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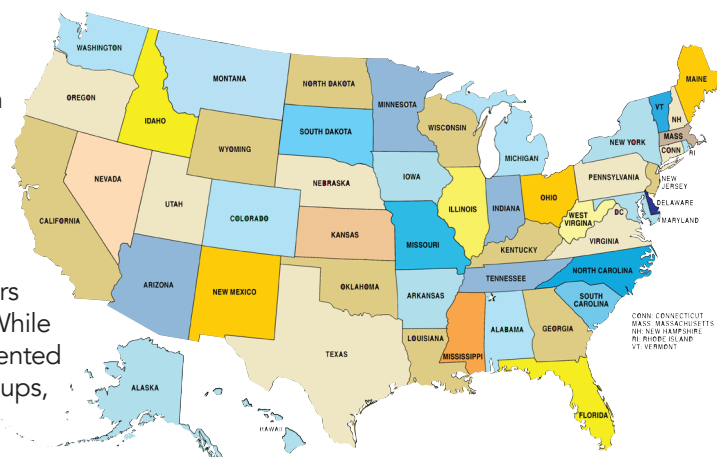
CASE STUDY

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

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

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

White supremacy is endemic to the United States, dating back to chattel slavery and the practice and policies of removal, relocation, and disenfranchisement of Indigenous peoples. The Ku Klux Klan, which emerged after the American Civil War, was the first American white supremacist group to use vigilante tactics to preserve white supremacy. In the 1980s, spurred by a sense of betrayal from the United States government's withdrawal from the Vietnam War, the American white power movement consolidated and transitioned from seeking to preserve the historical racial hierarchy towards actively aiming to overthrow the government with the goal to create an all-white ethno-state. The new white power movement unified anti-government militia groups, white supremacist groups such as the Klan, Neo-Nazis and skinheads, and religious fundamentalist groups.⁴

White supremacist violence also intersects with antisemitism, anti-immigration beliefs, and male supremacy. Periods of increased white supremacist-motivated violence ebb and flow cyclically. The United States is currently experiencing an intensifying period of white supremacist violence. This violence is spread across all age demographics, from teenagers to baby boomers, and spans all economic demographics. However, those under 25 are overrepresented in online-driven, accelerationist, neo-Nazi affiliated groups. Militia and separatist groups tend to attract 25- to 50-year-olds, and adherents to conspiracy-driven affiliations such as QAnon tend to be heavily populated by those 35 and over.



White women have historically played an integral part in white supremacy in the United States.

4. Belew, Kathleen. (2018). The History of White Power. New York Times ([access here](#)).

Real or fabricated violence against white women has often been used effectively to mobilize people to white supremacist violence.

The most recent United States Department of State Bureau of Counterterrorism report indicates that “racially or ethnically motivated terrorism (REMT), particularly white supremacist terrorism” has increased in the last five years.⁵ The United States Department of Homeland Security reports in the most recent Homeland Threat Assessment that 2019 was the most lethal year for domestic violent extremism in the United States since the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, and states, “Among DVEs [domestic violent extremists], racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists—specifically white supremacist extremists (WSEs)—will remain the most persistent and lethal threat in the Homeland.”⁶ Though it remains unclear at this point, there is much concern over lockdown measures and COVID-19-driven isolation amplifying future white supremacist violence.⁷

Women have historically played an integral part in white supremacy in the United States; from slavery⁸, through segregation⁹, and into the present day.¹⁰ Real or fabricated violence against white women has often been used very effectively to mobilize people to commit white supremacist violence.

Gender, Identity, and Drivers to White Supremacist Violent Extremism

Women often functionally work towards amplifying, marketing, and mainstreaming the messaging of white supremacist ideology. This outward-facing role and dissemination of propaganda is often made the purview of women, who, by virtue of their femininity, are presumed to have a certain distance from explicit hate and violence. Since women are discounted as coequal threats to their male counterparts, they can engage in violence or capacity building for violence undetected.

In practice, women are often not allowed to operate in leadership roles other than in relation to other women. For example, women are often not permitted to moderate forums other than all-women forums, which preserves the space for men. Women are encouraged to enhance their knowledge and ability to converse intelligently, but never to contradict or outshine their male counterparts. While women are largely outside of the decision-making structures, they play influential roles and can be leaders and organizers within these movements, as we saw with

the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia and during the events at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021.

