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CASE STUDY

RECONSTRUCTING IDENTITY: THE ROLE OF GENDER IN DRIVING AND DISMANTLING WHITE SUPREMACY IN SWEDEN

A Case Study on the Role of Gender and Identity in Shaping Positive Alternatives to Extremisms¹

SUMMARY

Through its EXIT program, the Swedish Fryshuset Foundation has pioneered a relational and psychological approach to disengagement from white extremist groups. In EXIT's approach, coaches support clients to build a stable identity outside of extremist ideology and practice, facilitating their reintegration into society. The EXIT program has expanded its impact by integrating a gendered perspective that breaks down the constricting ideas around gender and masculinity internalized by clients during their time in the white extremist movement.

Taking a Gender-based Analysis Plus (GBA+) approach,² the case study focuses on the drivers of violent extremism and proposes that creating a society that guarantees peace, pluralism and justice will require both social services and relational support, and complementary state-led interventions that address the structural and political drivers of racism, discrimination, and inequality.

White extremist groups in Sweden have re-entered the spotlight in recent years, encouraged and inspired by the international expansion of white extremist ideology. They continue to organize marches and commit acts of violence. Drivers of violent extremism in Sweden are deeply gendered, as they are everywhere. For men, these may include a sense of "aggrieved entitlement" that draws them to the ideological superiority, camaraderie, and simplified belief systems offered by white extremist groups. Age considerations are equally important: while Swedish young people are perceived as most at-risk of recruitment, this assumption does not hold up to scrutiny.



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 melinda.holmes@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/index.aspx).

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 extremist 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 extremist movements, **CT and CVE interventions that utilize a range of entry points should be considered, looking beyond work only in schools or churches.** 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, 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 white extremist, or white supremacist movement has a long history of spreading its ideology and committing acts of extremist violence in Sweden. Unlike many other European countries, Sweden did not ban fascist organizations after World War II, and the country had no mechanism for accountability to prosecute those who collaborated with the Nazi regime. Nazi-aligned organizations continued their activities. In the 1980s, an influx of refugees from Lebanon inspired a surge in xenophobic sentiment among Swedish youth, who questioned why Sweden should receive immigrants when young people were lacking housing and employment.³ In the 1990s and 2000s, “White Power” and “Viking Rock” groups reached new audiences of young people.⁴ Several new white supremacist groups were established, such as the White Aryan Resistance (“Vitt Ariskt Motstånd” or “VAM”), which carried out repeated acts of terrorism and racial violence, burglaries, bank robberies, police murders and car bombings of perceived opponents.



Although the self-image of Sweden is one of a pro-human rights, open, and tolerant country, racial segregation and discrimination persist.

3. Institute of Race Relations (IRR) (2014). Sweden's counter-extremism model and the stigmatizing of anti-racism. ([access here](#)).

4. Corte, U. and Edwards, B. (2008). White Power music and the mobilization of racist social movements. ([access here](#)).

The strength of the white supremacist movement in the late 20th century established a foundation for organized anti-immigrant sentiment that persists in modern-day Sweden. It has been embedded in mainstream political discourse by far-right populist political parties, particularly the Sweden Democrats.⁵ Anti-immigrant sentiment has been fueled by the growing pluralism of Swedish society (the percentage of migrants as a share of the Swedish population has grown from 9% in 1990 to 20% in 2019⁶), as well as social media, which has enabled circulation and normalization of xenophobic discourse and spreading of “junk news” and disinformation.^{7 8}

The number of incidents of racist and xenophobic hate speech, primarily targeting migrants, Muslims and Roma people, has risen over recent years.⁹ Contemporary white extremist groups in Sweden continue to organize marches and commit acts of violence: in 2017, members of the Nordic Resistance Movement bombed a left-wing bookstore and an asylum center.¹⁰ There has been an upsurge of attacks on mosques, desecration of Jewish cemeteries, and a rise in racist and homophobic incidents.¹¹ In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, general opposition to immigration has changed into a more specific opposition to Islam and Muslim immigration, although violence against other identity groups persists.¹²

