

Women of the Alt-Right: An Intersectional Study of Far-Right Extremism, Gender, & Identity in the United States

By Sarah Kenny

On August 12, 2017, neo-Nazis and white supremacists shocked the United States and the world alike with a deadly display of domestic terrorism. Tiki-torches, firearms, and fists overwhelmed the University of Virginia's campus and the streets of downtown Charlottesville, Virginia, leaving an activist and two state police officers dead and dozens injured.

Since August 2017, the list of far-right extremist atrocities in the United States and elsewhere has only grown. On October 24, 2018, two black shoppers were shot at a grocery store in Jeffersonton, Kentucky. Three days later, a man opened fire on a service at the Tree of Life synagogue in Squirrel Hill, Pennsylvania, the deadliest anti-Semitic attack in US history.¹ The following week, a man who identified as an 'incel' (involuntarily celibate) opened fire in a Tallahassee yoga studio.² On March 15, 2019, an Australian man carried out a shooting rampage at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. August 3rd marks the murder of 22 shoppers at an El Paso, Texas Walmart; the perpetrator of this mass shooting has admitted to targeting Mexicans in a white nationalist manifesto he released in advance of the attack.³

Depictions of the alt-right, like the grisly images from Charlottesville, feature few to no women actors. This lack of representation of women in the alt-right insinuates that women play an insignificant role in this movement, if any at all. But women do in fact make significant contributions to the alt-right movement. Moreover, the systematic mischaracterization of the alt-right movement as a genderless movement weakens governmental, civil society, and community level approaches to preventing and countering far-right extremism.

Research on far-right violent extremism is limited and on the role that women play even more so. This paper's arguments and recommendations are informed by primary source interviews I conducted with two former neo-Nazi women: Angela King and Shannon Martinez. King was involved in right-wing extremist activity into her mid-20s, when she was sent to federal prison for a hate crime. After her release from prison, King pursued higher education and co-founded Life After Hate, a peace activism organization that supports deradicalization. Martinez likewise turned her back on far-right extremism at the age of 20 and has since dedicated her career to counterextremist activism.

What Is the Alt-Right?

In 2008, University of Virginia graduate Richard Spencer coined the term "alternative right" (alt-right) to rebrand an age-old American sociopolitical tradition: white supremacy.

According to the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), the alt-right "is a set of far-right ideologies, groups and individuals whose core belief is that 'white identity' is under attack by multicultural forces using 'political correctness' and 'social justice' to undermine white people and 'their' civilization."⁴ Furthermore, the SPLC notes that "alt-righters eschew establishment conservatism, skew young, and embrace white ethno-nationalism as a fundamental value." Ethnonationalism can be understood as "advocacy of or support for the political interests of a particular ethnic group, especially its national independence or self-determination."

While the term alt-right is merely a decade old, the ideals that this platform espouses are a rebranding of a rich tradition of far-right activism in America. According to George Michael, a scholar of right-wing extremism at Westfield State University, “The alt-right derives from the same impulses that have launched other white extremist groups, including a belief that white civilization, the white race in particular, is imperiled.”⁵

The most prominent example of organized white supremacy in the mainstream American conscious is the Ku Klux Klan. African American political thinker Marcus Garvey, founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association and the “Back to Africa” movement, called the KKK the “invisible government of America,” a claim that speaks to the project of white supremacy that still lives on in many of nation’s most powerful institutions.⁶ While white hoods and cross burnings are no longer socially acceptable to the great majority of Americans, the principles that KKK-affiliated individuals have espoused over the last century live on in members of today’s alt-right, among others.

A distinguishing factor that differentiates alt-right activity from historical far-right violent extremism is the alt-right’s use of online meetings and community-building efforts. According to the SPLC, the alt-right is “characterized by heavy use of social media and online memes,” although these features of communication are often shielded from the mainstream eye.⁷ Much of the online activity occurs on the “deep web,” a part of the internet that is inaccessible to most search engines. Furthermore, extremist groups convene on the “dark web,” “a small portion of the deep web that has been intentionally hidden and is inaccessible through standard web browsers.”⁸

Myths about Women in the Alt-Right

- *Alt-right adherents are a homogenous group of violent, racist young men.*

Images of extremism in Charlottesville on August 11 and 12, 2017, and elsewhere primarily feature violent young men. Sociology scholar Kathleen Blee reflects this archetypal depiction in *Understanding Racist Activism*, where she describes common preconceptions of the alt-right actor as “a deviant, hate-filled extremist who acts on his own deeply-held hostilities toward the victim’s social group.”⁹ This definition overlooks the social dynamics and demographic diversity within alt-right membership.

