and new, highly-effective, gender-reflective methods have arisen from investigative work in the RWE sphere. (Cf. Vaja e.V. 2007, www.vaja-bremen.de). It is essential that these experiences be applied to current youth work, and that we as a field discuss the modern success criteria of practical anti-RWE youth work.

Unfortunately, cost-cutting taking place in states and communities over the past several years has made it increasingly difficult to conduct programs properly. With funds tight, specialists find themselves responsible for many potentially-widespread groups or projects. Under the constraints imposed by understaffing, it has become very difficult to apply even minimum standards of modern pedagogical youth work.

2.1 Dangers of Mis-targeted Pedagogical Work

In praxis it is necessary to distinguish between so-called “*Mitläufer*”,ⁱⁱ oriented towards the RWE sphere but not yet hardened ideologues, and real, hardened RWE activists. Though methods for rehabilitating the latter exist, primary and secondary pedagogical anti-RWE work are wholly unsuitable. Group work with such committed extremists is especially to be avoided, as group leaders often overestimate their own control of the group and underestimate the ideological influence such extremists can have on other group members. Group leaders must therefore be a) aware of the limits of their methods and b) able to assess the ideologies of potential group participants for their suitability. This requires a sensitivity for an individual’s worldview and the willingness to, if necessary, end group work with such an individual for the protection of other participants.

3 Gendered Right-Wing Extremism Prevention

Gendered, or gender-reflective, work with girls and boys is well-recognized as a successful concept in both pedagogical theory and praxis. We intend to explain what we mean by “gendered right-wing extremism prevention” and what it means in praxis.

3.1 A Question of Attitude

Gendered work, or gender-reflective work (we use them interchangeably in this text) is based on the critical observation of attitudes inherited from societal gender roles and assumptions—how we understand ourselves as “real” men and “true” women. In this respect it stands opposed to widespread assumptions and prejudices about gender, many masquerading as “common sense” or going unquestioned by broader society. We hold gendered work to be an essential part of a democratic approach to RWE prevention. Specialists perceive and understand individuals in their specific gendered socialization and thereby better understand the expectations and demands that person faces in their everyday milieu. This approach is difficult to develop, and it is for this reason that pedagogical RWE prevention requires well-qualified and educated professionals. In an age of neoliberal austerity policies, it can be difficult to summon the financial resources necessary for such an approach, but we call on political actors to keep in mind the immense advantages that such long-term initiatives bring.

3.2 Progressive Gender Roles as Preventative Praxis

A gender-reflective attitude in pedagogical praxis involves recognizing and elevating many different conceptions of gender—not just gender identities but also conceptions and performances of gender. The objective of the specialist in gendered work is to question restrictive gender roles and to attempt to unburden those with whom they work of normative femininity/masculinity. In fact, such progressive gender roles are in and of themselves anti-RWE praxis. They stand diametrically opposed to the restrictive and toxic gender roles of the far-right “*Volksgemeinschaft*” ideal. Ideologies of inequality, not last among them misogyny and sexism, shape far-right and neo-Nazi attitudes and philosophies.

Pedagogical praxis should therefore stand for the recognition of human equality. This can mean questioning gender-role-specific programs like boxing for boys or cooking courses for girls, and examining the prescriptive gender roles that such programs inculcate. It can also mean assembling project teams that themselves demonstrate diverse lifestyles and gender roles. The aforementioned directive to “elevate many different conceptions of gender” also means protecting and championing victims of right-wing and xenophobic persecution.

3.3 Theoretical Basis for Effective Praxis

One of the most important steps in gendered pedagogical praxis is questioning “natural” gender assumptions—those derived from biological arguments, reactionary cultural norms or alleged “common sense.” For this reason, project organizers must be knowledgeable of gender theory, feminist theory and critical theory of masculinity. For teams not confident in their knowledge, one possible first step is a collective conversation about gender and personal experiences with gendered socialization.

It bears mentioning that project organizers should be knowledgeable about right-wing ideology and culture; they should be well-versed in the specific gender roles and construction of far-right “*Volksgemeinschaften*”.

3.4 Gendered Motives for Extremist Involvement

Educators should always seek to turn young people susceptible to RWE in the direction of democratic, tolerant principles. It is important to examine what RWE offers for such people, and a gendered perspective is in this respect extremely useful. There are many gendered motives for involvement in the far-right or RWE scene, from the martial, hypermasculine appeal of neo-Nazi cadres to the nativist superiority complex of the “German maiden” towards PoC and migrants. Educators have the best chance

of designing a successful intervention strategy when they understand these gendered motives.

3.5 Women and Girls—a “Double Invisibility”

A fundamental understanding of the roles of women and girls is especially important to work against their “double invisibility” in right-wing extremism. Girls and young women are still overlooked and underestimated in their importance to the far-right and neo-Nazi scene. To this end, it is necessary to combine partisan young-woman advocacy and RWE-prevention work. Inter- or trans-cultural methods or experiences are also important to include. Most important is the following: that young women be perceived and understood as they are, recognizing racist or ultranationalist beliefs and actions. Fundamentally, educators should question normative expectations of femininity standing in the way of diverse and liberated gender roles.

3.6 Combating Toxic Masculinity

Pedagogical measures and strategies based on traditional masculinity are in danger of actually *strengthening* RWE inclinations. It is essential to recognize and deconstruct the connections between traditional, that is to say toxic, conceptions of masculinity and violent ideologies. In practice, this might mean critiquing competitive games as an educational method: what roles do dominance and exclusion play, and how are they connected to violence? Young men performing alternative masculinities must be strengthened and protected from the challenges of their peers—so long as this protection is empowering and not disempowering.

4 Conclusion

The basis of all our work is an orientation towards gender equality and human rights. Educators and activists must conceive of themselves as important political actors: we must stand unambiguously for democratic values in daily life, making them comprehensible for all. It is therefore indispensable that we stand against discrimination and hate speech, and that should we encounter them, that we use them as a learning opportunity for those with whom we work. Critical self-reflection is also crucial: confrontation with inequality begins when we examine our own speech, actions, and practices. Right-wing extremism is irrevocably entwined with toxic gender relations: a strike against the latter, through well-designed gender-reflective praxis, is an important step in the fight against the former.

Notes

ⁱ*Achtes Buch Sozialgesetzbuch*, or SGB VIII, is a law passed in 1991 regulating childcare and social work with minors in general, including regulation of youth work, early-years education (*Kitas* and kindergartens), child-raising, custody, and data privacy in relation to minors.

ⁱⁱBest translated as “fellow traveler”, although in English this usually refers to those with Communist beliefs.