The Swedish white extremist movement is increasingly integrated with the global white extremist movement, which has expanded in recent years and is responsible for a surge in xenophobic and far-right violence worldwide, particularly in Europe.¹³ The New York Times identified nearly 350 white extremist terrorist attacks across the globe between 2011 and 2017 and found that at least a third of white extremist killers were inspired by others who committed similar attacks.¹⁴ White extremists in the United States have looked to Sweden for inspiration for building their own white supremacist networks; in 2017, American white nationalist Richard Spencer formed a media platform, the AltRight Corporation, in partnership with two far-right Swedish media outfits, calling Sweden “the most alt-right” country in all of Europe.^{15 16} The growing internationalization and unification of the white extremist movement underscores the global significance of Swedish white extremist activity and rhetoric.

Beyond acts of violence committed by white extremist actors and encouraged by the Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020, the past year has seen a growing discussion of structural drivers of racism and inequality in Sweden. The protests have highlighted that although the self-image of Sweden is one of a pro-human rights, open,

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and tolerant country, racial segregation and discrimination persist. Studies on policing have shown that racial profiling remains an issue in Sweden.¹⁷ National minorities such as the Saami and Roma are highly marginalized and discriminated against in housing and job markets, and Sweden’s urban areas are visibly segregated along racial lines with people of color concentrated in low-income areas.^{18 19} People of African descent are exposed to the highest number of hate crimes.²⁰

To holistically understand drivers of violent extremism in Sweden and to design effective policies to counter it, racism cannot be framed only as a product of white extremist fringe groups—rather, its presence and impact on marginalized identity groups must be analyzed across all facets of society.

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

What motivates people to join white extremist groups? One can consider individual grievances and psychological processes through a gender lens, for example. The vast majority of members of these groups are male. Notions of masculinity play a central role in recruitment and participation. In Sweden, these groups promote a specific image of maleness, omnipresent in their propaganda: a large, muscular, warrior archetype, often heavily tattooed with white extremist or Viking symbols. Michael Kimmel, an American sociologist who conducted extensive research with members of white extremist groups in Europe, has found that men are attracted to such an image because it represents a solution to their sense of “aggrieved entitlement”: a gendered sense of entitlement thwarted by an experience of emasculation.²¹ Men may feel emasculated due to several push factors including victimization, for instance from being isolated or bullied in school, or because they have experienced economic distress that blocks them from assuming traditional male “provider” roles.²²

5. Widfeldt, A. (2009). Party change as a necessity – the case of the Sweden Democrats. ([access here](#)).

6. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs – Population Division. (2019). International migrant stock 2019: country profiles. ([access here](#)).

7. Ekman, M. (2019). Anti-immigration and racist discourse in social media. ([access here](#)).

8. Reuters. (2018). Exclusive: Right-wing sites swamp Sweden with ‘junk news’ in tight election race. ([access here](#)).

9. Equinet. (2019). Sweden: Racist and Xenophobic Hate Speech on the Rise Despite Considerable Preventive Efforts. ([access here](#)).

10. Reuters. (2017). Three Swedish men get jail for bomb attacks on asylum centers. ([access here](#)).

11. Institute of Race Relations (IRR) (2014). Sweden’s counter-extremism model and the stigmatizing of anti-racism. ([access here](#)).

12. Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX). (2019). Right-wing extremism in Norway: changes and challenges. University of Oslo. ([access here](#)).

13. New York Times. (2019). Attacks by White Extremists Are Growing. So Are Their Connections. ([access here](#)).

14. Ibid.

15. BuzzFeed News. (2017). How Sweden Became the Most Alt-Right Country in Europe. ([access here](#)).

16. Spencer’s Swedish co-founder Daniel Friberg who runs the far-right publishing company Arktos Media has since left the AltRight corporation.

17. Etc. (2020). Experten: Finns rasism även bland svenska poliser. ([access here](#)).

18. Equinet. (2019). Sweden: Racist and Xenophobic Hate Speech on the Rise Despite Considerable Preventive Efforts. ([access here](#)).

19. Amnesty International. (2018). Sweden: Homeless Roma and other EU migrants face widespread discrimination and dangerous conditions. ([access here](#)).

