

GENDER AND IDENTITY IN EXTREMISMS

Case Studies on the Role of Gender and Identity in Shaping Positive Alternatives to Extremisms



KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Gendered approaches to counterterrorism (CT) and countering violent extremism (CVE) need to address all genders, not just women.** Men, women, and others join violent extremist groups for different reasons—it is imperative to detect these motives and use specific approaches, including ones that recognize the role of masculinities.
- **Men may be drawn to violent extremist groups out of a sense of “aggrieved entitlement”:** a gendered sense of entitlement thwarted by an experience of emasculation such as being isolated or bullied in school or experiencing economic distress.
- **Leaving white supremacist groups requires rebuilding one’s entire world and network of relationships** with friends, family, and society. For older men, who are often more isolated and solitary, it may be particularly difficult to find community, thus strengthening the attraction of the “brotherhood” offered by white supremacist movements and making disengagement more challenging.
- Although violent extremist movements and groups may share similarities in their drivers, narratives and recruitment strategies, **CT and CVE approaches cannot take a broad-brush approach and should take into account identity considerations specific to each group**, such as the age and gender of its participants.
- To reach all groups vulnerable to recruitment into white supremacist movements, **CT and CVE interventions that utilize a range of entry points should be considered, looking beyond work only in schools or churches** as the sole avenues for intervention. Voluntary disengagement programs, such as EXIT Sweden, offer a potential access point for engaging an older demographic of (primarily) men.
- **Providing alternative ideas of masculinity can be a crucial part of men’s disengagement from violent extremist groups and their ability to rebuild a social identity separate from extremist thought.** This includes addressing social expectations (perceived or real) of behavior or looks, and more, encouraging reflection on internalized norms and modeling alternative behaviors and attitudes.
- To holistically address violent extremism, **social and psychological approaches to CT and CVE need to be paired with interventions that recognize and address the structural and political drivers of violent extremism.** Such interventions will require governments recognizing their own role in promoting violent extremism, taking accountability for racism and discrimination, and constructing economies and societies that enable peace, pluralism, equity, and justice for all citizens.

CONTEXT ANALYSIS

The Lure of Viking Brotherhood: Gendered Drivers of White Supremacy in Sweden

What motivates people to join white supremacist groups? One can consider individual grievances and psychological processes through a gender lens, for example. Notions of masculinity play a central role in recruitment to Sweden white supremacist groups. They promote a specific image of maleness: a large, muscular, warrior archetype, often heavily tattooed. Such an image might be attractive to men experiencing “aggrieved entitlement”: a gendered sense of entitlement thwarted by an experience of emasculation, which can stem from push factors such as being victimized or experiencing economic distress.^{3 4} The image of a Viking is a common symbolic trope among Nordic white supremacist groups, representing untamed masculinity and connection to an armed brotherhood. Participation in white power groups offers these men a solution: a feeling of ideological superiority and moral authority over others,



In Sweden, white extremist groups promote a specific image of maleness: a large, muscular, warrior archetype.

3. The Guardian. (2018). Almost all violent extremists share one thing: their gender. ([access here](#)).

4. Ibid.

support from and camaraderie with “brothers in arms”, and a predefined masculine identity and simplified belief system to fit into.

Women form a substantial minority in the Swedish white supremacist movement, and their motivations for joining are less easily explained, although some may be attracted to the same pull factors that facilitate recruitment of men: a sense of belonging, a clearly delineated identity, and social rewards from conforming to expected roles. Adjacency to power can also offer women a protective

space, in which they are shielded from external threats.

Young people, particularly young men, are typically portrayed as the group most vulnerable to recruitment into violent extremism. Today, however, members of white power groups in Sweden are primarily adults, usually older white men. These identity considerations challenge prevailing assumptions about vulnerability to recruitment by extremist groups and are vital to consider when designing counterterrorism (CT) and countering violent extremism (CVE) programming.

The image of a Viking is a common symbolic trope among Nordic white supremacist groups, representing untamed masculinity and connection to an armed brotherhood.