Men-centric definitions are not unique to alt-right archetypes. Women have been excluded from history books, scholarship, and policy analysis of most social and political movements. Such systemic exclusion has effectively gendered these social movements, including the alt-right. Thus “the

logic is circular: organized racism is a male province,” Blee deduces.¹⁰ To ignore the role and agency of women in political groups perpetuates erasure and subordination. Furthermore, this neglect is an incomplete, inaccurate account of society.

Women join alt-right and extremist movements. Precise participation estimates prove challenging to calculate due in part to the hidden nature of alt-right organizing. In her 2017 analysis of the alt-right, “The Rise of the Valkyries,” journalist Seyward Darby contended that women make up between 15 and 20 percent of this movement.¹¹ Any demographic that constitutes a fifth of a movement’s base is worth examination.¹² Moreover, a diverse group of women join movements like the alt-right. Instead of transferring stereotypes about alt-right membership from men to women—assuming that all women members are lower-class, uneducated, apolitical, violent racists—it is critical to examine how gender influences membership. An intersectional gender analysis of member demographics is a superior tool to analyze the nature of women in the alt-right.¹³

In a November 2017 *Newsweek* article, “Alt-Right Women Asked to ‘Choose Submission’ to Grow Political Movement,” a popular alt-right personality named Martina Markota speaks to the challenging relationship between her political perspective and experience as a woman. She shared, “I’m a conservative.... I identify as a woman. Being both tends to get you treated unfairly in media.”¹⁴ Another woman in the article shared, “I’m from a Northern city, and I’m highly educated, actually.... The reason I won’t give my name to you is because I’ve seen how the media distorts things about women like me.” Stereotypes that all far-right women are “trailer-park trash” can lead scholars to ignore the influence of alt-right ideology on those who hail from diverse walks of life, a dangerous miscalculation.¹⁵ Such examples shed light on the relationship between womanhood and whiteness.

- *Radicalization is an individualistic, belief-driven process.*

An individualistic model of radicalization maintains that a person, motivated by strong beliefs, goes out of their way to find community within an ideologically consistent group or movement. However, the individualistic framework neglects the gendered motivations of many women who join the alt-right. For many women, joining extremist movements arises from social interactions and/or pivots on a life incident that acts as a point of conversion.

Understanding membership as a social process that precedes belief formation has broad implications for the myth that the alt-right solely comprises individual racists who seek out a place to be openly racist. In “Becoming a Racist,” Kathleen Blee challenges the theory of belief-driven activism—“the

notion that people come into racist movements because they have racist ideas”—as the single motivating factor for far-right membership.¹⁶ Her research demonstrates that “racial ‘awareness’ is more often a consequence of association with members of racist groups than a cause motivating participation.”¹⁷ Instead, “social camaraderie, a desire for simple answers to complex political problems, or even the opportunity to take action against formidable social forces can co-exist with—even substitute for—hatred as the reason for participation in organized racist activities.”¹⁸

While scholars and academics have largely neglected the complex social nature of mobilization, far-right leaders surely understand the dynamics of recruitment. Blee recounts the story of a Southern Klan leader admitting that “in order to bring in men, the men will follow the women.... If the wife is into it, she’ll drag the husband along.”¹⁹ Alt-right figure Lana Lokteff illuminates the social nature of conversion: “The alt-right in America ... attracted young guys and gals, and guys with girlfriends.... They stopped caring about their old friends because they met new ones. White women in particular are starving for a true sisterhood.”²⁰

The social nature of radicalization also affects women’s ability to acquire leadership roles within the organization. As the Klan leader that Blee quotes said, “We don’t hold women back from promotions or climbing the ladder. We can’t afford to not let them have whatever positions they want to work for.”²¹ While clearly demonstrating reticence about women’s leadership, the Klan leader at the same time recognizes that he must set aside traditional gender role expectations to increase women’s participation.

Life-changing or traumatic instances can motivate group membership. Over years of interviews and research on far-right extremist groups in America, Blee has documented a “narrative of conversion pivoted on a single dramatic life event” driving women’s membership. She describes this conversion as “an ordeal that clarified perception, sharpened value priorities, and seemed to reveal the racial and ethnic dynamics of history,” thereby serving as a catalyst for joining.²²

My interviews with Martinez and King illustrate the transformative process to which Blee refers. Drawing upon her experience of rape and stories she has encountered in years of deradicalization work with other former skinheads, Martinez speaks to trauma’s role as a catalyzing factor for many who join far-right, extremist organizations. “I strongly believe, and there’s just a bit of research going on right now ... that trauma is a crucial piece of this puzzle that acts as sort of the tripwire, that the people who are entering into these violent movements of all ideologies are looking for a sense of belonging and idea and some purpose for their life,” Martinez said. “The ideology serves as this megaphone, on one hand

for anger and rage that the individual is already feeling and grappling with, and also as a release valve.”