One of the cornerstones of preventing violent extremist engagement is understanding the motivations, reasons, and conditions in which someone finds resonance with the messaging offered by violent extremist actors and communities. These motivations, reasons, and conditions are sometimes referred to collectively as “drivers”. Individuals radicalizing to violence usually have intensely personal stories explaining why they entrenched themselves in these ideologies, worldviews, and/or communities. However, these individual stories are always happening within larger societal and cultural realities. Though not all interventions will focus on these overlapping realities, effective prevention must address both personal and cultural aspects of this dynamic. Drivers can be grouped into personal and cultural categories.

Personal drivers include such things as unresolved trauma, including experiences of violence during childhood or youth, a perceived lack of agency, disconnection from a sense of belonging, a desire to feel a meaningful connection to something greater than oneself, struggles expressing and developing one’s identity, revenge for real or perceived wrongdoing, separation from a sense of meaningful empowerment, and unfulfillment of desires to engage in thoughtful and meaningful discussions or dialogue about philosophical and/or political ideas. Cultural drivers include such things as shifting demographics, war, widespread corruption, real or perceived economic, social, and cultural inequalities, lack of access to quality social services and safety nets, social unrest, and changing power and economic structures.

The dynamics of violent white supremacy in the United States are heavily gendered. Messaging and propaganda are imbued with themes of male supremacy, traditional gender roles, and nostalgia hearkening back to idealized visions of the past based on this gendered hierarchy. Women are often billed as sanctified keepers of the home, bearers of the future of the white race, and the conduit for passing on traditions to younger generations. At the same time, intimate partner and gender-based violence (GBV) are rife within white supremacist circles.

Shifting cultural ideas about the “ideal man” away from exhibiting physical strength and serving as the primary financial earner, towards broader emotional support and fluency in domestic skills can exacerbate feelings of disempowerment and a lack of agency in men. White supremacy offers simplicity. Men’s roles in the movement are often very structured, hierarchical, and clear, whereas in the rest of society those roles are ambiguous and evolving. Male strength and leadership are emphasized. For people who feel disempowered in their lives, this gives them dignity by attributing an inherent value to their lives, opinions, and aspirations.

5. Country Reports on Terrorism 2019. US Department of State, Bureau of Counterterrorism. ([access here](#)).

6. Homeland Threat Assessment. (2020). US Department of Homeland Security. ([access here](#)).

7. Ibid.

8. Jones-Rogers, S. (2019). *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South*. Yale University Press.

9. McRae, E.G. (2018). *Mothers of Massive Resistance: White Women and the Politics of White Supremacy*. Oxford University Press.

10. Darby, S. (2020). *Sisters in Hate: American Women on the Front Lines of White Nationalism*. Little, Brown and Company.

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The movement's goal of racial protection, racial purity, and racial advancement becomes the predominant concern; all else becomes superfluous. The communication skills and emotional intelligence that many of those who join these groups lack are viewed as weaknesses and often equated with femininity. Landing in a place where the things you lack are seen as weak, unnecessary to hold power, and even as the antithesis of being valuable, frees men from the challenge of navigating the world without these capacities.

Likewise, women face increasing social complexity as their roles expand beyond home, while they still carry most of the domestic labor load. The gendered messaging of white supremacy offers a framework that eases the burden of navigating the complexity of modern life, roles, and identities. The gendered burden of care and an inadequate social safety net lead some women to find solace and support in these groups that emphasize traditional gender roles. The isolation of atomized family units leaves an unfulfilled desire for the extended family and "village" to help raise their children and provide broader meaning to their role as mothers.

The Gendered Interplay of Trauma and Agency

Many women and men in these groups have experienced trauma in some form, and often in multiple forms. They have not developed healthy communication skills, interpersonal skills, and emotional intelligence to navigate our complex modern society. With unresolved trauma, the brain protects itself to prioritize space given to survival mechanisms. People exist suspended in these realities with no capacity to add extra layers, thus making navigating complexity impossible as the brain is hyper-vigilantly working to detect threats. Simplistic, binary worldviews with clear groups of "others" who are seen as threats can become the default response, because the brain is in a "safe or threat" mode with the question "Should I hide/run/fight?" always front of mind.

