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Women in the Nordic Resistance Movement and their online media practices: between internalised misogyny and “embedded feminism”

Tina Askanius

Media and Communication Studies, School of Arts and Communication, Malmö University, Malmö, Sweden

ABSTRACT
This paper is based on a case study of the online media practices of the neo-Nazi organisation, the Nordic Resistance Movement, conducted in the context of an ongoing project on contemporary forms of violent extremism in Sweden. Focusing on the activities of female “online influencers”, the paper explores the contradictory discourses around the role of women as “race warriors” and “Nordic wives” as this is articulated both by the women in the organisation themselves and in the online universe of the organisation more generally. On the one hand, women’s positions are determined and heavily policed by men in an organisation that openly propagates women’s subordination to men and their natural and biological role in the realm of homemaking. On the other, the discourses produced by these women are saturated by ideas of female empowerment, sisterhood, emancipation and the importance of women in the reproduction of the white race. The content analysis of online propaganda produced by female activists about the role of women positions these contradictory pulls of “White femininity” inherent to the white supremacist movements at the current political juncture in which the extreme right is growing and actively looking to recruit women as part of a broader strategy to “mainstream” in Sweden and mobilise internationally.

Introduction

To me, it has always been about paving the way for other women. At the time when I started, women were very much on the sideline. They were not politically engaged or ideologically trained at all. They had no clue what it was all about or what the men were doing. Women would sit next door in the kitchen, expected to just, you know, be nice and chit-chat. But that was not really my thing. That is not really my way of working. I wanted to be part of it. That is what I have been fighting for this entire time, for women to have a self-evident platform within the organisation and the movement at large.

(Female member and “front women”, interviewed on Radio Regeringen #73)

Female host: If we are to have a democratic system, then those with a voice and a vote should be contributing at the very least. I wouldn’t mind if, for example, you weren’t
allowed to vote before you had worked for a certain period of time. That would mean I wouldn't be allowed to vote but I wouldn't mind. I know I've said it before, but sometimes I am very much against women being allowed to vote. I really don't care about that stuff (giggles)

Male guest: No, I get it. I, of course, want my voting rights, but we do sometimes say that women’s suffrage should be revoked, and we’re actually kind of serious about it. That being said, there are of course many women who are fully capable of exercising their right to vote, but far too many are not, and then it is better to restrict this so that no one is allowed. Inger, she is a woman, and she is one of our strongest proponents of this.

Female host: I believe you should give up your own right to vote if this serves the greater good.

Male guest Yes, just imagine not having to care about that crap, to worry about these things or be forced to make such difficult decisions.

(Radio Regeringen, #40 med Conrad!)

The two excerpts above both derive from the same podcast, Radio Regeringen (RR), a female-fronted podcast run by Sweden’s currently largest and most active neo-Nazi organisation, The Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM). In the first quotation, a female front figure reflects on the changing role of women and women’s rights in the organisation and her decade-long personal battle to carve out a space for women to assume the role of activists and political subjects within the organisation. The second excerpt is an exchange between one of the female hosts and a male guest showcasing the prevalent idea in nationalist movements that women need to curtail their rights to secure the future of the nation in times of war, crisis, and/or when faced with an impending state of emergency (Krista Hunt 2006). Historically, these ideas have been propagated by women themselves, who willingly subordinate themselves and give up their rights for the greater good of the revolutionary cause or in order to save the nation (Kathleen Blee and Elisabeth Yates 2018)—or in the words of NRM “to secure the future of white babies.”

When contrasted, these examples highlight the contradictory discourses inherent to white supremacist ideology. At the heart, these discourses are a dual narrative of women as the solution—as child bearers of white babies, as powerful persuaders and attractive recruiters, as stabilising forces in an organisation and indispensable actors in the re-equilibration of the world back to its natural order. On the other side of this duality, women are articulated as the problem—emotional and irrational beings whose promiscuous behaviour and voting patterns have brought Sweden to the brink of “white genocide,” as their naïve and soft-hearted nature makes them prone to tolerating “racial strangers”.

In a broader sense, they shine a light on the paradox of current political developments in which women are increasingly joining white supremacist movements, particularly younger neo-Nazi groups (Cynthia Miller-Idriss and Hilary Pilkington 2019; Hilary Pilkington 2017) and the Alt-Right movement (Seyward Darby 2020) while simultaneously being increasingly targeted by those same movements. Women are thus increasingly taking up public and more openly activist roles in extreme right movements across liberal democracies, while sexist, hateful rhetoric towards women—and in some cases violent,
even deadly misogyny—has an ever-stronger presence in extreme right ideas and organizing (ADL 2018; Kathleen Blee 2017; Alex DiBranco 2020; Barbara Perry 2004).

