How Women Advance the Internationalization of the Far-Right

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Traditional Gender Roles in Extreme-Right Movements

In 2016, an image of a young Scottish woman wearing the runic insignia of the Schutzstaffel while performing Hitler salute made global headlines as National Action, a British far-right terrorist organization, crowned her "Miss Hitler" in the organization's beauty pageant. According to National Action, the purpose of the event was to raise awareness of their female supporters, who "rarely get much spotlight or recognition."[1] In statements promoting the event, the group said, "We hope this will grant a unique insight into our movement that will challenge the widely held preconceptions society has about the far-right."[2]

Women are traditionally underrepresented in neo-Nazi movements. When thousands of white supremacists took to the streets in the 2016 "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, few female faces were visible among the protestors. However, while many militant movements remain predominantly male, the far-right landscape is currently in the process of flux. Women are becoming increasingly important as broadcasters, dramatically amplifying messages across the spectrum of worldviews that comprise the international far-right, ranging from European cultural supremacists and anti-Muslim activists, to the United States alt-right, to more traditional neo-Nazi and Skinhead groups.

As the specter of internationalized right-wing extremists continues to grow, the success of women in the virtual sphere becomes particularly problematic, with these broadcasters often serving as a soft introduction to hard edge ideology, facilitating the 'redpilling' of individuals who are vulnerable to radicalization.

The past two decades have seen a sharp increase in the number of female supporters of far-right movements and the creation of many female-centered groups.[3] In 1999, the Southern Poverty Law Center concluded that the Internet gave rise to a number of newly emerging female-led white supremacist websites, as sympathizing women were carving out their own niches in the digital space.[4] The age of social media, viral selfies, and online guerilla marketing has further accelerated this dynamic and made women a key asset in the branding and outreach strategies of extremist movements.

The rapid growth in the number of female far-right supporters demonstrates that women are not immune to racist mindsets and more broadly extremist ideologies, which hold contempt for human nature.[5] A recent study conducted by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung even concluded that women are more susceptible to xenophobic, racist and anti-Muslim attitudes than men and equally prone to ingroup-outgroup thinking.[6] Likewise, a survey conducted in 2016 showed that women had a significantly higher tendency to privilege the rights of native Europeans than men and were slightly more inclined to sympathize with "new right attitudes."[7]

Today, women are seen on the frontlines of protest marches and act as the public faces of extreme-right social media campaigns. University of Pittsburgh scholar Kathleen Blee, who conducted ethnographic studies and traced the evolution of female participation in the Ku Klux Klan, concluded that women have increasingly become the target of white supremacist recruitment campaigns.[8] The widespread presence of women in far-right movements has played a significant role in the mainstreaming and normalization of white nationalist, anti-migration and anti-Muslim views. Female social media influencers have helped to generate millions of views and media attention for far-right causes, and these figureheads are becoming more and more important in the internationalization of the far-right, using their influence to market extreme right-wing ideology to audiences across the Western world. Despite the increasingly prominent role of women, gender remains a heavily contested issue in the far-right space; for instance, female figureheads often have to negotiate their identity within a hyper-masculine ecosystem.

Hyper-Masculinity, Male and Female Anti-Feminism and Alt-Right Counter-Culture

The Gamergate Controversy is the name given to a prolonged organized harassment campaign in August 2014, which was waged by a loose connection of trolls organizing across online platforms such as Reddit and 4chan and targeted women in the video-game industry.[9] The event was initially sparked by a blog-post written by Eron Gjoni attacking his former girlfriend, independent game maker Zoe Quinn, and is seen by many to be a crucial junction in the formulation of the alt-right, helping to launch the careers of figureheads such as Milo Yiannopoulus, whilst providing political realization to communities of online trolls.[10] As a result of this, a counter-cultural backlash against feminism was cemented as an ideological cornerstone of the alt-right. It also meant that the pushback against progressivism became a valuable recruiting tool for young white men who feel alienated by mainstream liberal culture both online and on campuses. This left vs. right divide mirrors the cumulative radicalization process which has been observed between Islamist and far-right groups.[11]