20. Multicultural Centre (Mångkulturellt centrum) (2014). Afrofobia - A overview of the situation for Afro-Swedes in contemporary Sweden (Afrofobi - En kunskapsöversikt över afrosvenskars situation i dagens Sverige) commissioned by the Ministry of Labour (Arbetsmarknadsdepartementet). ([access here](#)).

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

22. Ibid.

Participation in white supremacist groups offers men a feeling of ideological superiority and moral authority over others—specifically, other races and women, support from and camaraderie with other men, and a predefined masculine identity and simplified belief system to fit into. Kimmel posits that the recruitment process to white extremist groups, during which new members are often asked to prove themselves by starting fights or committing acts of violence, serves a “rite of passage,” a way to reclaim their manhood and restore their sense of entitlement.²³ The image of a Viking—a common symbolic trope among Nordic white supremacist groups—encapsulates these pull factors, representing untamed masculinity and connection to an armed brotherhood of fighters and heroes.²⁴ Once men become members, they are able to continuously affirm their masculine identity by emasculating the “other.”

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Women form a substantial minority in the Swedish white supremacist movement. Their role may be less central and active than that played by women in American groups on the extreme right. They often enter the movement as girlfriends of white extremist men.²⁵ Roles and expectations for women oscillate between two contrasting models of femininity: the conservative “holy mother” of the nation who assumes a familial, housewife role, and the skinhead (or “skinbyrd,” as the female term goes) who fights alongside men and adopts traditionally masculine traits.²⁶ Women might also act as a symbol, a “Valkyrie” to inspire men to fight battles for the future of the white race.²⁷ In any of these roles, their agency is removed: they are reduced to their ability to produce children, expected to act like men, or elevated to a mythical icon of the white nationalist cause.

Motivations for women to join white extremist groups are less easily explained by psychological drivers alone, 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.

A Youth Problem? Challenging the Vulnerability Myth

Young people, particularly young men, are typically, and mistakenly, portrayed as the group most vulnerable to recruitment into violent extremism. Swedish counter-extremism policy, including its 2015 communication “Actions to Make Society More Resilient to Violent Extremism” and 2016 “National Strategy to Counter Violent Extremism” targets most of its recommendations to groups working with young people and their parents and relatives, for instance by providing guidance to social services who “come into contact with girls, boys, young women and young men... involved in violent extremism.”²⁸ The perception is that young people from difficult social situations are prone to recruitment by violent extremist groups, including white extremism, and that schools can act as recruiting grounds.

However, while white extremism was clearly linked to youth culture in the 1990s and early 2000s, these days members of white supremacist groups in Sweden are primarily adults, typically older white men.²⁹ ³⁰ Studies have shown that young people in Sweden, who have grown up in a multicultural society, are less xenophobic than older generations.³¹ These identity considerations challenge prevailing assumptions about vulnerability to recruitment by extremist groups and are important to consider in the design of counterterrorism and countering violent extremism programming.

EXIT Sweden: Disengagement through Rebuilding (Gender) Identity

The EXIT program, established in 1998 as part of the non-profit organization, Fryshuset, offers a social and relational approach to disengaging members of white supremacist groups (referred to as “clients” in the model). EXIT’s founder Ken Lindahl is himself a former member of a neo-Nazi group, and in the earlier years of the program EXIT staff (referred to as “coaches”) was largely composed of former white extremists. This helped to establish trust with clients and understand their needs.

Women’s agency is removed: they are either reduced to their ability to produce children, expected to act like men, or elevated to a mythical icon of the white nationalist cause.

23. Kimmel, M. (2007). Racism as Adolescent Male Rite of Passage: Ex-Nazis in Scandinavia. ([access here](#)).

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

26. Teitelbaum. (2014). Saga’s Sorrow: Femininities of Despair in the Music of Radical White Nationalism. *Ethnomusicology*, 58(3), 405.

27. Darby, S. (2019). The Rise of the Valkyries. *Harper’s Magazine*. ([access here](#)).

28. Government of Sweden. (2014). Actions to Make Society More Resilient to Violent Extremism. 2014/15:144. ([access here](#)).

29. Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX). (2019). Right-wing extremism in Norway: changes and challenges. University of Oslo. ([access here](#)).

30. Institute of Race Relations (IRR) (2014). Sweden’s counter-extremism model and the stigmatizing of anti-racism. ([access here](#)).

31. Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX). (2019). Right-wing extremism in Norway: changes and challenges. University of Oslo. ([access here](#)).



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

Currently, the staff is a mixture of social workers, academics and former white supremacists. EXIT's model has been adopted by other countries such as Norway, Germany, Sweden, Denmark and the United States to disengage right-wing extremists and gang members, and the program has been expanded to support de-radicalization of Islamic extremists. Available data indicates EXIT Sweden has a high success rate in addressing deradicalization and disengagement for its target population, although the data is limited due to Sweden's personal data protection laws.³²

By encouraging critical thinking around gendered issues, clients were able to break down some of the constricting ideas around masculinity that they had internalized during their participation in the movement.

The EXIT program is self-help based, relying on the client's personal choice to disengage from the movement. A coach'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. This is no simple task, as clients are used to having their identities dictated and circumscribed by the white extremist group they belonged to, and most of their social interactions and relationships exist within the movement. EXIT places a heavy emphasis on educational and emotional support, providing group meetings, individual therapy, advice on social lives and practical support in searching for a job or returning to school.³³

Notably, the Swedish EXIT model takes a non-ideological approach, steering away from directly challenging white

supremacist or totalitarian ideologies. The rationale for taking a non-judgmental, relational approach rather than seeking to change ideological and political perceptions is that the individual will eventually change their perception when they integrate into alternative social settings.³⁴ A basic tenet of the organization is not to condemn the clients, but to condemn their actions. Transformation of political views is seen as secondary—a consequence of a transformation in lifestyle. In other countries, such as Germany, the EXIT program does address its clients' ideological orientations, addressing their extremist attitudes and ideological perceptions directly. This is tied to Germany being the center of origin for the Nazi ideology, as well as to the profile of EXIT Germany's clients: several clients are fourth generation Nazis, to whom ideology might emerge from their family setting and lifestyle and is a more integral part of their motives for participating in white supremacist groups.³⁵

Following Kimmel's research on the role of masculinities in white extremism, which included research on and with EXIT Sweden, EXIT coaches began informally implementing a gendered perspective in their work. An important component of the program's work with clients is "modeling" behavior, with staff acting as role models to challenge client self-perception and guide them towards a different identity and way of being. Consequently, staff reflected on how they modeled masculinities and how they could engage with male clients in a way that challenged the version of masculinity promoted by the white supremacist movement. For instance, they would give fellow staff members and clients a hug rather than a handshake to demonstrate a different level of comfort with physical touch between men.

Staff noticed that through modeling such behavior with an awareness of masculinity, clients adapted and opened up in a different way. To make sure the approach extended to all genders, EXIT Sweden eventually had a female former neo-Nazi join the team. Female clients found it easier to talk with her.

32. Daugherty, C. (2019). Deradicalization and Disengagement: Exit Programs in Norway and Sweden and Addressing Neo-Nazi Extremism. *Journal for Deradicalization*, Winter 2019/20. Nr 21. <https://journals.sfu.ca/jd/index.php/jd/article/view/287/195>

33. Ibid.

34. Christensen, T. (2015). A Question of Participation – Disengagement from the Extremist Right. A case study from Sweden. PhD Dissertation. Department of Psychology and Educational Studies. Roskilde University.

35. Ibid.

EXIT staff members also encouraged reflection on masculinity in the movement, talking generally about how clients relate to topics such as pressure for men to look a certain way, what it means to be a man in the movement and the treatment of women in the movement. For instance, one male client, who was from a family situation with severe trauma and had spent a large part of his life in prisons, talked about how it was important to him to be extremely big and muscled, visibly superior, and always in control during his time in the movement. Following prompting by a staff member, he was able to reflect on how this stance had affected him and hindered him from constructively dealing with conflict and managing his emotions.

By encouraging critical thinking around gendered issues, clients were able to break down some of the constricting ideas around gender and masculinity that they had internalized during their participation in the movement. The gender perspective organically complemented and enhanced EXIT's existing work around altering and rebuilding social identity.