Further, both examples should be read in the context of a specific time and political juncture in Sweden. In the time following the 2015 European border crisis, which marked the beginning of a period of growth for extreme-right movements in Sweden and the rest of Europe, this particular organisation, classified by authorities as violent extremists, has had a significant impact on public and political debate in the country. In some regards, they have been “successful” in that they, considering their relatively modest numbers, have managed to punch above their weight in terms of the attention and visibility achieved. While the history of the organisation goes back to interwar national socialism in Sweden, in recent years, the neo-Nazis have had a growing public presence around events such as book fairs, political festivals, and the May Day demonstrations, and they are increasingly visible in everyday settings, for example, handing out flyers in town squares or outside supermarkets. In 2016, the organisation rebranded, changing from the Swedish Resistance Movement to the Nordic Resistance Movement—a pan-Nordic organisation with chapters in Finland, Denmark, Norway and Iceland. The chapters are organised by a joint council with (male-only) representatives from each country in a highly hierarchical, top-down structure imposed by the leadership in Sweden, which remains the chief site of activity and membership. Beyond intimidating minorities and spreading fear in public, NRM members—many of whom are previously convicted felons, have during the most recent cycle of violence, been trialed and convicted of incitement to racial hatred, arson, bomb attacks against refugee shelters, illegal possession of arms, preparation for crime, attacks and harassment targeting researchers and journalists, etc. This is also a period in which NRM has actively and openly sought to broaden its recruitment base and publicly expressed aspirations to “go mainstream”, part of which involves boosting media productions focused on culture, entertainment and satire. At the heart of these new softer expressions, in which overtly violent and bigoted speech is toned down or couched in playful and entertaining media formats, are attempts to reach a wider audience online, (Tina Askanius 2021a, Tina Askanius 2021b) not least women. We see these ambitions play out not just through the increasing representations of women in their propaganda but also in the upward trend in propaganda produced and narrated by women in their online universe.

Women have generally been treated as “side shows” in the literature on war, terrorism and violent extremism. In the Swedish context too, very little has been written about women’s involvement in neo-Nazism and violent extremism more generally (for exceptions see Maria Blomqvist and Lisa Bjurwald 2009; Helene Lööw 1999; Benjamin Teitelbaum 2014; none of whom engage with the issues from the perspective of media and communication studies or with a focus on the role of online media in women’s engagement). In her ground-breaking work on the women of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), (Kathleen Blee 1991, Kathleen Blee 2002, Kathleen Blee 2005) argues that scholarship on extreme right movements has generally seen women as apolitical, directionless, manipulated, and victimised, attached only to these movements through the political affiliations of their husbands, boyfriends, or fathers. German historian Claudia Claudia Koonz 1987 similarly refuses to accept the position of women as passive objects, a notion she claims has led historians to fail to regard women in Nazi Germany as active
historical subjects. Women in the Third Reich, Koonz argues, voluntarily adopted and internalised the Nazi viewpoint and therefore their behaviour should be examined in terms of the responsibility, reasoning, and guilt, previously examined in only men. In *Mothers of massive resistance*, Elizabeth McRae 2018 explores how segregationist women formed a crucial workforce for the white supremacist movement by protested racial integration and civil rights in the US, first in the interwar period and later by transforming support for Jim Crow laws into massive resistance against the civil rights movement after World War II. Her study shows that it was often white women who, on the ground and in everyday settings often overlooked in history books, shaped and sustained white supremacist politics in ways less spectacular and public than those of the KKK or the Citizens’ Councils. In another historical study also in the US context, Glen Jeansonne 1996 documents the overlapping ties between the largely unknown Mother’s Movement against World War II with the far-right male-dominated organisations at the time, for example, the German-American Bund, the KKK and Christian Crusaders for Americanism. In their opposition to Roosevelt and US intervention, which never attacked patriarchal or authoritarian structure they used maternalist, gendered arguments to mobilise women around extreme nationalism, anti-communism and anti-Semitism in ways that were often openly supportive of Hitler and Nazism. These foundational works on the role played by women in white supremacy historically are pillars in the framework from which I seek to understand women’s participation in extremist movements today and the role of online media in this participation.

