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Broadening the definition of terrorism, through the lens of misogyny

Misogyny is an ideology that is inspiring violence, whether we call it terrorism or not, write Sajjan M. Gohel and Hannah Hains.

In July 2024, Axel Rudakubana attacked a Taylor Swift-themed dance class in Southport, killing three young girls and injuring many more. Under the United Kingdom's current definition, the Southport attack is not considered terrorism. However, the extreme nature of the violence involved prompted a debate over the possible need to expand the definition. This debate prompted [a review by Jonathan Hall KC](#), the United Kingdom's Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation, which argued against such an expansion for cases of extreme violence.

The current definition of terrorism in the UK is set out in the [Terrorism Act 2000](#). It includes the proviso that to be considered terrorism, the use or threat of violence must have the goal 'of advancing a political, religious racial or ideological cause'. Additionally, it must involve an intent to 'influence the government' or 'intimidate the public'. This motive clause is crucial; non-terrorist crimes, such as hate crimes, can be motivated by race, religion, ideology or politics but are not necessarily intended to influence the government or to frighten a particular group of people.

The core of Hall's argument against defining the Southport attack as terrorism is his claim that Rudakubana was not attempting to advance a political, religious, racial or ideological cause – the first constituent part of the UK's definition of terrorism. However this ignores the fact that Rudakubana's worldview was infused with misogyny, reflecting a broader reluctance or failure to treat misogyny as an ideological cause of terrorism.

Not all acts of violent misogyny are terrorism. But it is entirely possible to view misogyny as an ideology that may inspire terrorism without amending the definition of terrorism. Unfortunately, we currently lack a conceptual framework with which to make this distinction, as the legal system has continually failed to recognise misogyny as a connecting thread that ties together seemingly incoherent elements into a functional ideology. This was evident in Rudakubana's case. His

fascination with extreme violence was much discussed in the media and during his trial. Far less discussed was the fact that his violent obsessions revolved in large part around the mistreatment of women. Rudakubana researched the mistreatment of women in conflicts around the world and the use of rape as a weapon of war, and collected photographs of sexual violence. He also consumed material from al-Qaeda, a profoundly misogynistic group. He was hostile to issues of feminism and displayed unsettling behaviour towards girls in his class.

In the Southport case, a crucial oversight was failing to adequately recognise the overall picture of Rudakubana's radicalisation. From at least October 2019 onwards, when [Rudakubana told Childline](#) he had taken a knife to school at least ten times and was considering murdering a schoolmate, his behaviour showed serious warning signs of violence, particularly when coupled with the clear evidence of misogynistic patterns outlined above. Had this dangerous combination been taken seriously by any one of the many entities which had contact with Rudakubana before his crime, a more accurate assessment of the severe threat he posed may have resulted in more successful preventative measures.

To a certain extent, violence against women and girls is inherently ideological because it is underpinned by the ideology of misogyny. There is a need, therefore, to distinguish between situations where misogyny provides an ideological background for violence and those where misogyny is a crucial constituent part of the perpetrator's motivations.

In essence, this can be construed as the difference between hatred towards *a woman* and hatred towards *women*. When acts of extreme violence are committed against strangers, as was the case in the Southport attack, personal animus toward the victims is not a feasible motivation. Accordingly, it is unfortunate that Hall's review fails to mention Rudakubana's choice to target young girls, as this fulfils the second plank of the UK definition of terrorism – intimidation of a particular section of the public. By targeting a Taylor Swift-themed dance class, Rudakubana sought to destroy a specifically female safe space, destroying a community created for young girls.

In his report, Jonathan Hall proposes the introduction of a new category for cases like that of Southport: non-terrorist lone-actor mass killings. He references other cases that he claims also show the phenomenon of non-ideological extreme violence. But six out of the ten cases cited show a relatively clear ideological pattern: misogyny. The first case, that of [Emad Al Swealmeen](#), involved the attempted detonation of a bomb at Liverpool Women's Hospital – like the Southport attack, an attempt to annihilate a women's-only space. Three cases involved [incel ideology](#): [Jake Davidson](#), [Ben Moynihan](#) and [Anwar Driouich](#). One involved serious previous violence against women: the Northallerton teenagers. Three involved attacks or attempted attacks on women: [Danyal Hussein](#), [Emad Al Swealmeen](#), and [Ben Moynihan](#). This demonstrates that, with a more robust conceptual framing that encompasses ideological misogyny, the number of cases fulfilling the criteria of non-ideological extreme violence would fall significantly.

Another facet of Hall's argument against classing attacks like Southport as terrorism is the fact that defining an act as terrorism can lead to fearmongering, public suspicion and the spread of harmful, dangerous rumours. However, hesitating to classify a violent and shocking crime can intensify fear to a fever pitch, encouraging the spread of dangerous disinformation and giving rise to violent consequences – precisely what eventuated in the Rudakubana case, as the spread of misinformation regarding his identity and motives provoked violent racist riots across England. This could have been mitigated by a clearer and more robust response by the authorities in releasing appropriate information and clearly delineating the nature of the crime. Furthermore, raising public awareness through accurate messaging, particularly in cases of misogynistic terrorism, is a crucial aspect of prevention; if we do not recognise ideologies like misogyny as explicitly extremist in nature, how can we hope to combat them?

Ultimately, the crucial question is not whether the current definition of terrorism is wide enough, but whether misogyny should be recognised as an ideology which can inspire terrorist violence. To address terrorism, which is becoming ever more interwoven with extremist, violent misogyny, it is necessary to first recognise this phenomenon for what it is.

Photo credit: Pexels

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