

**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

**Acknowledgements:**

ICAN gratefully acknowledges Shannon Foley Martinez for her collaboration on developing the case study and Global Affairs Canada for their financial support and feedback.

We also thank Rana Allam, Sanam Naraghi Anderlini, Sven Botha, Melinda Holmes, Juliana Jackson, Maya Kavalier, and Stacey Schamber for their review and editorial support.

**Suggested Citation:**

Shannon Foley Martinez and Melinda Holmes, 'Adjacency to Power: Gender, Trauma and Violence in White Supremacist Extremism in the United States (Case Summary),' International Civil Society Action Network, October 2021.

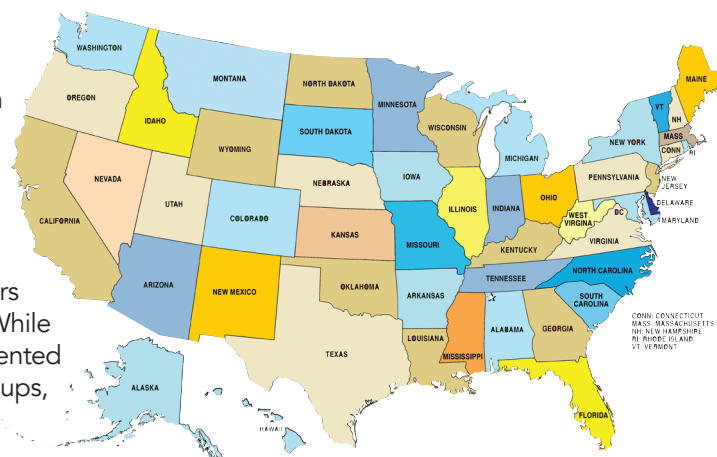
## CASE SUMMARY

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

A Case Study on the Role of Gender and Identity in Shaping Positive Alternatives to Extremisms<sup>1</sup>

## 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 roles<sup>2</sup> 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,<sup>3</sup> 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](mailto: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.<sup>4</sup> 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



Shannon Foley Martinez uses a holistic and pluralistic approach to help people leaving extremist groups to reintegrate and develop skills to engage with the wider society.

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.