To cope with the trauma of her own rape, Martinez “found it a relief to make her anger and rage smaller and more focused” by joining the skinheads who occupied the margins of the countercultural scene she already identified with as a young adolescent, although previously on the left wing of the ideological spectrum. Martinez said she did not join the group specifically to target nonwhite individuals. Rather, her extremism was motivated by a desire to express the rage her trauma had induced. That nonwhite individuals were on the receiving end of this rage was a tragic but not predetermined reality.

King’s childhood and adolescence were characterized by pain similar to that of Martinez. “I never expected to make it past the age of 30,” King told me. “Things had happened to me that could have caused me to end up on any number of self-destructive paths. I had started associating with local gangs until I was raped, so I found a new way. I didn’t say, ‘Wow, you’re all racists and I want to get involved,’ but it was because they accepted me and because I didn’t have to explain why I was aggressive and angry.” Throughout King’s struggle to deal with her personal pain and trauma, she found a community that accepted her hurt and anger. As in Martinez’s case, King’s new peer group came with the cost of extreme discriminatory principles and activity, a cost that her deep suffering, in part, drove her to accept. Trauma certainly does not send every victim toward extremist organizations. However, this understanding of trauma as a conversion factor for extremist mobilization helps to construct a more complete process of why and how people may join such movements.

- *Women alt-right adherents are irrational and apolitical.*

Men’s past and present motivations to join far-right extremist groups are often perceived as somewhat cogent. According to Blee, “White men—who were privileged in economic life, public politics, and the family—had a clear interest in racist appeals to traditionalism, economic stability, and national resurgence.”²³ Thereby, men’s involvement “was rational and self-interested. Gender wasn’t peripheral to the Right ... indeed, it was paramount.” If men’s motivations are rational, self-interested, and grounded in a gendered order, then what of women’s motivations?

Women of the alt-right do not view the movement as being in opposition to their beliefs. Rather, many women view the movement as “a refuge where [they] can embrace their femininity and their racial heritage without shame.”²⁴ Blee also finds that “women’s entrance into organized racism is not a simple matter of their obliviousness to the political agenda of racist groups, nor of personal gullibility on the part of individual women.” Rather, she notes, most “women work to create a rational connection between themselves and the goals of racist politics.”²⁵

Movement leaders like Lokteff help facilitate this rational connection for adherents. In a speech at a rightist conference in Stockholm titled “How the Left Is Betraying Women,” she spoke to the character of the alt-right women: they “aren’t from the trailer park, and they’re not weak and naive—they’re the kind of women that other women want to be like. They’re smart, beautiful women who realize that mass immigration isn’t working, and it’s changing their lifestyle for the worse.”²⁶ Lokteff strategically manipulates the mainstream label of irrationality and uses it to build community among women who understand their ideologies as rational and thereby seek corresponding political outlets.

Factions of the alt-right accept that women can and should have a political role in the movement, yet this role has a narrow expression within the broader project of ethnonationalism. Women and men have distinct roles in the war to preserve the future of white civilization, a civilization founded upon an immutable understanding of gender. Lokteff equates nationalism to the values of womanhood—beauty, family, and home—and promises that the left is losing women to the right because the nationalist movement will continue to elevate these values. She argues, “We value the beauty of Western civilization and the refined human form. European men . . . facilitated beauty in all its forms. It’s the ultimate romantic gesture to European women. They built our civilization to enable the home and family and to protect women.”²⁷

The Nordic symbol of the valkyrie encapsulates the call to political action to which alt-right women are responding. Valkyries describe a group of maiden women sent to war by the ancient god Odin, some of whom were tasked with slaying righteous enemies, others with guarding their loved ones. Associated with “fairness, brightness, and gold, as well as bloodshed,” this mythical figure supports a preeminent narrative in alt-right thought that Western civilization finds itself under an exceptional era of attack.²⁸ Therefore, alt-right women interested in preserving a white nation must leave behind their natural and preferable roles in the home to protect the future of white civilization.²⁹ Yet come the end of battle, women are expected to return home and rely upon the ordinarily sufficient protection they receive from their spouses.