EXIT Sweden: Disengagement through Rebuilding (Gender) Identity

The EXIT program, established in 1998 as part of Fryshuset, a broader Swedish non-profit youth program, offers a social and relational approach to disengaging members of white power groups. The EXIT program relies on the client’s personal choice to disengage from the movement. Staff’s primary objective is to support clients to alter and rebuild their social identity so that they may reintegrate into Swedish society and find a renewed sense of purpose and belonging. The Swedish EXIT model takes a non-ideological approach, steering away from directly challenging white supremacist or totalitarian ideologies.⁴ EXIT Sweden offers a model of CVE programming that reaches an older demographic, working primarily with Sweden’s older neo-Nazi population. In considering entry points to deradicalization and off-ramping outside of schools or churches, EXIT’s approach to inviting individuals who voluntarily disaffiliated themselves from white extremist groups may provide an alternative.

“Modeling” behavior is an important component of the program’s work with clients. Staff members act as role models to challenge client self-perception and guide them towards a different identity and way of being. A gendered perspective is crucial here, as staff noticed that through modeling behavior with an awareness of masculinity, clients adapted. EXIT staff members also prompted client reflection on masculinity in the movement. As a result,

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Pairing social and relational approaches with interventions that target the structural and political drivers of violent extremism and racism offers a new challenge for the Swedish context.

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The purely social and relational approach in Sweden has been the subject of growing criticism by some organizations, who view it as trivializing the political and ideological aspects of the problem.⁵ Pairing social and relational approaches with interventions that target the structural and political drivers of violent extremism and racism offers a new challenge for the Swedish context, and will require operating at the nexus of psychological processes; historical legacies; cultural values; and economic, social, and political forces.



Country: Indonesia

Authors: Melinda Holmes and Rosalie Fransen

Actor: KUPI and AMAN Indonesia

Contributors:

Editing – Sohaila Abdulali
Layout and Design – Abdelazim Saafan and Lauren Mellows

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CASE SUMMARY

HEIRESSES TO THE PROPHET: WOMEN RELIGIOUS SCHOLARS TRANSFORMING VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN INDONESIA

A Case Study on the Role of Gender and Intersectional Identities in Countering Violent Extremism and Counterterrorism¹

SUMMARY



Indonesia has a well-established tradition of female religious leadership, with women ulama (religious scholars) playing significant roles in education, activism and religious legal discourse. The Asian Muslim Action Network (AMAN) in Indonesia co-convened the Indonesian Congress of Women Scholars or Kongres Ulama Perempuan Indonesia (KUPI) to amplify the Islamic narratives of women ulama and work with them to promote gender equality and counter extremist violence.

Taking a Gender-based Analysis Plus (GBA+) approach,² this case study discusses the narratives promoting and countering violent extremism and terrorism. It focuses on how the women ulama movement's trust-based relationships, gender-sensitive Islamic perspective and consultative process enables them to deconstruct violent narratives as they pursue gender justice in Indonesia.

Violent extremism in Indonesia is framed by gendered narratives that draw on narrow interpretations of Islam and Qur'anic texts, which are further amplified by social media. This includes extremism among Indonesians who traveled to join the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. These narratives use conservative gender roles and familial power structures to promote violent extremist ideology among young men and women.

1. The International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) was commissioned by Global Affairs Canada to produce this set of case studies on the role of gender and intersectional identities in countering violent extremism and counterterrorism. For more information or to contact the authors please email info@icanpeacework.org.

2. Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) is an analytical process that provides a rigorous method for the assessment of systemic inequalities, as well as to assess how diverse groups of women, men, and gender diverse people may experience policies, programs and initiatives. More info on the GBA+ approach is accessible [here](https://www24.international.gc.ca/gba/gba-plus/eng.aspx).

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ▶ **Narratives are not merely messaging; they are societal responses that attempt to explain complex modern realities.** Promoting the idea of multiple narratives, perspectives, or interpretations, and peaceful disagreements, is as important as the substantive deconstruction of specific narratives.
- ▶ **Women religious leaders such as the women ulama can be authentic messengers** who offer an important perspective vital to fully understanding and contesting the gendered narratives of violent extremist groups. Though they might be less visible, their rootedness in communities, and the related trust and influence they hold should not be overlooked.
- ▶ **Social media has emerged as a new outlet for religious education, particularly for and by young people who use convincing visual and narrative strategies to spread their viewpoints.** Beyond work in educational institutions, contesting violent extremist ideology requires operating in online spaces, and collaborating with the youth leaders and influencers who – due to their digital literacy and popularity – are critical messengers in these spaces.
- ▶ **The process of arriving at new narratives is as important as the narratives themselves.** Employing participatory, consultative methods for discussion and debate that consider a multitude of perspectives challenges the inflexible, binary nature of violent extremist ideology.
- ▶ **The creation and preservation of open, safe, civic spaces for dialogue and debate, and the protection of women who play a visible role in these spaces,** is key to transforming narratives at the nexus of gender and violence.

