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# Why Women Leave White Nationalist Movements: Exploring the Deradicalization Process

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## Abstract

This essay aims to explore primarily why women leave white nationalist movements, and the possible role of gender in the radicalization and deradicalization of white women in white nationalist movements. This essay examines the narratives of three former white supremacist women - Angela King, Samantha, and Katie McHugh - and identifies patterns in their journeys. This study has a limited scope due to the small number of case studies available and needs further research. In attempting to connect different narratives of former white supremacist women in an under-studied area, I take the liberty to interpret their stories within the broader framework of organized racism. For clarity's sake, organized racism and hate, extremism, the alt-right, white power, nationalism, and supremacy are used interchangeably.

## INTRODUCTION

The Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville in 2017 forced the public to realize that the alt-right no longer resided on the fringes of the political spectrum – it had infiltrated the mainstream and shifted American politics. That rally gave a face to the alt-right movement - multiple faces, in fact. Hundreds of angry young white men holding torches and dressed in polo shirts exclaimed racist chants and denounced what they believed to be white genocide. But these new faces of the movement are not quite accurate. The alt-right is code for white power/nationalism, or organized racism, and completely erases the presence of alt-right women from the forefront of the movement. White women have played critical and active roles in upholding white supremacy in broader society but are relegated to passive auxiliary positions in formal extremist groups. This research essay explores the roles of women in

white power movements, the processes by which they become radicalized, and the potential of women to deradicalize others.

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF WOMEN IN WHITE POWER MOVEMENT

Before exploring the various roles women play in white power movements, I must express the difference in white women's actions in perpetuating systemic racism both in and outside of these movements. White women, particularly white mothers, have largely shaped how racism is expressed through political, social, and economic institutions in America through their political activism.

After the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling in 1954, white segregationists rushed to interfere in forced integration. White parents turned towards private schooling, administrators closed schools, and white women and children took to the streets in protest. White women formed new organizations, such as the

Paul Revere Ladies and Women for Constitutional Government (WCG), to combat integration and the Civil Rights Act of 1957. Suffering repeated legislative defeat, segregationists knew that they could not win by challenging racial issues head on. The WCG marked the turning point of southern politics, marrying segregationist views and conservatism to form color-blind politics that emphasized constitutional issues and property rights (McRae 2018). The WCG opposed the mainstream media, communism, sex education, and public childcare while supporting free economic enterprise, a strict constitutional government, and international US dominance. Without explicitly mentioning race, the WCG supported policies that had racist outcomes and helped sustain a Jim Crow nation (McRae 2018). These color-blind politics that champion conservative values, economic and international political dominance, and small government have become the foundation for the modern Republican party platform. Through their activism, white women have preserved white supremacist ideology in mainstream politics.

While white women have taken the lead in organized racism in broader society, they have been relegated to more passive and supportive roles in extreme white supremacist organizations. White nationalist groups structure themselves in a variety of ways, but most if not all have some form of gendered hierarchy. The most significant role that white women play are wives and mothers continuing and rearing the next Aryan generation. They are especially valued for their capacity to bear and raise as many white children as possible to ensure Aryan survival. To safeguard their racial future, however, white women must

**“While white women have taken the lead in organized racism in broader society, they have been relegated to more passive and supportive roles in extreme white supremacist organizations.”**

strictly adhere to conventional gender norms. Supportive wives enable white Aryan men to maintain their racial activism instead of focusing their energy on homelife (Blee 2002). Traditional wives help unify the white family and produce children believing in white supremacist values. In white power circles, this traditional family unit is the only acceptable way to counter the population decline of white people, or white genocide, as they call it. Women performing white motherhood in an appealing way can help legitimize the movement in the eyes of the mainstream public (Belew 2018). Depicting rallies as events where women with babies care and school children together and serve food to attending families normalizes the activities of extremist groups (Blee 2002). As wives and mothers, women can protect members and secure the longevity of an intergenerational racist movement.

White women also play a more operative role in white power movements. While leadership positions are limited, they often exercise leadership informally. Women are key to the social integrity of the movement, serving as the gatekeepers of

white supremacy. They homeschool children, help create inspiring rallies and meetings, and forge bonds between families. These same tactics were used by white women in the era of segregation to enforce the color line in their communities (McRae 2018). Their recruiting strategy often involves forming personal connections with potential new members and easing them into racist life. They maintain and strengthen social groups that provide support to potential new

members, which can make the group seem more appealing. New recruits are more open to joining the group if they are invited in, instead of having white power literature forcefully presented by

angry men at rallies. White women effectively nurture sustained commitment to the cause, making them critical to recruitment efforts (Blee 2002)..

## HOW WOMEN ARE RADICALIZED INTO WHITE SUPREMACY

White supremacist groups and the alt-right have taken full advantage of the internet by making a place for themselves online and establishing links to the mainstream. They have weaponized beauty and political hashtags to stir up fear and resentment, which motivates people to begin exploring the more extreme side of the internet further. The alt-right has also famously used memes to generate engagement with their content, exemplified by Richard Spencer claiming that the “Pepe the Frog” meme is used to spread their ideas. Hashtags and memes are easily digestible content shared on mainstream websites, such as Facebook and Twitter. Engagement in white supremacist content can lead users down a frightening rabbit hole to radicalization on sites like Reddit and 4chan.