Policy Implications

- *Recognize the role that women play in supporting, countering, and preventing violent extremism.*

Far-right violent extremism, including alt-right activity, presents a significant international security threat.³⁰ Thereby, women in the alt-right present a significant international security threat. The systemic exclusion of women from programming and strategies for countering/preventing violent extremism “may cause us to seriously underestimate the destructive potential of this movement,” Blee writes.³¹ Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, UN special rapporteur on counterterrorism and human rights, notes that “when women come into view in terrorism and counterterrorism policy, they typically do so as the wives, daughters, sisters, and mothers of terrorist actors, or as the archetypal victims of senseless terrorist acts whose effects on the most vulnerable (women) underscore the unacceptability of terrorist targeting.”³² Martinez’s description of the alt-right reflects similar themes: women “work in interceptive space and a legal space where it’s not material support but that there is support offered. This is a particularly big area where women are involved, where they’re not breaking the law, but they’re providing support nevertheless.” While women are less likely to break the law, there has been acknowledgment in recent U.S. legislative efforts that some women can and do perpetrate illegal acts of violent extremism.³³

In order to recognize and legitimate the role of women in this movement, US actors should draw parallels to global trends in violent extremism. By comparing alt-right radicalization to global radicalization processes, scholars of far-right violent extremism can glean valuable insights from the more extensive body of research that exists on the threat of Islamist extremism.³⁴ Joana Cook and Catherine Zheng are among those contributing to this work.³⁵ Martinez’s experiences have informed her belief that there are fewer differences between flavors of extremism than many believe. When I first met Martinez, she was on her way home from a presentation in the United Arab Emirates about deradicalization. Addressing members of the United Nations, she contended that many of the patterns within the Neo-Nazi skinhead organization to which she belonged closely resemble patterns that have led young women and men to join organizations such as ISIS.

- *Incorporate gender mainstreaming into deradicalization efforts.*

Civil society organizations that support deradicalization efforts should conduct gender analyses of their programming. Furthermore, these groups should mainstream a gender perspective in their work to prevent and counter violent extremism.³⁶ I asked King about the role that gender played in her programming at Life After Hate, an organization dedicated to working with people leaving extremist

movements. “I don’t differentiate my treatment of the people I work with,” King said. “I use my vulnerability to connect to people. The women and men that I work with have a lot in common that they talk about openly.” After making this initial claim that gender was not a featured framework in her professional methodology, she shared some observations that seemed to demonstrate otherwise. King noted, “Among the women that I’m friends with and have worked with, there’s a lot of criticism about how they were treated and abused. Women are afraid of criticizing the men now that they’re out and changed.” Here, King points to a marked difference in women’s understanding of themselves as former members of the movement and as people that are independent of the movement. Presenting a problem for consideration, King pondered “how to create a best practice around the issue of how to facilitate healthy conversations between men and women who were formally involved regarding issues that women were affected by and men were not.”

In addition to civil society organizations, public schools should incorporate a gendered counterextremism curriculum into general health and wellness education. Martinez has strong convictions about the role that education should play in counter-racist activism and preventing violent extremism. Drawing on her experiences as a mother of seven, she stated, “We teach our kids at home and in school about what to do if there’s a fire or school shooter, preparing our kids for these dangers, but for some reason, we won’t talk about how radicalization happens. We should absolutely develop curriculum around how recruitment happens in spaces like gangs as well, which is all the same...” Posing that the dynamics of radicalization are foundationally gendered, such material would equip boys and girls alike with tools of awareness and resiliency in the face of extremism.

- *Invest in the power of personal relationships.*

Personal interactions hold great transformative power for countering violent extremism. Relationships between women who harbor extremist ideologies and those who challenge their worldviews offer great potential for deradicalization, as “personal allegiances are as important as ideological commitments to many women activists.”³⁷ If such personal allegiances played a large role in a woman’s radicalization processes, they necessarily fit into the puzzle of deradicalization. Yet forming relationships with those outside of one’s extreme ideological camp proves challenging, Martinez laments, speaking to the deep shame and self-loathing that she knows adherents to extremist ideologies have internalized. Offering advice to those who have thought about engaging with women who hold extremist views, Martinez cautions that “objectifying the person with whom you’re trying to dialogue just exacerbates the problem and there’s just a deepening cycle of disconnect from others.”³⁸ Her point underscores the importance of recognizing the humanity of others in deradicalization and counterextremism efforts.

King’s deradicalization story is a testament to the power of personal relationships. At 23, King was arrested and sent to federal prison for robbery.³⁹ Reflecting on her time in prison, King recalls, “I was treated with kindness by women that I didn’t deserve it from, such as women of color and different nationalities. I was treated the opposite of what I felt that I deserved and started to feel like a human being again with hopes.” Beyond finding friendships, King fell in love with a black woman. She noted, “From the age of 10, I knew that I was gay, but I ran far away from it. In prison, I acknowledged my sexuality for the first time, and I started to see things through a broader lens. Gender roles started to go outside the lines of what I’d been taught.”