CONTEXT ANALYSIS

Gender, Identity, and Violent Extremist Narratives in Indonesia

Even with a strong national identity and a secular constitution, religion has often been a lightning rod for tensions in Indonesian society. Due to the powerful role religion plays in Indonesian society, violent extremist narratives in the country are grounded in simplified interpretations of Islamic texts. They are also heavily gendered, focusing on the role and condition of women, including gender equality, dress, polygamy, and child marriage. These narratives frame the progressive debate on these topics as persecution of Islamic values and disregard for women's traditional roles: Islam is “under threat” by Indonesia's modernization and pluralism.³

Through their dominance of media, Islamist groups have crowded the Indonesian public sphere. In recent years, the Islamic State and its Indonesian affiliates have used sophisticated communication networks to recruit Indonesian Muslims, including women and children, to travel to Syria and Iraq.⁴ In the third largest democracy in the world, this has given conservative Islamists the clear lead in the marketplace of ideas—until very recently.

Religious literacy, which can be a source of resilience to radicalization, is high in Indonesia thanks to the country's unique system of Islamic boarding schools called pesantren. Pesantren have been led by and produced female imams, intellectuals, expert Qur'an reciters and



In Indonesia, the social authority of women ulama is recognized by the population because they are embedded in society through the pesantren.

3. USAID. (2013). Violent Extremism and Insurgency in Indonesia: A Risk Assessment. ([access here](#)).

4. Djelantik, S. (2019). Islamic State and the Social Media in Indonesia. ([access here](#)).

activists with expertise in Islamic studies, Islamic law and interpretation of Islamic texts.⁵ In contrast to other contexts where efforts to elevate female Islamic leadership have been more of an elite enterprise, in Indonesia the social authority of women ulama is recognized by the population because they are embedded in society through their

positions in the pesantren.

Women ulama's advocacy for gender equality through religious scholarship and education offers a powerful counter-discourse to extremist religious teachings, including the simplified conservative narratives popularized on Indonesia's social media platforms.⁶

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KUPI: Women's Religious Leadership for Gender Justice and Peace

The Indonesian Congress of Women Scholars or Kongres Ulama Perempuan Indonesia (KUPI) is a pioneering effort to organize women ulama, defined by their interpretations of Islam proclaiming gender equality as a foundational basis of Islamic teachings, rather than by their gender identity as women alone.⁷ KUPI serves as a collective, gathering women ulama including scholars, educators, activists, and officials, from diverse institutions and organizations to advocate for gender justice and social justice. The Asian Muslim Action Network (AMAN Indonesia) is a co-organizer of KUPI and aims to promote gender equality, advocate for the rights of women who have been targets of gender-based violence and promote the role of women ulama in the prevention of violent extremism.⁸

2017 saw a marked advance in public recognition of women ulama, as a result of their consolidation through the first official convening of KUPI. In a groundbreaking step, KUPI issued three fatwas⁹ focused on priority issues for Indonesian women: Sexual Violence, Child Marriage, and the Destruction of Nature.¹⁰ These first three fatwas also provide a testing ground for the acceptance and impact of this claim to religious authority by women ulama.¹¹ The Congress also produced extensive recommendations addressing religious radicalism, violence, and conflict. These recommendations emphasize pluralism, critical thinking, supporting the nation-state, minority rights, following the rule of laws against hate speech, support



KUPI gathers women ulama from diverse institutions and organizations to advocate for gender justice and social justice.

for women and child victims of radicalism through disengagement, and countering the stigmatization of returnees.¹²

KUPI's process of consultation and argumentation is a powerful antidote to the inflexible and binary nature of violent extremist ideologies, and a deliberate rejection of hegemonic power structures that underpin—and are underpinned by—gender inequalities. KUPI's methodology recognizes the experience of victims alongside scientific evidence and Islamic scholarship.¹³ The preparation for the 2017 convening of KUPI goes back around fifteen years, and included participatory dialogue and learning that bridged the grassroots and the academic spheres, and laid the groundwork for its decision-making structures.