White women can interact with white supremacist hashtags in many online communities, such as beauty. White supremacists spread #ItsOkToBeWhite as a counter to #BlackGirlMagic, a hashtag highlighting black women’s value to the beauty community and other general achievements. Along with the hashtag comes the idea that white beauty is under attack and is beginning to be valued less than nonwhite beauty (Badalich 2019). White women who feel intentionally excluded by the new embrace of women of color in the beauty community may follow #ItsOkToBeWhite and be increasingly exposed to white supremacist content that celebrates whiteness. They may be drawn into white identity conversations where others express their insecurities. At this point, the users have found a group that supports and validates their feelings and encourages further

exploration into white supremacist rhetoric. When users repost or create similar content, likes and attention validate their opinions, and the increased engagement incentivizes social media sites to show more white supremacist content to their users.

Politics is another avenue by which women can be radicalized. Anti-feminists that are vocal on social media can be introduced to communities who share similar views and begin interacting with those groups off mainstream sites. Less mainstream sites, such as the reddit threat r/theredpill, harbor more radical beliefs and lead anti-feminist women to engage with white supremacist users (Badalich 2019). The alt-right has encouraged activity on subreddits and forums, allowing white supremacists to share their own content and rhetoric to a large group of potential new members seeking validation (Badalich 2019). As stated above, validation is key to the continuation of radicalization.

## WHY WOMEN LEAVE THE WHITE POWER MOVEMENT

In order to determine the ways to deradicalize white supremacist women, it is necessary to analyze the stories of women who have left the hate movement. It is important to acknowledge that it is exceptionally difficult for women to leave white power movements. They often form personal relationships and are encouraged to cut off outside contact, so they become isolated from people who may challenge their beliefs or try to pull them out of the movement. Women who have husbands that are deeply involved and raise their children in the movement have little hope of escape. This section follows the stories of Angela, Samantha, and Katie who successfully left white supremacist groups.

Angela King, now a leader in deradicalizing white supremacists, used to be a prominent member within the Skinhead group. King was bullied as she grew up and felt isolated as a queer woman in a traditional southern community. The Skinhead Movement gave her a purpose and a network to rely on. Angela has said, “In the very beginning, there were points where I started to think to myself, ‘This is stuff that I already know. I learned it from my parents...I see very much that this is where I’m supposed to be...’” (Badalich 2019). White supremacist tenets had been ingrained in King since she was young, so radicalization was only a small step away.

After being arrested and sentenced to five years in federal prison for robbery, she interacted with people outside of the white nationalist network. She fell in love with a black woman who became her support system alongside other women of color. When she left prison, she also left the Skinhead movement (Badalich 2019). For King, her sole source of support lay within the Skinhead movement. When she was removed from that support network, she had to make friends with women who were often the target of her own hate. King had to consciously unlearn the homophobia and racism she had internalized in a social group where that was encouraged. Her physical removal from the group and the strength she gained from her new support network allowed her to leave the movement for good.

Samantha, whose last name is protected for privacy purposes, is the former national women’s coordinator for the Identity Evropa (IE) Movement. She originally saw the group as pro-white, not necessarily anti-minority. She had recently broken off a serious relationship with a guy who described himself as a fascist. His desire to date someone with a similar ideology compelled her to look into IE. Samantha explained, “I went in because I was insecure, and it made me feel good about myself” (Marantz 2019). Once she joined, they rekindled their

relationship, but Samantha gradually lost all her friends outside IE. Eventually she obtained a leadership role and became the national women’s coordinator, responsible for recruiting more women into the movement. She was never comfortable with the Neo-Nazi rhetoric the group would utilize at times, nevertheless she continued to work to build the movement. The Charlottesville Unite the Right Rally in 2017 marked a shift in her perspective. While she helped organize many rallies in the past, this was the first one that included other groups outside of IE. Samantha believed that the presence of multiple white power groups with differing views would lead to chaos, so she stepped back. Instead of attending, she watched the rally and subsequently the horrific death of Heather Heyer from her job at a bar. The Charlottesville incident convinced her to start reevaluating the movement to which she was dedicated (Marantz 2019).

Although Samantha was reconsidering her loyalty to IE, she was still bound to the movement by her relationship. At this point, she had broken up with her previous boyfriend and was now dating and living with the leader of IE. Even though they suffered from relationship issues, Samantha was hesitant to break off the relationship for fear of losing her leadership position in the movement as well as her home. Her resolve to leave strengthened in an interview after the Charlottesville Rally. She was interviewed by a photojournalist researching women on the far right. She freely explained her beliefs to the journalist, who challenged her logic at every turn. Samantha repeatedly denied that her beliefs (such as white separatism) were consistent with Nazi ideology, but the journalist showed her the connections between them. She was also shown how her beliefs were instrumental in horrific acts, such as Heyer’s death. Samantha could only watch as her convictions crumbled in front of her. Once she realized she had lost her beliefs, she could no longer deny that she had to leave IE. After she resigned from the movement, threats of doxing and physical harm caused

Samantha to go into hiding for a few weeks. During this time, her mind felt fragile and fragmented as she tried to discern what kind of person she truly was (Marantz 2019).