Against this backdrop, masculinity– a long established trait among extremist groups – has grown as a core component in the way emergent far-right communities broker their identity against mainstream culture. By fetishizing physical strength and traditional family values, the contemporary far-right embraces conventional notions of masculinity and uses narratives around the reclamation of masculinity as an important recruitment tool.[12] In contrast to this perspective, weak masculinity is identified as a defining trait of progressive culture, with tropes of cuckoldry and effeminacy being used to ridicule left-wing men. One interesting, yet bizarre, example of this is the so-called 'soy boy' meme, which associates progressive men with the consumption of soy products, and the consumption of soy products with raised levels of estrogen.[13]

Within this context, a new wave of women are situating themselves within the movement, leading to the growth of communities such as the 'Tradwives,' who see the rejection of feminism as a key component in 'redpilling' (the alt-right's term for radicalization), a trend which mirrors the empowerment that western women joining the Islamic State felt through embracing traditional gender roles.[14] In particular, women identify the apparent un-yielding orthodoxy and hostile atmosphere against conservatives from contemporary feminist culture as being driving factors for their radicalization.[15] As prominent far-right influencer Lauren Southern summarizes, "I believe anyone who supports feminism is anti-woman even if they are not conscious of it."[16]

By embracing this anti-feminist stance, individual women have found an effective mechanism to advertise their radicalism. Doing so in an overt way appears to guide the trajectory of several figureheads. Lauren Southern provides a notable example of this trend, starting her activist career by publically campaigning against feminism, promoting a campaign called #TheTriggering, which was designed to provoke feminist activists.[17] Controversy has been crucial in driving digital celebrity,[18] and by embracing such a contentious topic, Southern's fame rocketed, providing her with a platform from which to broaden international support for far-right ideology.

One of the key drivers behind the contemporary trend for internationalization, which can be observed in the far-right, is the creation of an active counter-culture which pushes back against the mainstream liberalism which, until recently, has united the Western world. By identifying common enemies in the form of institutions like the mass media, and out-groups including both Muslims, non-whites, and feminists, European and North American far right communities construct a shared world-view, which proves effective in attracting large-scale global support.[19] The crucial power of this counter-culture lies in the assertion of its radical difference from the status quo. Here it is suggested that the rejection of feminism, something which is cast as sacred to many is, through its overt and innate controversy, one of the most effective ways of establishing the international far-right as an alternative to the contemporary order.

Generation Identity's Influencers and the Hijacking of #MeToo

As part of the far-right's effort to mainstream this new counter-culture, the past few years have seen white nationalist recruiters and propagandists in Europe and the U.S. step up their efforts to reach out to female audiences. Women have become powerful amplifiers of their rhetoric and can be seen as part of a larger attempt by far-right movements to rebrand themselves as modern versions of patriotic, Identitarian rebellion that have little in common with traditional neo-Nazi movements.

The pan-European white nationalist movement Generation Identity was originally founded in the South of France and often described as the European alt-right equivalent. Generation Identity

proactively tries to recruit young white women into their networks by playing on widespread fears of rape and sexual harassment committed by migrant communities, and by framing themselves as the only defenders of women's rights. At the same time, Generation Identity's Handbook for Media Guerilla Warfare recommends targeting "young women, who come straight from university" in online intimidation campaigns. The Handbook elaborates, noting, "These are classic victims and not used to being confronted. You can usually easily take the piss out of them."[20]
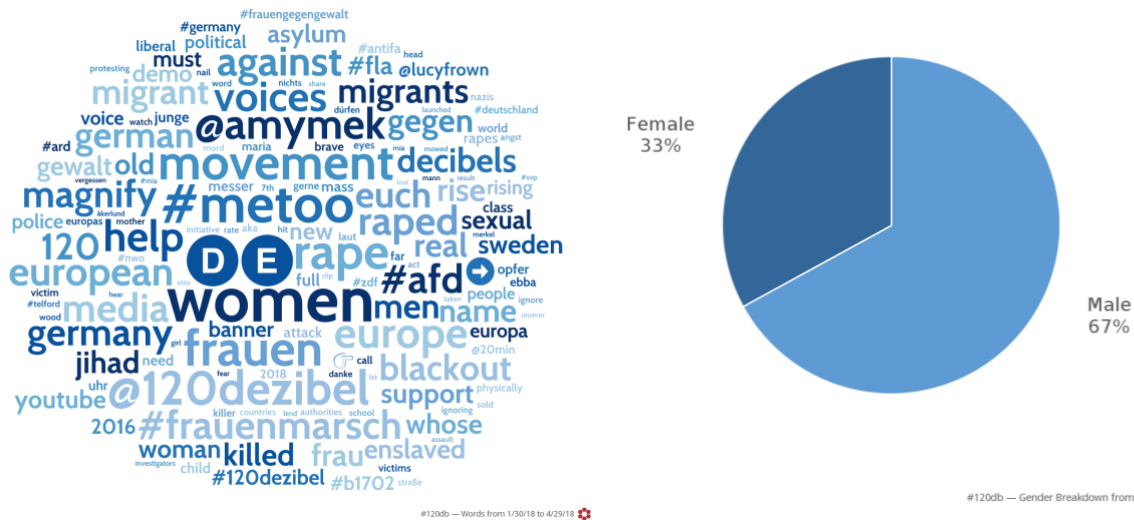
In the summer of 2017, Generation Identity started its controversial #DefendEurope campaign, attempting to prevent NGOs from rescuing drowning migrants in the Mediterranean. An original analysis of the #DefendEurope hashtag showed that female influencers were decisive for the campaign's global reach. Between May and September 2017, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue's social media monitors identified roughly 300,000 supportive tweets, coming from all across Europe and North America. Prominent American YouTuber Brittany Pettibone, Canadian activist Lauren Southern, and British commentator Katie Hopkins were all key in the dissemination of campaign contents to audiences in their respective home countries.[21]