Despite the risk, of public backlash and retaliation, more and more women ulama feel they need to face the public and amplify their voices in online spaces. They recognize that the current battle is on social media and that is where they need to win some space in order to educate people about Islamic teachings from their perspective. However, due to the norms of consensus in Islamic scholarship, not all women ulama are comfortable directly and publicly countering violent extremist narratives.¹⁵

KUPI's members are increasingly active in their communities, helping people understand events and reject narratives justifying violence in the aftermath of attacks. By enhancing the capacity of local members with guidance on deradicalization initiatives, KUPI can enable local women ulama to aid in rehabilitation and reintegration.

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5. Oxford Islamic Studies. (2007). Women, Islam and the Twenty-first Century. ([access here](#)).

6. Idris, I. (2019). Preventing/countering violent extremism programming on men, women, boys and girls. ([access here](#)).

7. Robinson, K. (2017). Female Ulama voice a vision for Indonesia's future. ([access here](#)); Interview with AMAN Indonesia.

8. Women and Peacebuilding Blog. (2019). Amplifying Women Ulama's Voices: Training and Dialogue on Gender and Islam. ([access here](#)).

9. Fatwas are a non-binding legal opinions or rulings on points of Islamic law, practice, or convention, issued by an Islamic scholar.

10. Congress of Indonesian Women Ulama: Official Documents on Process and Outcome.

11. AMAN Indonesia is assisting KUPI with a review to assess the adoption of these fatwa in advance of the next congress in 2022.

12. Congress of Indonesian Women Ulama: Official Documents on Process and Outcome, p. 138.

13. Congress of Indonesian Women Ulama: Official Documents on Process and Outcome.

14. Ibid.

15. Interview with AMAN Indonesia.

CASE SUMMARY

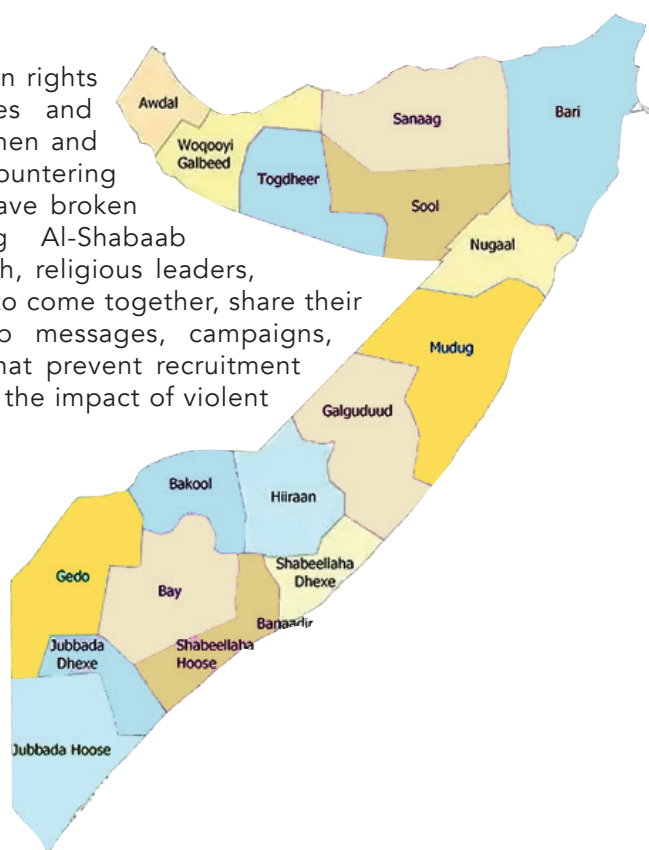
AGENTS OF CHANGE: TRANSFORMING GENDER ROLES AND EXTREMISM IN SOMALIA

A Case Study on the Role of Gender and Intersectional Identities in Countering Violent Extremism and Counterterrorism¹

SUMMARY

Witness Somalia is a human rights organization that engages and promotes the roles of women and youth in preventing/countering violent extremism. They have broken the secrecy surrounding Al-Shabaab and enabled women, youth, religious leaders, artists, and police officers to come together, share their experiences, and develop messages, campaigns, and community systems that prevent recruitment and help people heal from the impact of violent extremism.

