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CASE SUMMARY

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

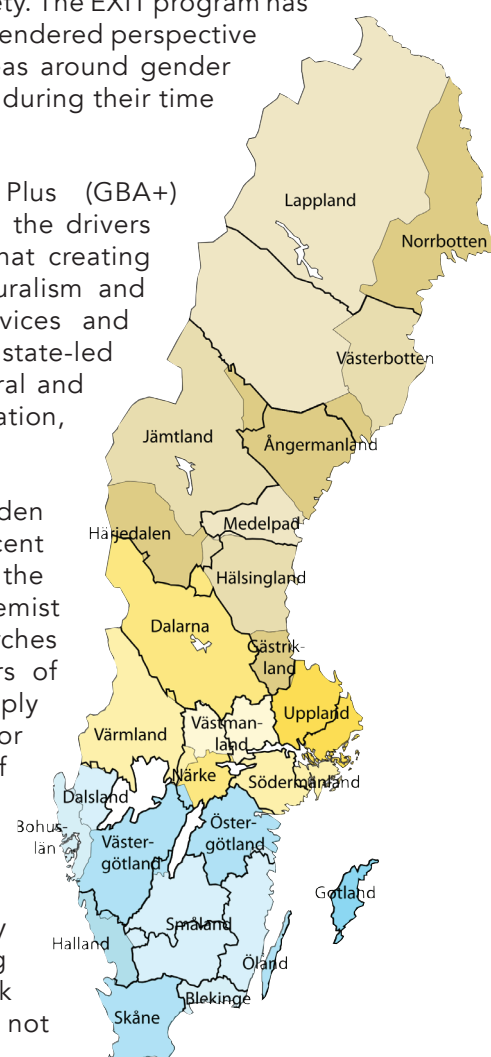
A Case Study on the Role of Gender and Identity in Shaping Positive Alternatives to Extremisms¹

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 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.

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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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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.