Brittany Pettibone, who is now engaged to the European figurehead of Generation Identity, Martin Sellner, plays a vital role in bridging the gap between Europe and North America. Since founding the podcast "Virtue of the West" with the white supremacist vlogger Tara McCarthy, Pettibone has become a prominent figure among the U.S. alt-right. On Twitter, Pettibone describes herself as 'Barbie Fiancé,' and draws over 135,000 followers. Pettibone's YouTube channel features videos of her talking to her twin sister about topics such as 'Why is Dating Becoming So Difficult,'[22] 'Women Are Losing Their Femininity' and 'Women Want Love, Men Want Respect?' attract more than 100,000 subscribers. Videos like these make traditional gender constructs that are popular among the far right more accessible to a general audience. White and male supremacist organizations may take advantage of this effect, and strategically use women to soften their image and make regressive values appear normal and even attractive.

Other prominent women that Generation Identity uses as influencers for the movement's campaigns include Berit Franziska and Franziska M. They both featured as the main public faces of Generation Identity's initiative #120dB, which stood under the motto "women defend yourselves" and was labeled as the far-right's #metoo equivalent.

The following analysis of the campaign was created using the social listening tool Crimson Hexagon to examine all Tweets which used the hashtag #120db between February and April 2018. Nearly 300,000 tweets with the hashtag #120db were identified in that period. The graphic below visualizes the words that were most commonly used in conjunction with #120db. It illustrates that the campaign hijacked the #metoo hashtag as well as spreading anti-Islam messages and campaign against migrant rape crimes. The #120db hashtag was also paired with hashtags used in the context of campaigns for the empowerment of women such as #frauengegengewalt (#womenagainstviolence). It is notable that despite this focus on women's rights, about 67 percent of the tweets using the hashtag #120db originated from male accounts.[23]

#120db — Words from 1/30/18 to 4/29/18

#120db — Gender Breakdown from 1/30/18 to 4/29/18

#120dB originally started as an unbranded, seemingly independent campaign, but was soon exposed as a communications operation initiated by Generation Identity. The group framed the campaign as a female-led initiative against acts of sexual violence targeting women, but only highlighted rape crimes committed by migrants and refugees. It instrumentalized white female victimhood to fuel anti-Muslim and xenophobic sentiments and positioned itself as a counter-movement to #metoo. Even though Generation Identity had long been among the loudest anti-feminist voices in Europe, the movement has managed to co-opt the topic of women's rights for the sake of denouncing foreign cultures in Europe.