Media and mediation processes have not been at the centre of inquiries about women and far-right extremism, however. Only recently have scholars begun to look at the nexus between female participation and the affordances of the online spaces in which women perform different activist roles. Focusing on the most prominent women in the Alt-right movement, Ashley Mattheis 2018 for example explores the gendered dynamics of women’s framing of the movement to outside audiences within the broader online “tradwife” cultures in which they operate. In her book *Sister of Hate*, US writer Seyward Darby (2020) discusses the weaponisation of motherhood and the “feminist language” used by female activists to recruit other women into the movement in YouTube channels, podcasts or blogs enabling this discourse to move globally. While a growing body of research is forming around issues of these high-profile women involved in white nationalism and meta-politics, we still know little about the gender dynamics at play in the interactions between influencer practices, digital technologies, and online cultures at the most radical end the movement among the groups promoting explicitly male-supremacist, anti-democratic and violent agendas.

The lack of attention to female activists in historic and contemporary extreme right mobilisations is, according to Blee (1996), a problem for at least two reasons. First, it limits our ability to understand these movements, as we have no way of knowing why more women join if we do not study them. Second, the exclusive attention to men in these organisations has deformed theoretical understandings of the processes whereby individuals become radicalised, which ultimately “undermine(s) efforts to design effective strategies against the politics or organized racial, religious, and ethnic bigotry” (p. 681). Filling this gap, this paper asks the following research questions:
How do female members of NRM engage as “online influencers”?
How do they perform the official family policy of the organisations to the audience?
How do women in NRM reconcile the official agenda of a male-dominated and male-oriented organisation with their aspirations as activists and their gendered self-interests?

In posing these questions, this paper explores the contradictory discourses around women and the role of women in white supremacist and neo-Nazi movements, both as articulated by the women in the organisation themselves—those who are very active as what we might dub online female influencers—and in the online universe of the organisation more generally. On the one hand, the position of women is defined and heavily policed by men in an organisation which openly propagates women’s subordination to men and considers their natural and biological role restricted to the realm of childcare and homemaking. On the other hand, the discourses produced by these women—as social media influencers, podcast hosts, and lifestyle columnists—are saturated by ideas of female empowerment, sisterhood, the importance of women in the reproduction of the “white race” and the emancipative powers of being part of the movement on a personal level for women. I probe these conflicting discourses as expressions of internalised misogyny and “embedded feminism”, understanding the latter as “the incorporation of feminist discourse and feminist activities into political projects that claim to serve the interest of women but ultimately subordinate and/or subvert that goal” (Krista Hunt 2006, 53). The notion of embedded feminism goes beyond the simple co-opting of women’s rights, as it involves circumstances in which women propagate their own rights to be activists, while willingly aligning themselves in support of projects that curtail their rights until “the national cause is secured” (Ibid). In the following analysis, I explore contemporary expressions of these “contradictory pulls of White femininity” (Blee et al. 2018) involving paradoxical imaginaries of women as warriors and wives, saviours and race traitors, inherent to the position of women in white supremacist movements historically and today. These women hold dual roles as oppressors in their participation in white supremacy and as being the oppressed within the patriarchal structures of the male-dominated organisation in which they are active. As I approach the dualities, paradoxes and conflicting, at times even nonsensical, discourses of the material, I am driven by the urge to try to understand how we can hold these women’s dual realities to both be true, and as a means to understand women’s radicalisation pathways and potential disengagement with the movement.