Abused people often become abusers. Research shows that the highest indicator that someone will act out violently is a history of experiencing violence to effectively solve problems earlier in life, as a victim, witness, or perpetrator.¹¹ Most mass shooters have a history of violence



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against women: among the ten deadliest mass shootings in U.S. history, nine were committed by individuals with histories of violence against women.¹²

Why would women engage and entrench themselves in spaces where male supremacy is so dominant? Women can derive a sense of agency through adjacency to power from which they otherwise feel disconnected. Since fewer women are represented inside these groups, a dynamic exists of empowerment or heightened worth, filling that huge gap in sense of self-worth, because they are "big fish in a small pond". Straight white women also experience a sense of heightened power over the targets of their hate and violence: non-white groups, Jewish people, and marginalized sexualities. Women derive real benefits from their participation in white supremacy; it allows them to maintain and expand social, political, and economic power.

Male infighting and struggles for power are inherent and never-ending within these spaces. Women can offer cohesion and build peace within groups plagued by internal conflict. Their efforts can help mitigate and counterbalance the endemic splintering of groups. They often play the role of filling the emotional labor gap, since groups are comprised mostly of men without the capacity to do so, and emotional skills have been largely devalued. Even though these roles are being played out in very negative spaces and to perpetuate white supremacy, it often gives women a sense of purpose and meaning they did not experience outside the movement. While they might come from fractured homes and marginalized social spaces where they felt worthless, inside the movement their input is vital and sought after.

11. Athens, L. (2017). "Applying Violentization: From Theory to Praxis". Victims & Offenders. Vol. 12:4, pp. 497-522. ([access here](#)).

12. Nicholson, J. and DeVoe, E. (2020). "Violence Against Women and Public Mass Shootings". Boston University Institute for Health System Innovation & Policy. ([access here](#)).

Interpersonal relationships within the white supremacist groups are often incredibly violent. A large percentage of women who leave have reported GBV before and during their participation in these spaces. Previous experiences of GBV often means these women have a sense of personal worthlessness as a baseline. Violence within a group simply reinforces that baseline view. The violence directed towards them may also be justified by perpetrators as a form of protection from others who are perceived as threats—threats that may be real or imagined due to the hyper-vigilance often exhibited by those who have unresolved trauma.

Generating financial and housing stability for women allows them to decrease their dependency on toxic relationships. Connecting women with GBV support groups and services offers them a chance to create new relationship dynamics, which emphasize safety and nurturing care

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 former extremists reintegrate and develop skills to engage with the wider society. Foley Martinez was active in the white power movement during the late 1980s and early 1990s and has been engaged in rehabilitative mentorship for over twenty years. 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 organizing trainings for law enforcement officials.

Foley Martinez's peer-to-peer mentorship is informed by her own journey into and out of violent extremism. She recognizes that rehabilitation and reintegration require consistent stability, mental wellness building, a healthy processing of shame, and a pathway to integrate past actions healthfully into the present in order to begin building a future. She emphasizes identifying and addressing traumatizing environments and events in a mentee's life, improving interpersonal communications skills, gaining emotional skills, developing self-care and employment skills, and growing pro-social community building skills. She understands that people must be active agents in their own transformation for it to be effective and long-lasting.

Creating Stability

For positive transformation to take place, this model initially prioritizes improving conditions of stability. Disengagement is a process just as much as engagement and entrenchment, but some baselines must be met first in order to make progress. Without a sense of stability, people find it very difficult to focus on healing. People need a safe place to live, a predictable, livable income, access to healthcare, and nurturing relationships. Some people disaffiliate (they no longer hold white supremacist beliefs and don't



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identify with the group), but they don't necessarily leave or disengage because their whole world is wrapped up in the movement. Their relationships, support for their children, friendships, and support systems all still exist inside the hate- and violence-based spaces. They no longer believe in what they are doing, but stay because it is the only family, community, and reality they know, and they have learned to navigate it over an extended period of time.

A large percentage of women have reported GBV before entering violent white supremacy, as well as while engaged inside these spaces. People who have experienced GBV often remain in unsafe relationships, citing a lack of resources, difficulty identifying what has happened as violence, feelings of having nowhere else to go, and conflating the cycle of abuse with love. Many times, women who have left violent extremism continue to engage in emotionally chaotic, tumultuous, unsafe, and abusive intimate partner relationships. There are many reasons for this, but much of women's identity building has often been based on their relationships with the men who are still inside, and that does not simply end once they disengage. Women struggle to engage consistently in holistic, nontoxic relationships and also seem to have more difficulty developing financial stability outside the movement. Because of this, special consideration must be given to addressing some of the underlying factors to break this cycle. Generating financial and housing stability for women allows them to decrease their dependency on toxic relationships. Connecting women with GBV support groups and services offers them a chance to create new relationship dynamics, which emphasize safety and nurturing care.