Taking a Gender-based Analysis Plus (GBA+) approach,² this case study focuses on how expanding socially accepted gender roles for all identity groups challenges violent extremist rhetoric and creates new spaces for engaging in prevention work.



In the 1990s, Somalia endured state collapse and war, caused by post-colonial governance and international economic policies. Somalia's traditional, clan-based culture suffered severe blows. The resulting corruption and chaos allowed several Islamist extremist groups to gain a foothold, providing alternative governance systems and applying strict Shariah law. The resulting marginalization, lack of opportunity, and exposure to violence for youth and women helped push them to join extremist groups. Since women and youth experience some of the most severe impacts of violent extremism, there is a growing recognition of their critical roles in its prevention.

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2. Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) is an analytical process that provides a rigorous method for the assessment of systemic inequalities, as well as to assess how diverse groups of women, men, and gender diverse people may experience policies, programs and initiatives. More info on the GBA+ approach is accessible [here](#).

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Expanding the socially accepted roles for all groups -- women, men, and those with marginalized identities -- challenges the rigid, narrowly defined gender roles maintained by violent extremist groups** and creates new spaces and actors to engage in countering and preventing violent extremism. Gender-responsive approaches to counterterrorism (CT) and countering violent extremism (CVE) should engage women, men, and those from marginalized identity groups comprehensively and with consideration for evolving gender roles.
- **Violent extremist groups leverage traditional gender roles centering around familial relationships and economic functions to help recruit people and run their campaigns.** While engaging traditional gender roles can be effective for CT and CVE, this approach is risky as it can reinforce the same social norms that violent extremist groups play on, thus constraining prevention efforts. Considering the multiple dimensions of individuals' identities can provide new openings for engagement. For example, a woman may be a mother and a wife but also a journalist or entrepreneur.
- **Gendered gaps in security responses, from failure to address gender-based violence to the lack of access to women in communities, undermine the relationship between the police and the public.** As the police represent the state, relationships with them are critical, both for CT and CVE efforts to succeed, and as indicators of and avenues to build trust in government and respect for the rule of law.
- **Gender is intertwined with other marginalized identities.** Young women, for example, are particularly vulnerable to exclusion, recruitment, and victimization by violent extremist groups due to "double marginalization". Along with gender and age, being internally displaced or from a minority clan can reinforce this dynamic.
- **People can also draw strength from their identities.** Claiming civic space by organizing groups and networks of people with different identities and affected by violent extremism in different ways is an effective strategy for prevention. With adequate protection measures, the solidarity within such groups encourages individuals to reclaim their agency, often by speaking out against violent extremism and becoming agents for change and peace. Interaction among these groups helps create a safe space to address conflicts and build social cohesion.
- **Artistic expression, especially public art, is a powerful mechanism for healing and change.** Art reflecting the voices of women, children, and men impacted by violent extremism and conflict can reveal the cost of violence to the society, challenge extremist narratives, and expand gender roles to reclaim civic space for women, youth and those with marginalized identities.

CONTEXT ANALYSIS

Markets and Marriage: The Diversity of Gender Roles in Violent Extremism

Weak government institutions, corruption, unemployment, and poverty are all drivers of extremism in Somalia.³ Women experience high levels of violence, exacerbated by widespread impunity throughout the larger society.⁴ Women have long been marginalized from political life and the public sphere through the rigid gender norms of cultural, religious, and clan-based traditions.⁵ With worsening conditions of ongoing conflict, the economic incentive among other gendered experiences in Somalia can lead women to join Al-Shabaab.⁶



Witness Somalia provides safe spaces for women to share their experiences with the impact of violent extremism and discuss their roles in promoting peace and security

3. Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in Somalia: A Mapping Report. (2020). Life and Peace Institute. ([access here](#)).

4. Ibid and Supporting Civil Society and Women's Rights Organisations in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Contexts Somalia Report. (2020). Saferworld and Gender Action for Peace and Security UK. ([access here](#)).