Conclusion

The alt-right, an expression of far-right violent extremism, presents a security risk to citizens in the United States and around the world. As globalization, mass immigration, and multiculturalism flourish, various collectives of fearful individuals and populist politicians will continue to embrace ethnonationalist worldviews and employ violent means to enforce them.

To combat this security risk, it is essential to acknowledge that women make significant contributions to the alt-right and violent extremism. Women can no longer be misrepresented and excluded from efforts to prevent and counter this form of violent extremism. Exclusion has proven both disingenuous and dangerous along the road to realizing a comprehensive threat analysis and strategy.

Martinez is keenly aware of the challenges in adopting such an inclusive strategy. She acknowledges that “there are some growing pains right now” but nevertheless “hold[s] out a lot of hope” and believes that “the culture that is coming up is way more inclusive.” Her optimism is worth investing in.

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10. Ibid, p. 125
11. Darby, "Rise of the Valkyries."
12. In an interview with me, former skinhead Angela King cautioned against pinning hard statistics to membership in such organizations, noting that "one person could have 10 social media accounts, so we'll never get accurate numbers about who's involved. These kinds of groups are always in transition, always waning and waxing."
13. Intersectionality, a concept rooted in feminist theory, provides a helpful theoretical tool to understand the complex beliefs of women in the alt-right. The term intersectionality has been defined as "the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage." YW Boston, "What Is Intersectionality, and What Does It Have to Do with Me?" blogpost (March 29, 2017).
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28. "Valkyrie," *Encyclopedia Britannica*.
29. Ibid. The alt-right and its various incarnations over time have embraced Celtic and Nordic ideology to brand themselves with ideological symbolism.
30. The United States saw a 70 percent increase in "violent attacks perpetrated in the name of far-right ideology" over the course of Trump's first year in office. Stephen Tankel, "Riding the Tiger: How Trump Enables Right-Wing Extremism," *War on the Rocks* blog (November 5, 2018). However, the Trump administration has slashed federal funding and external grant programs to counter violent extremism at home. Julia Edwards Ainsley, "White House Budget Slashes 'Countering Violent Extremism' Grants," Reuters (May 23, 2017). Daniel Byman writes that "right-wing groups like neo-Nazis are at times lumped in with animal rights organizations as a domestic threat or discussed in the context of their overseas connections." "Takeaways from the Trump Administration's New Counterterrorism Strategy," Order from Chaos blog (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, October 5, 2018), Furthermore, the US government lacks the legal tools to prevent and prosecute much domestic extremist activity and the actors who employ it. Legal advocates like Mary McCord, senior litigator and visiting professor of law at the Institute for Constitutional Advocacy and Protection at Georgetown University Law School, are encouraging congressional actors to enact a domestic terrorism statute. McCord's legal advocacy aligns with Martinez's prescriptions for countering the violent extremist threat: "The government needs to reassess how they define terrorism and include white nationalism. If they are declared terrorist organizations, the government can mobilize resources they currently can't."
31. Blee, *Understanding Racist Activism*.
32. Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, "Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms While Countering Terrorism" (New York: United Nations, Human Rights Council, 2017).
33. On March 8, 2019, which was International Women's Day, Congresswoman Lois Frankel introduced H.R. 1653, the Women and Countering Violence Extremism Act of 2019. This legislation aims "to ensure that the United States recognizes women's varied roles in all aspects of violent extremism and terrorism and promotes their meaningful participation as full partners in all efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism and terrorism, and for other purposes." The June 2019 US Strategy on Women, Peace, and Security issued calls to "empower women as partners in preventing terrorism and countering radicalization and recruitment."

34. Julia Ebner, senior research associate with the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, argues that far-right and Islamist extremists actually reinforce one another's ideologies, creating an echo chamber that blurs the neat lines of domestic and foreign extremism altogether (Julia Ebner, *The Rage: The Vicious Circle of Islamist and Far-Right Extremism* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2018).

35. Joana Cook, *A Woman's Place: U.S. Counterterrorism since 9/11* (London: Hurst, 2019); Catherine Zheng, "Women in ISIS: The Rise of Female Jihadists," *Harvard Political Review* blog (March 18, 2017).

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Author

Sarah Kenny, Senior Program Assistant at WIIS (2018-2019). She is currently pursuing a Master's degree in Violence, Terrorism and Security at Queens University Belfast.

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