



When Minors Become Targets of Violent Extremist Groups

Noor Huda Ismail



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By Noor Huda Ismail

SYNOPSIS

The increasing susceptibility of minors to recruitment by violent extremist groups via online platforms poses a clear and present danger. Cases in Singapore and Indonesia illustrate how radicalisation exploits factors such as identity crises, wounded masculinity, and digital isolation. Emphasis on rehabilitation as opposed to punishment is critical, necessitating the involvement of families, schools, and communities to safeguard children through fostering trust and empathy.

COMMENTARY

As a father of two teenage boys, aged 16 and 14, I cannot read the news of radicalised minors without feeling alarmed and deeply concerned. The recent case in Singapore, involving a 14-year-old student, is particularly striking.

Security officials reported that the boy was influenced by a “salad bar” of extremist beliefs, including ISIS propaganda, incel subculture and those on the far-right and far-left. He is not much older than my youngest child, who, like millions of teenagers, spends hours on gaming, social media, and online communities that quietly shape their identity, sense of belonging, and moral compass.

For the unfamiliar, incel stands for “involuntary celibate”. These are mostly young men, expressing deep resentment toward women and society for their sexual frustrations. From a gender perspective, incel ideology feeds on what scholars call wounded masculinity.

Many boys today struggle with identity in a world where traditional markers of male success – financial stability, social recognition, romantic relationships – are increasingly uncertain. Online platforms amplify these feelings, creating spaces

where humiliation and anger are validated, sometimes evolving into misogyny or even violence.

Lessons from Singapore and Indonesia

The Singapore case illustrates how radicalisation these days can be complex and hybrid. Extremist content no longer fits neatly into a single category. Instead, it blends political resentment, religious narratives, and gender-based grievances into a mix that can appeal to teenage digital-natives.

These hybrid messages exploit vulnerabilities in identity formation, offering recognition, belonging, and purpose – things many adolescents aspire to.

Indonesia faces a similar challenge. In Pemalang, Central Java, a 14-year-old boy became involved in online extremist networks connected to a suspect arrested in Tolitoli, Central Sulawesi.

What started as casual exposure on Facebook escalated to active participation in closed WhatsApp groups, where he even became an admin sharing ISIS propaganda. He is one of 14 minors identified in 2024 as having been drawn into extremist activities. Two are being prosecuted for serious involvement, including attempts at bomb-making, while the others are receiving support through family, school, and community-based interventions.

Children: Victims, Not Just Security Threats

From my perspective as both a father and a scholar who has studied radicalisation in Southeast Asia for over two decades, two dynamics stand out.

First is the digital vulnerability of minors. Online spaces are no longer for entertainment only; they are formative environments where adolescents negotiate their identity, values, and social standing.

UNICEF and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) emphasise that child protection must extend to all environments, including the online world. Extremists exploit these spaces, offering recognition, belonging, and purpose, tailored to teenagers' developmental needs and anxieties.

Second is the societal response. Too often, minors involved in extremist networks are seen primarily as security threats, and only secondarily as children in need of care. Criminalisation should be a last resort.

The CRC and UNICEF's child protection guidance stress that children caught in these networks are victims of exploitation and require rehabilitation, not punishment. This includes counselling, digital literacy training, family engagement, and social reintegration, which help children regain perspective and prevent further harm.

Building Trust Through Everyday Engagement

The psychological dimension is also critical. Adolescents are highly susceptible to narratives that simplify complex realities and offer immediate solutions. Whether through jihadist ideology, incel forums, or political extremism, radicalisation provides a clear, if dangerous, pathway to identity and agency.

This brings me to the personal side of the story. My own sons are digital natives. Their friendships, role models, and moral compass are increasingly mediated through screens. My greatest fear is not that they will encounter extremist content – it is that they might feel more understood by strangers online than by me.

If a child senses that outsiders offer more recognition, guidance, or validation than parents or teachers, that gap is easily filled by ideologies that exploit anger, fear, or insecurity.

That is why investing in personal bonding is no longer optional – it is essential. Protecting children in the digital age does not mean monitoring them constantly or forbidding online activity. It means entering their worlds with curiosity rather than judgment.

Ask about the games they play, the YouTubers they follow, or the TikTok trends they enjoy. Listen to what excites, worries, or frustrates them. Meaningful conversations and shared activities build trust, empathy, and resilience.

My research and interviews with former extremists show that a lack of recognition and belonging in early adolescence is a key factor that recruiters exploit.

Community and Institutional Collaboration

From a policy perspective, the solution extends beyond families. Online radicalisation cannot be countered solely through content moderation or law enforcement. It requires a multi-layered strategy combining family engagement, educational programmes, psychosocial support, and community-based prevention.

Schools, religious institutions, and parents all play a role in providing children with alternative narratives, emotional support, and safe spaces to explore ideas. Early identification of risk factors, coupled with supportive interventions, can reduce the allure of extremist ideologies – including those that exploit wounded masculinity.

Psychologically, adolescents need guidance to navigate identity, belonging, and gender in a world dominated by online influences. Boys, in particular, should be encouraged to develop emotional literacy, empathy, and a healthy understanding of masculinity.

Social and emotional skills, nurtured within family and school environments, can make young people less susceptible to manipulative narratives that prey on anger, humiliation, or isolation.

The cases in Singapore and Indonesia also highlight the importance of community and institutional collaboration. While parental engagement is the first line of defence, schools, social workers, and specialised agencies like Singapore's Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) provide the professional expertise necessary to handle complex cases. Families are not expected to navigate this alone, and early reporting – although emotionally difficult – can prevent long-term harm.

Ultimately, protection in the digital age is not about building walls around children; it is about building bridges. It is about listening, understanding, and guiding them before they seek belonging in sinister communities.

The fight against online radicalisation begins at home but is reinforced when families, communities, and institutions work together.

Shared Responsibility and Hope

As a father, scholar, and observer of radicalisation in Southeast Asia, my message is clear: overcoming the vulnerability of minors online is a shared responsibility. We must invest in meaningful relationships, encourage emotional literacy, and seek professional help when needed.

Singapore's approach – with its emphasis on rehabilitation, early reporting, and child protection – demonstrates that even in complex cases, there is hope.

Children, no matter how misguided, still have enormous potential. Our task is to ensure that they realise it safely, and that no child slips through the cracks of a digital world full of influences beyond our immediate control.

Safeguarding a child's imagination, attention, and future begins not with fear or punishment, but with presence, care, and structured guidance – from home, school, and society alike.

Noor Huda Ismail is a Visiting Fellow at RSIS and a strategic communication consultant for Southeast Asia with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). He also runs the award-winning interactive community website, www.ruangobrol.id. This commentary was originally published in The Jakarta Post on 13 September 2025. It is republished with permission.

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