5. Now and the Future: Gender Equality, Peace and Security in a COVID-19 World. (2020). Saferworld. ([access here](#)).

6. Stern, O.M. (2019). The Invisible Women of Al-Shabaab. Adam Smith International. ([access here](#))

In Al-Shabaab, women fulfill several roles, including recruitment, fundraising, weapons storing and transport, and intelligence.⁷ However, women also are often well positioned to mitigate the dangers of violent extremism because they can detect early warning signs. As they witness and experience the impact of extremism in their communities, they understand the need for a holistic, whole-of-society approach to prevent and counter violent extremism.⁸

Women's roles within Al-Shabaab support their gendered narrative of arranging brides for young male recruits and

enforcing "wife inheritance" where in the case of a man's death, any Al-Shabaab member can inherit his wife.⁹ Women's kinship ties work both ways, however. They can use the same skill set to engage husbands and sons to disengage from violent extremist groups or prevent them from joining in the first place. While many women, including peacebuilders, draw upon their kinship relations, it is also critical to recognize the multitude of roles that women embrace as agents of change. The local organization Witness Somalia exemplifies this approach of expanding civil society roles to prevent and counter violent extremism.

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Witness Somalia: Breaking the Silence and Reclaiming Civic Space for Social Change

Witness Somalia works to promote peaceful alternatives to rebuild a society free from violence. They document and report human rights violations, demand accountability, and protect the rights of vulnerable groups. They focus on expanding civil society's role to resolve conflicts and transform local communities. Spurred by Al-Shabaab's devastating impact, Witness Somalia seized opportunities to work with students, religious leaders, police officers, journalist, artists, elders and other community activists to prevent violent extremism.

Witness Somalia provides a safe space for women to share their experiences with Al-Shabaab and the impact of violent extremism, and discuss their roles in preventing extremism and promoting peace and security. In their community engagement, they pay particular attention to including women from minority clans and internally displaced persons. Witness Somalia understands the importance of women's inclusion in the security sector and their capability to mitigate violent extremist incidents. The group established contact, built trust, and supported cooperation between local police officers and the community, who now meet regularly to share information, report critical incidents, and organize community events.

Witness Somalia has capitalized on art, music, drama, and sports to engage youth in alternative forms of expression and self-development.



Witness Somalia recognizes art as a form of expression and understands the role of artists in raising public awareness around complex issues.

Witness Somalia increases awareness around violent extremism through public messaging and religious interpretation. They recognize the religious leaders' crucial role as interpreters of Islamic texts and traditions, and include such leaders in their work. They use a gender-responsive approach to expand the role of women in society. They train youth to challenge religious militancy and violent extremism. As a result, young people have mobilized to respond to their communities after terrorist attacks. To reach the public, Witness Somalia launched a radio program to discuss gender equality, women's rights, and their role in peacebuilding.

Despite the taboos surrounding art in the larger culture, Witness Somalia recognizes art as a form of expression and understands the role of artists in raising public awareness around complex issues. They trained a small group of artists in advocacy, freedom of expression, and the intersection of the arts and peacebuilding. They have capitalized on art, music, drama, and sports to engage youth in alternative forms of expression and self-development. Through such programs, Witness Somalia has reached 32 youth groups and NGOs and 218 youth (including 135 women). The arts have enabled people to resist extremism and raise their voices to transform their society.

7. Ibid and Women and Al-Shabaab's Insurgency. (2019) International Crisis Group. ([access here](#)).

8. Invisible Women: The Gendered Dimensions of Return, Rehabilitation and Reintegration from Violent Extremism (2019), International Civil Society Action Network and United Nations Development Program. ([access here](#))

9. Ibid.

Country: United States

Authors: Shannon Foley Martinez
and Melinda Holmes

Actor: Shannon Foley Martinez

Contributors:

Editing – Sohaila Abdulali
Layout and Design – Abdelazim Saafan
and Lauren Mellows

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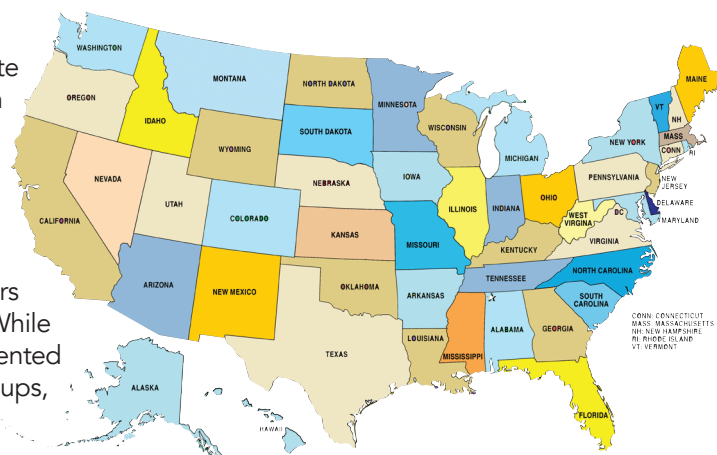
CASE SUMMARY