**Methodology**

The qualitative content analysis draws on empirical materials that have been purposely selected from the extensive database of digital content collected during an intensive period of online ethnographic fieldwork in 2018 comprising more than 1000 items (images, videos, memes, articles, speeches, manifests, podcasts) and field notes covering the broader time period of 2015–2018 (see Tina Askanius 2019). The analytical process unfolded across several stages of mining the data for themes and patterns across the dataset. Drawing on the key principles of thematic analysis in communication research (Kristina Scharp and Matthew Sanders 2019), this iterative process grouped the data into
the three broad thematic strands which structure the analysis; women as activists, practices of self-disciplining, and negotiating misogyny. The selection of data was partly guided by observations made during the fieldwork and partly by the organisation’s own tagging system applied on the online hub, Nordfront, in which content is systematically categorised using a long list of (not always meaningful or consistent) labels. I chose to draw partially on the tags offered by the organisation itself because I wanted their ideas of what constitutes “women’s issues” to feed into the strategic sampling process. The analysis presented in this article is thus based on articles, videos and podcasts tagged with labels such as “family politics”, “gender equality”, “women”, “women’s health”, “feminism” and “anti-feminism”, as in, propaganda in which gender issues, body politics, and the role of women takes centre stage. The final sample includes 25 feature articles published on Nordfront (of which eight have been authored by named female members), 11 episodes of the female fronted podcast Radio Regeringen, social media data from four Twitter accounts of female NRM members, the political manifesto “Our Way” focusing on Article 7: “Family politics and the role of women”, and Episode 6 of the podcast Leader perspective entitled “Should women be chained to the stove?”. Approaching the analysis of white supremacy and contemporary expressions of Nazi-ideology as an intricately gendered enterprise, I bring together literature on extreme right movements, organised racism, and feminist media studies, which have so far largely developed in parallel tracks.

The discursive marriage between misogyny and female empowerment

When turning to the content produced by the women in the organisation specifically, I first focus on articulations of women activists as “recruiters” unpacking imaginaries of women’s role in making neo-Nazism more assailable or palatable to outside audiences and inducing a sense of normalcy and mundanity to a largely stigmatised ideology and an organisation which is publicly condemned and under the constant scrutiny of state authorities. Second, I turn to practices of self-disciplining by women activists probing questions of how their activism is policed and self-censored, at times in posts, reposts and in exchanges on social media, and at other times, to live radio audiences, in ways that become part of the performance of white male supremacy for the audiences. Some of the conversations about the role of women are polished and produced, while at other times, more unabridged and spontaneous interactions pop up in personal tweets or in unscripted conversations between women in podcasts. These interactions bring to light some of the paradoxes and tensions involved in female members’ attempts to engage as activists in a hyper-masculine structure in which women are traditionally treated as lesser members and assigned tasks dismissed as low-level by activist men (Kathleen Blee 2002). Finally, I explore the ways in which misogyny is negotiated between the women as they try to navigate the confines of the space for activism assigned to them, while often having to defend themselves against critique and accusations of “being feminists” from within their own ranks.

I: the female activist

In her work on female racists in white supremacist groups in the US, Blee (1996) identifies four distinct roles assigned to women: 1) goddess/victim; 2) race traitor; 3) wife and
mother; and 4) female activist. While these imaginaries and distinct archetypes are all clearly echoed in contemporary expressions of neo-Nazism in Sweden, the following analysis focuses on the latter category—that of the female activist or “woman warrior” albeit taking into consideration how this is intertwined with and pollinated by additional, often conflicting ideas of women on the extreme right.

Activism equals violence in the world of NRM whose members define it first and foremost as a combat group, with its primary battle is to be won in the streets and not necessarily or exclusively online by changing hearts and minds through the power of language and discourse. However, when granted the role of activist by the male leadership, women in the organisation primarily engage in discursive activism, for instance, by engaging in the narrative construction of violence rather than violence as such.

Although women are increasingly seen publicly in rallies and street actions, leaked documents show that women are still prevented from “executing violence” (Kathleen Blee 2005), as their rights to be activists are revoked when violence is planned or predicted. One variation of the (discursive) activist tasks assigned to women is that of the recruiter, the role of whom is “to break the myth that national socialism only attracts angry young men” (Nordfront 2016–10–16). Historically, including women as recruiters, or what might today be thought of as “online influencers” has served the purpose of making neo-Nazism more assessable or palatable to outside audiences. For example, women introduce other women to national socialism through seemingly benign topics such as motherhood, child-caring, (female) health, pregnancy and contraception, family values, etc.

Post-promoting podcast episode on motherhood by “Radio Regeringen” (See Figure 1 below)

![Image](image-url)
In this sense, NRM’s media targeting women specifically is reminiscent of historic forms of Nazi propaganda directed at women, which often contained very little explicitly ideology but instead featured mundane topics that served to blunt violent activities (Sharon Ringel 2018). Women magazines such as NS Frauen-Warte, the official National Socialist party’s magazine for women (1934–45) for example, largely included “practical items, such as recipes, health recommendations, fashion tips, career advice, and other features of general interest to women” (p. 4). To NRM today, assuming a less violent or militant tone in their rhetoric is thought to make women particularly good recruiters of segments of the population who might be turned off by overtly violent or hateful bigotry or hyper-masculine rhetoric. The female members themselves reflect upon their virtues as recruiters:

Our show attracts a wide range of different sympathisers. There are of course a lot of members listening in, but we have noticed that a lot are people who haven’t yet taken the final steps to join the resistance movement. They might have one foot in, one foot out and are considering us as a compelling alternative. Probably because we come across as somewhat milder and nicer in our tone. (RR #73, 2017–08–25).