Far-right activists have increasingly been able to capitalize on victimhood narratives that put white women at the center of their propaganda about the threats experienced in multicultural societies, whilst at the same time advocating fundamentally backward gender perceptions and a return to traditional power relations between men and women. For example, the prominent British far-right activist and founder of the English Defense League, Tommy Robinson, used migrant rape crimes and oppression of women in Islam to paint all Muslims as potential rapists and a threat to white, non-Muslim women. Yet, extremist groups tend to converge rhetorically in their calls for protecting in-group women from aggression by out-group men in order to fuel anger and hatred against the perceived enemy. Their traditionalist perceptions of gender roles and claims of ownership over women are, however, reflected in their language. For example, many counter-jihad

accounts warn that Islam destroys "our women, our country, our sense of right and wrong and our lives,"[24] claim that the "U.K. police let Muslim gangs rape our girls" or argue that they won't let migrants "treat our women as easy meat."[25]

Conclusive Discussion and Policy Considerations

As this piece demonstrates, a range of factors drive female involvement in contemporary far-right movements. These include a fragility of feminine identity, reaction against the abuse of women, and a backlash against contemporary progressive ideology and feminism. Although these issues remain understudied, policymakers and practitioners can use this information to further develop measures to prevent and counter extremism with strategic communications and counter-radicalization intervention programming.

Greater attention could be paid to perceived hostility in contemporary feminist circles and the potential this has for polarization. It is clear that the anti-feminist ideology of the contemporary far-right has its roots in deeply ingrained misogyny and a culture of hegemonic masculinity. However, in an oxymoronic trend, this anti-feminist ideology is proving effective in the recruitment of women to far-right causes. A number of women identifying with far-right groups highlight conflict with feminists and hostility towards conservatives as being driving causes for their radicalization. Accordingly, it is suggested that further attention is paid to the apparent lack of civil discourse in spaces for women.

Counter-strategy should focus on the apparent hypocrisy of contemporary far-right ideology. This paper demonstrates the inherently misogynistic context within which contemporary far-right gender politics has evolved. Even if women find empowerment through the rejection of progressive conceptions of feminism this empowerment is nevertheless at odds with the overt and rampant misogyny which is held by the contemporary far-right. Furthermore, even if a small number of women rise to prominence within the movement and gain respect for their actions, most women operating within far-right circles are simultaneously marginalized and denigrated by the groups that claim to protect them. By publicly highlighting this fact in messaging, strategic communicators can possibly weaken the narrative of anti-feminist far-right activists.

Women are increasingly essential to the global far-right, especially as effective figureheads who use controversy to broadcast extreme-right wing ideology to potential recruits. As this paper shows, the pathways of women into these movements are multifaceted and triggered by a range of grievances. Intervention programs that focus on deradicalization from extremist ideology and disengagement from extremist groups are a crucial tool in the push-back against extremism. Ultimately, the most effective interventions rely on an in-depth understanding of the motivations behind radicalization and recruitment. Consequently, relevant stakeholders should do more to research the trends outlined above and use the gathered information to develop interventions designed to engage women in the far-right.

The growing pool of female recruits is a tremendous asset to far-right groups that seek to bolster their image and movement. As these groups continue to expand this will remain a pressing issue, with women serving in valuable roles within movements, both at an ideological and a practical level. Organizations within the far-right regularly frame white women as the victims of aggression to rationalize radical action and justify women's need for protection. Although these organizations marginalize and subordinate most of their female members, some women social media influencers and activists undoubtedly help generate massive amounts of media attention and enhance the

appeal of the far-right. By acting as an accessible and enticing part of fringe groups, these women help normalize misogynistic gender dynamics, as well as xenophobic and racist ideologies.

In recent years, the migration crisis has sparked new anxieties and grievances that extremist movements have skillfully leveraged to recruit women into their circles. By fueling women's fears of sexual crimes committed by migrants and denouncing the authorities as being inactive or even complicit, the organizations frame themselves as the sole protectors of women's rights. Additionally, traditionally male-oriented agendas of the far-right have been repackaged as reconcilable with female interests, now making an appealing offer to women searching for clear gender roles in an increasingly fast-paced culture. By playing on female identity crisis in an age of what Brittany Pettibone refers to as "hook up culture" or the "Tinder age," deeply misogynistic movements sell a return to traditional power structures as a step towards empowerment. Furthermore, the rejection of a feminist status quo has proven essential in the establishment of far-right ideology as a radical alternative to mainstream ideology, proving an effective recruitment mechanism for both men and women.

The contemporary growth of far-right ideology is an issue of pressing concern. However, without a clear understanding of the role gender dynamics have played in the creation and dissemination of extremist ideology; the mobilization of activists; and the ideological rejection of the liberal status quo, it will be difficult to effectively counter this threat. Most importantly, there is a need for greater knowledge around the role women are playing - actively or passively - in the ongoing culture wars which the far-right are propagating, and to turn this knowledge into effective counter-measures.

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