ADJACENCY TO POWER: GENDER, TRAUMA, AND VIOLENCE IN WHITE SUPREMACIST EXTREMISM IN THE UNITED STATES

A Case Study on the Role of Gender and Intersectional Identities
in Countering Violent Extremism and Counterterrorism¹

SUMMARY

As a former white supremacist, Shannon Foley Martinez has unique insight into the draw of the far-right and uses her experience and knowledge to help others leave the movement. While women are underrepresented in far-right extremist groups, they have always played critical roles² and are becoming increasingly visible. The rationale of women who join clearly misogynist movements—whether the Islamic State or the Alt-Right—has often perplexed experts. However, Foley Martinez's experience illustrates that the complex and gendered power dynamics within these groups can benefit individual women.



Taking a Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) approach,³ this case study is partially autoethnographic, co-authored by Foley Martinez herself. It focuses on the drivers to violent extremism and terrorism, and the importance of addressing trauma and building interpersonal skills to successfully reintegrate into society after leaving a violent extremist group.

Foley Martinez grew up with no sense of belonging in her family, and experienced sexual violence at a young age. The self-hatred that stemmed from that unresolved trauma found a home in Neo-Nazis' rhetoric and violence. During her days as a white supremacist, Foley Martinez's relationships were abusive, and she was exposed to violence by leaders of the group. At the same time, her adjacency to power provided a sense of safety from outsiders. In her current work mentoring people leaving violent white supremacist groups, she emphasizes the importance of identifying and addressing trauma, and developing interpersonal and emotional skills to positively engage with the complex modern world.

1. ICAN was commissioned by Global Affairs Canada to produce this set of case studies on the role of gender and intersectional identities in countering violent extremism and counterterrorism. For more information or to contact the authors please email melinda.holmes@icanpeacework.org.

2. Ebner, J. and Davey J. (2019). "How Women Advance the Internationalization of the Far-Right". GW Program on Extremism, Perspectives on the Future of Women, Gender & Violent Extremism. ([access here](#)).

3. Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) is an analytical process that provides a rigorous method for the assessment of systemic inequalities, as well as to assess how diverse groups of women, men, and gender diverse people may experience policies, programs and initiatives. More info on the GBA+ approach is accessible [here](#).

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ▶ **Trauma plays an inherent role in radicalization to violence**, for all ages, genders, sexualities, and socio-economic demographics. Trauma takes many forms, as do toxic responses to unprocessed trauma.
- ▶ **People with marginalized identities (such as women, people of color, low-income people, immigrants) may experience a heightened sense of empowerment in violent white supremacist groups** through the fear their words and actions evoke in others and their adjacency to power.
- ▶ **Women are often simultaneously perpetrators and victims of violence.** Seeing women as active agents in their radicalization who derive benefit from their participation in violent white supremacy helps to offset the “victim trope” often assigned to women in violent extremism, and supports them in acting as agents in their own rehabilitation.
- ▶ **Whole person approaches to rehabilitation and reintegration are more successful** and likely to generate pro-social good than approaches dealing only with transforming belief systems and/or ideologies.
- ▶ **Inability to successfully navigate social complexity often leads people to embrace dogmatic belief systems** through which they can interact with the world more simplistically. Developing interpersonal communication and emotional skills are crucial to empower people disengaging from such groups to adapt to changing ideas about the “ideal man” and about women’s roles in society, and to embrace greater complexity surrounding roles and expressions of gender and sexuality.
- ▶ **Throughout rehabilitation and reintegration, men often require greater assistance in building healthy networks**, while women often require greater assistance finding and sustaining economic opportunities.