Most often, it is the wives of leading members who publicly take on the role of online influence, giving speeches in demonstrations or appearing as guests in radio shows. However, in some cases, other, less experienced (more peripheral) women are allowed to publicly assume the role of activist for the purpose of recruiting other women with mundane stories of everyday life as a “national woman” (sic) or as in the example below, a personal account of their own introduction to the organisation and the ideology:

I have to say I have been genuinely heartened and thrilled by how I have been welcomed into the organisation and by how there is room for women in the resistance movement. (...) After several conversations with other women who share my vision and ideology, I have been struck by how many of them believe that participating in the organisation is reserved for men. Several of them have expressed a concern that “their femininity would disappear” and that they would somehow have to submit themselves because they are women. This is as far from the truth as can be. Obviously, the organisation is hierarchically structured, but any sub-ordination related to gender does not exist.

(Female guest contributor to Nordfront 2015–03–07)

It is exactly her inexperience and outsider role as an aspiring member, sharing her initial reactions and first experiences with the movement, which positions her as a potentially convincing endorser of the organisation and the community it offers. Previous research shows that white supremacist groups strategically use women when attempting to present themselves as relatively non-threatening in order to recruit new members, avoid police surveillance, and occasionally run members for public office (Amy Cooter 2006). Women have thus across time and across the various groups that have mobilised around white supremacy been used to “legitimate strategic racial terrorism by creating an air of normalcy that belies the violence of organised racism” (Kathleen Blee 2005, 428). Research also shows that when groups pursue electoral politics, which is exactly what NRM was gearing up to do in the 2015–2018 time period leading up to the national elections, women tend to be actively recruited and to become relatively important members, albeit rarely important enough to be listed as political candidates (Blee et al.
In this sense, NRM’s strategic recruitment and communicative efforts around women follow familiar patterns identified in previous and international literature.

In conversations between the women orchestrated in the podcast *Radio Regeringen*, hosts and guests openly reflect on the challenges they face trying to juggle several roles at the same time—for example, that of wife/mother and that of a female activist. The perceived force unique to the female activist is often construed to lie in the combination of the two. This duality is on display in the Twitter profile picture of the most prominent/public woman in the organisation, PF, presenting herself as mother *and* activist or rather as an activist in her capacity as a mother and woman:

![Figure 2. Twitter profile of female NMR front figure.](image)

In her feed, she is explicitly and continuously contributing to crafting a view of motherhood that places women at the centre of the movement towards white dominance (cf. JoAnn Rogers and Jacquelyn Litt 2004). Motherhood is construed as a superpower, and the social media feed of the handful of female activists who openly propagate under NRM’s banner online generally tap into and reproduce ideas of themselves as empowered and independent political subjects by virtue of the role as reproducers and saviours of the White/Aryan race. Despite presenting herself as bearer and transporter of the ideology primarily as a mother confined and dedicated to homemaking and childcaring, her engagement as “lifestyle editor” on Nordfront and her social media activism primarily on Twitter penetrates the private realm into the public sphere in intricate ways. PF is perhaps the closest we get in Sweden to an individual woman
using the practices of influencer culture for neo-Nazi goals. However, even with 16,000 followers on Twitter, she draws far less traffic compared to female social media influencers on the Alt-Right such as Lauren Southern, Faith Golden, Brittany Pettibone or Lana Lakoff (see, e.g., Ashley Mattheis 2018). Ico. Maly 2020 describes the influencer cultures embodied by these women as a “socio-technical assemblage” in which the voice of the activist is tied up with the features and politics of the digital in which they operate. An online persona or micro-celebrity even like that nurtured by PF in social media is at the same time a product of the internal norms of the organisation (shaped, for example, by neo-Nazi symbolism and NRM’s specific metanarrative) and the technical affordances connected to the platforms in which she operates, as well as the intrinsic features of online content and engagement with that content from social media audiences/users. As internet micro-celebrities with a large followership, women of the so-called Alt-right blur the boundaries between lone actor activism and strategic movement campaigning in intricate ways (Stephen Albrecht, Maik Fielitz and Nick Thurston 2019). PF has been deplatformed by Twitter on several occasions but perhaps the most important obstacle to her project of building a political platform around herself is the strong communal ethos of the organisation, which does not allow the kind of lone-actor activism at the core of influencer practices, which deflects attention from the common cause. Indeed, the “post-organizational” nature of far-right influencers (Joe Mulhall 2018) sits poorly with a strictly hierarchical and collectivist organisation such as NRM.