Katie McHugh is a former far-right media figure and journalist for Breitbart News. McHugh found a special place in Breitbart where Steve Bannon himself asked for her help on projects. She was an important figure and had a considerable media following, and the validation she received for her racist beliefs pulled her deeper into white nationalism (Gray 2019). She also had a serious romantic relationship with Kevin DeAnna, and soon he and his alt-right friends were her only close contacts outside of work. When her tweets became too extreme for even Breitbart to tolerate, the company fired her. Losing her job only catapulted her farther into the extreme right, as she had nowhere else to go. She moved between small media outlets on the far right, but never completely fit into the culture. McHugh was outspoken about her beliefs and very active, which often strained her personal relationships with white nationalist men as she didn't strictly adhere to the traditional gender roles expected for women. The pressure to conform and her second relationship with an abusive white supremacist man soon became too much for McHugh. Additionally, she couldn't find work as a journalist and began working in restaurants. This put distance between her and the white power movement, and by her own admission "pushed her to remove herself from the alt-right" (Gray 2019). Eventually, McHugh made a friend who committed to deradicalizing her completely and started her on the path to a more normal life (Gray 2019).

King, Samantha, and McHugh felt pressured to internalize white supremacist beliefs from people close to them - King by her parents, and Samantha and McHugh from their partners. Once they internalized racist rhetoric, it seems as though the radicalization process was inevitable. They also relied on white power groups as their only source of support and

validation. King felt ostracized from her conservative community as a queer woman, but the Skinheads made her feel like she belonged to a significant community, and therefore was important by association. When Samantha left her boyfriend, the IE Movement filled the gap in emotional fulfillment where her relationship had previously been. Her leadership role endeared her to IE members and gave her a sense of purpose. McHugh received praise and recognition for her racist views from Steve Bannon at Breitbart, social media, and her romantic partner. Because the people closest to King, Samantha, and McHugh validated their beliefs and made them feel significant, these women became political activists, transforming their private beliefs into a dedicated cause.

Their successful deradicalization occurred because of committed individuals who made a concentrated effort to change their minds. For King, she fell in love with a black woman in prison who shifted her mindset. McHugh developed a strong friendship with another person in her service job who worked to set McHugh back on the right path. Samantha began the process of leaving when she watched the death of Heather Heyer, and her conversion was solidified when she was interviewed by a female photojournalist who carefully disassembled every single belief that linked her to white supremacy. One interesting feature of their narratives is the possible role that gender played in their radicalization and extraction. In Samantha's and McHugh's cases, their romantic relationships with extremist men had the most profound impact on their own journey into extremism. McHugh also had several professional relationships with alt-right men across Breitbart and other news organizations who encouraged her views. For King and Samantha, they were deradicalized in part by the efforts of other women. King was influenced by her partner, and Samantha was affected by Heyer's death and her interview experience. The gender of McHugh's friend was unspecified.



Their stories illustrate, however, the potential significance that women play in the deradicalization processes of other women.

## LIMITATIONS

This is a very limited exploratory research essay. The selection of these narratives is biased towards women who freely joined white supremacist groups and were able to leave and safely share their stories. This study does not consider the fact that the differing reasons for leaving hate groups could have an impact on the successful deradicalization process of an individual. Additionally, it can be assumed that there are a number of women who tried and failed to leave white power groups or succeeded but due to safety concerns cannot share their stories. The interpretations in this essay of the significance of gender in the deradicalization are tentative because there is simply insufficient data to draw any certain understanding. Any definite conclusions regarding the extraction process of women from organized racism warrant further research.

## CONCLUSION

Unlearning their racist beliefs and leaving the white power movement was very difficult for Angela King, Samantha, and Katie McHugh. Personal relationships and a sense of purpose bound them tightly to their organizations and their ideologies. Afterwards, King had to create a new life for herself after prison, and the work done by McHugh and Samantha for the far-right basically made them unemployable anywhere else. The processes of radicalization and deradicalization have profoundly impacted their lives and their work both inside and outside of these movements have greatly affected the lives of others. The pain inflicted by organized racism easily leads us to blame the actions of King, McHugh, and Samantha on their own moral failings. There is, however, a deeper and more sinister structure at work; one that takes advantage of women who feel

ostracized and foists a sense of purpose upon them. It is because of this structure that these women feel compelled to share their stories and to fight for redemption – not only for themselves – but for others who have left the movement as well. Their experiences illustrate the great potential of not just former female white power members, but of women in general in deradicalizing extremists.

## ENDNOTES

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