CONTEXT ANALYSIS

Gender, Identity and Drivers to White Supremacist Violent Extremism

White supremacy is endemic to the United States, dating back to chattel slavery and the removal, relocation, and disenfranchisement of Indigenous peoples. White supremacist ideological violence and terrorism originated in the late 19th century post-Civil War and continues today. White supremacist violence intersects with antisemitism, anti-immigration beliefs, and male supremacy. The U.S. is currently experiencing an intensifying period of white supremacist violence, and there is concern over lockdown measures and COVID-19-driven isolation amplifying future white supremacist violence in the coming years.⁴ Women have often been present inside such movements, but in smaller numbers than men. Just as some of the dynamics of white supremacy have changed through the years, so too have women’s roles inside these spaces.

White supremacy in the U.S. is heavily gendered, and its messaging and propaganda are imbued with themes of male supremacy and traditional gender roles, which offer simplicity. Such simplicity is appealing amid a changing and increasingly complex world that can exacerbate feelings of disempowerment, a lack of agency in men, and uncertainty of societal roles. This simplicity is also seen in the movement’s goals, which typically focus on racial protection, purity, and advancement. Women often functionally work towards amplifying white supremacist



Women often functionally work towards amplifying white supremacist ideology and messaging.

4. Wallner, C. and White, J. (2020). “The Far-Right and Coronavirus: Extreme Voices Amplified by the Global Crisis”. RUSI. ([access here](#)).

ideology and messaging. They are often not allowed to operate in leadership roles other than in relation to other women, but they can be influential in other ways, including as organizers. Women can engage undetected in violence or capacity building for violence because they are discounted as coequal threats to men.

People in the movement often have histories of trauma but lack the necessary healthy skills needed to heal. Abused people often become

the abuser, and interpersonal relationships within white supremacist groups are often extremely violent. Intimate partner and gender-based violence (GBV) are rife within white supremacist circles. In addition, male infighting is inherent in these spaces. Women can offer cohesion and build peace within groups, which often gives them a sense of purpose and meaning they did not previously experience. In addition, women can derive a sense of agency through adjacency to power.

White supremacy in the U.S. is heavily gendered, and its messaging and propaganda are imbued with themes of male supremacy and traditional gender roles, which offer simplicity.

Shannon Foley Martinez: Embracing the Complexity of Identity and Society

Shannon Foley Martinez, a former white supremacist from the United States, mentors people leaving extremist groups. She uses a holistic and pluralistic approach to help them reintegrate and develop skills to engage with the wider society. Her work includes developing community resource platforms to inoculate individuals against violence-based ideologies, teaching resiliency skills to at-risk communities, building programs for educators, collaborating with tech platforms on countering extremism, and trainings for law enforcement officials.

Rehabilitation and reintegration require stability, mental wellness building, a healthy processing of shame and trauma, and a pathway to integrate past actions healthfully into the present in order to begin building a future. The initial priority in this model is improving conditions of stability, because it is difficult to focus on healing without it. Stability includes a safe place to live; a predictable, livable income; access to healthcare; and nurturing relationships. A large percentage of women report GBV before and during their time in VE groups, and they seem to have more difficulty developing financial stability and engaging in holistic, nontoxic relationships. Special consideration must be given to addressing the underlying factors to break this cycle.

Helping someone disengage from hate and violence is inseparable from helping them disentangle and heal from their trauma. For women, this often entails working through the trauma of GBV. Men often report childhood abuse. Connecting people with resources and mental health care professionals to better identify, understand, and process their trauma is a cornerstone of rehabilitation and reintegration of those leaving violent extremism.

Healthy communication and emotional skills are essential. With these skills, men can build healthier relationships and non-destructive means of expressing their fears and struggles, and women can better identify toxic relationships and break cycles of abuse. It can be greatly beneficial to learn non-violent communication skills, where the focus is on identifying one's emotions and needs, empathetic



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listening, and non-coercive requests for engagement. In addition, cultivating mindfulness seems to enhance the ability to re-engage with the world and other people in healthier ways. It helps develop self-compassion, which is necessary to holistically process the shame that most former violent extremists feel about their engagement in violent white supremacy. Mind-body integration seems especially important for processing GBV.

The final piece of this puzzle is improving the capacity for complexity in thought, solution generation, and identity building. People need to embrace the complexity of navigating through the world. Encouraging engagement in pluralistic philosophical and political discourse can help people have a wider view and greater empathy for the struggles of many communities and populations around the world.