II: self-censorship and self-disciplining

The role as female activist beyond “White motherhood” is contentious, and women in NRM carefully toe the lines of what they can and cannot say in public and how they can articulate what constitutes activism and women’s place in it. This tiptoeing around the subject is palpable in the interview excerpt below in which PF describes the change towards a more “female-friendly” environment and female empowerment, which she herself has been instrumental in creating, in the following manner:

Back then it wasn’t like today. A lot has happened along the way, and things are better now. I was very clear from the beginning that I wanted to do more, that I wanted to write and be engaged to the extent that I could. In the beginning it was a lot about us women getting together to book the rooms, fix the food, all the additional extra stuff and I thought that was quite alright … most of the time. We’re good at those things quite simply so … No, I mean I have always felt welcomed into the organisation … it’s not that. At the same time, having been part for so long I do see a difference in how … Well, let me just say this much – today it is more self-evident that women are involved.

(female activist interviewed on RR #73, 2017–08–25)

Seemingly fearful she has overemphasised the importance of women’s power and participation, she quickly goes on to clarify:

That being said, I want to stress that I actually do think the nationalist movement should be male-dominated, and especially our organisation seeing how it is a combat group, which makes it only natural that there are more male than female representatives. Obviously, I want more women to join but I think we will always see a movement with more men, considering the way in which we are fighting in the streets. And looking ahead at what is to come, men are needed even more, if we are to speculate on what awaits us. The political climate is going
to hardened even more and we will be needing more strong men. Strong women as well of course but the men will always be more important. (ibid)

We see her policing herself and her own statements on the importance and power of women carefully toeing the lines of what she can and cannot express as a woman. In this manner, the propaganda produced by women seems to not only fill the function of recruiting new female members but also to work as a means of exercising self-control and of engendering subtle warnings against unacceptable behaviour or attitudes of women within the organisation. They discipline each other and police the limits of the activist space they have been consigned by clamping down on utterances, which could be interpreted as defiant or critical towards the organisation’s official line on gender issues and family politics. It is clear, for example, that as a longstanding member with eight children and married to one of the leaders of the organisation, PF is an authority to other females in the group. Having paved the way for other women to take on the role as columnists, radio hosts or social media influencers, she warns against the risks of mistak- ing these achievements with feminist victories and encourages her fellow female activists to resist and oppose whenever they come across “other women who are affected, perhaps unknowingly, by feminist thinking” (RR #167). Another female columnist similarly argues, “We women need to stand up against the feminists, we need to show the men that we are on their side. Induce them with courage, remind them why they are fighting. We should ignite the spark in men by maintaining our femininity. Our natural femininity. Men’s strength does not reduce our worth, on the contrary it makes us more valuable” (Nordfront 2017–08–01). As part of the work of standing up against feminists, female online influencers encourage women to (re)educate each other publicly. This work of keeping one-self and others in check, which they recognise can be emotionally taxing and contentious at times, needs to be done continuously and diligently, particularly because any utterance that in one way or another, oversteps the bounds of their authority to act as activists, put them at risk of being sanctioned or further restricted by men in the organisation. These acts of self-disciplining and re-education are especially pronounced in interviews and conversations between hosts on Radio Regeringen where you hear them correcting themselves and each other. Any time a woman’s right to be an activist comes up in the conversations, they are quick to point out that this is under no circumstances should be interpreted as an expression of feminism.