Transforming Trauma

As Foley Martinez says, "No one's story into violence and hate begins: 'So everything was totally awesome in my life, and then...'" There are nearly always multitudinous layers of trauma interwoven into someone's life before they entrench themselves in violent extremism. While they are engaged, new layers of trauma are added. Helping someone disengage from hate and violence is inseparable from helping them disentangle their trauma in order to begin to healthfully process and learn to integrate these harmful experiences into their lives in a more holistic way. The more layers of trauma

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that exist in a person's life, the more they are likely to engage in behaviors harmful to themselves and/or others. Increased childhood experiences of trauma are correlated with higher levels of both domestic violence and sexual assault.¹³

Unfortunately, as mentioned above, people whose lives have been impacted by trauma often have difficulty identifying what they have experienced as traumatic. Adding an additional layer of complexity to this, many people engaged in violence experience Perpetration-Induced Traumatic Stress (PITS) in response to the hurt and harm they have perpetuated.

For women, this often entails working through the trauma of GBV both before and during engagement in violent extremism. Men who have disengaged also have often reported emotional, physical, and sexual abuse in childhood. Connecting people with resources, information, and mental health care professionals to better identify, understand, and process their trauma is a cornerstone of rehabilitation and reintegration for those leaving violent extremism. The goal should be for people to learn to thrive, not just to cease to engage in one harmful set of actions.

Embracing Empathy, Complexity and Non-Violent Communication Skills

Because so many people disengaging from white supremacy have been immersed in toxic and violence-imbued spaces for long periods, it is essential to help them develop healthy communication and emotional skills. Research suggests that even just learning how to name the emotion one is feeling helps with healthier processing of emotions.¹⁴ Broadening men's emotional skills and tools empowers them to build healthier relationships and non-destructive means of expressing their fears and struggles. This can also help expand men's ability to engage in the world where far more emotional competency is required of them. Women gaining emotional proficiency are better empowered to identify toxic relationships and potentially break cycles of abuse.

Non-Violent Communication: It can be greatly beneficial to learn non-violent communication (NVC) skills and tools, where the focus is placed on identifying one's emotions and needs, empathetic listening, and non-coercive requests for engagement. Many people leaving white supremacy have never encountered a healthy model of communication. Learning necessary, healthy boundary-setting skills assists women in developing healthier relationships and beginning the process of cultivating an identity of their own, outside of their interpersonal relationships. Men benefit from learning how to respect boundaries, as well as how to seek and honor consent in their interactions and relationships.

13. "What ACEs/PCEs do you have?". Aces Too High News. Last accessed 31 March 2021. ([access here](#)).

14. "Putting Feelings Into Words Produces Therapeutic Effects In The Brain." (2007). ScienceDaily. ([access here](#)).



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Mindfulness: There is much evidence that developing the practice of mindfulness- broadly defined as the practice of focusing awareness on the present moment and accepting one's feelings, thoughts, and physical sensations - promotes both psychological and physical health.¹⁵ For those leaving violence and hate, cultivating mindfulness seems to enhance their ability to re-engage with the world and other people in healthier ways. Mindfulness also seems to help in the development of self-compassion, which is a necessary part of holistically processing the shame that most former violent extremists feel about their engagement in white supremacy. For women who have experienced GBV, the development of mind-body

integration seems especially important for processing that violence. It also seems very important for women to learn that self-care doesn't equate to selfishness, because so much of their time and identity in the white power movement involved messaging about their subservience to their male counterparts.

Critical and Complex Thinking and Empathy: The final piece of this puzzle is improving the capacity for complexity in thought, solution generation, and identity building. After the intense, inward focus of previous healing, the goal is for people to holistically reintegrate back into society at large. In order to do this, they 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. Women learn that there are no prescriptive roles which they must inherently fulfill; they can seek meaningful education, recreation, and employment. Improving domestic-work skills can help men more successfully navigate a broader view of masculinity, through gaining capacity to more equitably share household workloads.

15. Murphy, M. et al. (2012). "The Benefits of Dispositional Mindfulness in Physical Health: A Longitudinal Study of Female College Students". Journal of American College Health. Vol. 60:5, pp. 341-348. ([access here](#)).