In addition to providing insight about integrating gender into deradicalization and disengagement programs, EXIT Sweden also offers a model of CVE programming that reaches an older demographic. This is especially important given the recruitment trends described above. In Sweden, the program works primarily with the country's older neo-Nazi population. Schools and churches are considered typical entry points for deradicalization and off-ramping interventions, as they allow for engaging young people and religious leaders in CT and CVE. EXIT's approach - inviting individuals who voluntarily disaffiliated themselves from white extremist groups - may provide an alternative entry point, particularly for forms of violent extremism that are not tied to religion, or that have older participants.

A Nexus of Drivers for Peace

Sweden's approach to countering and preventing violent extremism is largely focused on the provision of a toolkit of social services and relational support. The government funds programs like EXIT Sweden and the Tolerance Project, a project practiced in 60 Swedish schools that works with teenagers in schools to promote tolerance, facilitate democratic dialogue and prevent "at-risk" youth from being drawn into violent extremist groups.³⁶

The purely social and relational approach taken in Sweden has been the subject of growing criticism by organizations such as the Institute for Race Relations, who view it as trivializing the political and ideological aspects of the problem, arguing that drivers to violent extremism cannot be properly addressed by an extension of social services alone.³⁷ Their critique posits that taking this approach allows the governance to maintain neutrality and a façade of tolerance, framing white extremists as

victims or "lost sheep" who need to be brought back into mainstream Swedish society, thus normalizing fascism as a developmental stage.³⁸ They argue that government tolerance of white extremists stands in contrast to the treatment of ethnic minorities by Swedish police and limited access to justice for victims of hate crimes.³⁹

Devising new drivers for peace, rights and pluralism will require operating at the nexus of psychological processes, historical legacies, cultural values and economic, and social and political forces.

The philosophy behind Sweden's approach to combating racism may be rooted in the country's relationship to white identity, which some researchers theorize can be defined by "dueling nostalgias": one mourning the loss of a racially homogenous "old Sweden" that has disappeared due to the growing presence of immigrants, and the other mourning the loss of a morally superior "good Sweden" as tolerant attitudes have dissipated amid new waves of anti-immigrant sentiment.⁴⁰ Per this theory, a melancholic longing for a whiter past defines both racism and responses to racism in Sweden with the latter emphasizing a return to tolerance, rather than institutionalizing an explicit anti-racist ideology.

In terms of drivers of peace in Sweden, programs like EXIT and the Tolerance Project, which engage people at the prevention and disengagement stage to build or rebuild a stable identity outside of extremist thought and practice, occupy an important niche. 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.

The demands of young people, who have been at the forefront of demanding accountability for structural racism in the Black Lives Matter movement and in leading other anti-racist activism, illustrate what these interventions might require: a recognition of Sweden's role in colonialism and scientific racism, addressing discrimination and exclusion of national minorities, redressing racial profiling in the police and criminal justice system, and closing the income inequality gap between white Swedes and racial minorities—to name a few.⁴¹ Devising new drivers of peace, rights and pluralism will require operating at the nexus of psychological processes, historical legacies, cultural values and economic, social and political forces. Gender and identity are key considerations in such an approach, not only to analyze what motivates people to join extremist groups, but also to capture the differences between white extremism and Islamic extremism, and the specific tools required to combat each.

36. Skiple, A. (2020). The Importance of Significant Others in Preventing Extremism: The Philosophy and Practice of the Swedish Tolerance Project. ([access here](#)).

37. Institute of Race Relations (IRR) (2014). Sweden's counter-extremism model and the stigmatizing of anti-racism. ([access here](#)).

38. Ibid.

39. Ibid.

40. Lundstrom, C. and Teitelbaum, B. (2017). Nordic Whiteness: an introduction. *Scandinavian Studies*, Vol. 89, No. 2, Nordic Whiteness (Summer 2017), pp. 151- 158. ([access here](#)).

41. Daily Beast. (2021). Racism is Challenging Sweden's Myth of a Post-Racial Paradise. ([access here](#)).