It seems, however, that this self-policing and the frequent clarifications do not always prevent them from ending up in the crossfire internally. Their struggle to be seen as free, empowered agents, and not just accomplices or appendages, puts them at risk of being mistaken for (or downright accused of) being feminist by men in the movement. In the feature article, “Do women belong in the battle?”, a female online influencer takes a stand against accusations directed at her and other women in the organisation:

It seems almost amusing when I and other women in the movement are labelled as feminist from time to time. Even if these voices are insignificant, I still find it upsetting to say the least (. . .) I have repeatedly argued for the importance of giving birth and that women’s primary duty is to take care of children. Despite this, I have continually been framed as a feminist. (Nordfront 2015–10–05)

She continues to argue for women’s right to be activists urging that “real men do not feel threatened by women writing articles or handing out flyers. Real men (and women)
appreciate every fellow-patriot and feel grateful for this person’s willingness to sacrifice herself for the battle” (ibid). Another female columnist hints at such internal conflicts when making references to a “destructive battle between the sexes” and confusion over gender roles even in the organisation (Nordfront 2015–09–09). These interactions pay testimony to the internal power struggles over the re-negotiation of women’s position in the movement which obviously struggles to strike a balance between keeping women in check while allowing women to take up space and visibility in order to appear more open and welcoming to women and families as part of their recruitment strategy.

III: negotiating misogyny

In the article “The role of women”, a female Nordfront columnist states, “During my years in the national movement, I have come across a range of different expressions, comments, thoughts and beliefs about what a woman should and should not be, about what is wrong and right in this regard. The biggest misconception I have come across is that women should somehow be worth less than men and that men are more important to the fight than women” (Nordfront 2015–09–09). In this remarkably open critique of men and misogyny in the organisation, she is clearly addressing an internal audience. She calls out gendered slurs, everyday sexism, and prevailing ideas of women’s inferiority in what can only be dubbed a rant aimed at men in the group. In it, she argues that “even men in the neo-Nazi movement have been affected by the mentality that women’s place is in the kitchen and that she should act as a servant to her husband” (my emphasis) and similar ideas “which to an alarming extent seem to have taken root among some nationals” (ibid). Avoiding a full-on confrontation, however she admits that male members are not to blame directly. Instead, she proposes the explanation that their misogyny has been unwillingly imposed on them by the outside world—a world in which gender norms and the natural order of things have been put off balance by feminism and “gender traitors”.

These accusations of misogyny and sexism within the movement raised by the female activists are later addressed directly by the leader of the organisation in an episode of the podcast Leader Perspective “#6: Should women be chained to the stove?” dedicated exclusively to clarifying the organisation’s official stance on women and their worth as part of the ideological struggle and debunking claims that the organisation operates with a hidden male-chauvinist agenda intended to keep women from power. In many ways, these internal conflicts and contradictory discourses echo historical accounts of gender dynamics during the reign of the Nazi regime in Germany, in which the small group of women who experienced some emancipation and a certain degree of freedom to act politically within the inconsistent framework of the Nazi regime, eventually had to cave in to the blatant patriarchal structures and misogynist baseline of the party (Peter Peter Englund 2015). Previous research shows that women often join racist groups “with the expectation that they will be racial warriors” (Blee et al. 2018) and that they tend to over time become disaffected when they are not included in decision-making or allowed to partake in public activism. In fact, Kathleen Blee and Anette Linden 2012 argue that most women never experience the same sense of belonging and camaraderie as men and that they are generally frustrated by how they are treated by their fellow male activists (p. 103–105). Such disaffection, albeit very subtle, and signs of internal power struggles,
continuously surface in the different online spaces in which female activists are permitted to be public figures.

It is clear that these women struggle to negotiate the apparent contradictions between their activism and personal ambitions as content creators and online influencers in the movement and the blatant misogyny and male chauvinism of the organisation. These are women who on the one hand are asked to take political responsibility and become public faces of the organisation in their capacity as strong powerful women, while on the other hand, are asked to dedicate their life and body as part of this struggle. Faced by the promise—or threat—of the impending “race wars” these women are asked to give up their freedom, and civil rights, and to donate their bodies for the larger cause of the survival of the (white) nation. These are women operating within a male-dominated and deeply misogynist movement that legitimises its violence with the stated goal and self-proclaimed mission of defending white women against an alleged external enemy (protecting them not only from rape, violence and “racial strangers”, but also from their own ignorance and misconception of the world/politics, et cetera). These are women, who in many ways, are making a career out of encouraging other women not to pursue a career. These are ardent anti-feminists whose internalised misogyny is channelled through discourses of embedded feminism. However, by appropriating and subverting feminist rhetoric appealing to women’s rights and empowerment, they contribute to a movement that ultimately oppresses and disempowers women, including themselves. Through their online media practices, they simultaneously diminish their own worth and space of agency (disqualified as leaders, sanctioned as political activists), while at the same time, assert their significance and agency in the foreboded race war.

Such contradictions in both practice and discourse have always haunted women’s participation in white supremacy (Claudia Koonz 1987). Indeed, Kathleen Blee (2002) reminds us of the long history of white women’s participation in movements for Aryan and male supremacy, acting as complicit actors in the oppression and subordination of other women and themselves. Further pointing to the historical continuities and persistence of contradictions and paradoxes around women, Sharon Ringel’s (2018) work on representations of women and women’s bodies in the Nazis own propaganda demonstrates how contradicting fantasies were projected onto imaginaries about women and the female body in the Third Reich. In some regards, one might argue that there is little new under the sun. Indeed, Barbara Perry (2004) notes that the remarkable thing about contemporary “politics of reproduction” based on the mantra “We must ensure the existence of our people and our future for White children”—the so-called 14 words—is that it remains true to age-old canons of the white supremacy, in spite of the dramatically shifting demographics of its membership (p. 72). But even though the history of the movement may be lengthy with roots in racist and misogynistic theories, ideologies, and practices that are centuries old, these age-old mantras of intolerance are re-gaining considerable legitimacy and renewed energy “in light of the changing messengers and media that carry their message” (Ibid). Understanding what is said and done, and how this travels in online media by a new generation of female activists is an important part of understanding the metamorphosis that the movement is currently undergoing.
Concluding remarks

Based on the analysis of the media practices of female influencers in NRM, I want to advance two key arguments emerging from the empirical observations: First, female voices might be marginal in the context of the larger organisation, but they play an important strategic role in communicating the broader nation-building project around the idea of a distinctly Nordic version of National Socialism, as political actors themselves but also as symbols of fragile whiteness and cradles of “national essence” (Benjamin Teitelbaum 2018, 122). The discourses produced by and around these women as they perform the family policy of the movement to online audiences are used strategically by the male leaders in the meta-narrative of NRM as the self-proclaimed defenders of a victimised, threatened population embodied by white women and blond babies. Indeed, their performance as, at the same time, soft-spoken and hard-hitting, fragile and powerful, should be understood in relation to a more long-term strategy of reshaping public perception of national socialism by presenting it as an inclusive and non-threatening ideology in tune with the complexities of modern femininity and what it means to be a woman operating under the banner of national socialism today.

Second, the far-right internationally has its own set of female internet micro-celebrities with large followership who operate across social media platforms. But rather than 1-to-1 adopting the strategies of international alt-right influencers, we might understand the Swedish women of NRM to be influencers in terms of their function as recruiters operating under relatively strict implicit rules around how they can be political. As actors who move between mainstream and fringe online spaces, often rallying around mundane and only subtly ideological issues, their activities in social media become gateways into the more extreme ends of the movement’s online content. We see this play out most clearly in the influencer practices of PF whose activities on Twitter work as a way to generate uptake for her tweets and direct the attention and engagement of her social media followers into the extensive online universe of the organisation.

Finally, I want to make the case for close-up and sustained qualitative inquiry which allows us to address the complexities involved in the intricate relationship between gender and right-wing extremism. Qualitative analyses of their “messy” media practices (as opposed to textual analyses of polished rhetoric) reveal the contradictions and ambiguities at stake in women’s involvement in extreme right mobilisation. By applying these techniques to exploring online media, we get at the sense-making practices, rationales and discourses underpinning and sustaining women’s ideological commitment to extremism. Focusing on these inconsistencies and the messiness that form part of doing “dirty research on unloved groups” (Erin Sanders-mcdonagh 2014) may help us avoid unhelpful distinctions, or bifurcations even, between “women as victims” or “women as perpetrators”, which has saturated much of feminist scholarly debate on women’s role in hate movements and racial and religious violence.6 We need to hold both of these realities to be equally true and important to our understanding of women’s motives for both engagement and disengagement. The analysis clearly shows that the contradictions inherent to white supremacy are hard to navigate, even for those most assertively devoted to adhering to the gender policies charted by the leadership. We know from previous research that despite strict and dogmatic policies on gender roles and family structures, both men and women privately practice “pragmatic egalitarianism”
and that women tend to bend the strict rules and confinements around gender norms imposed on them to make them compatible with the realities of everyday life (Betty Dobratxz and Stephanie Shanks-Meile 2004). Potentially, this provides us with a window into understanding how women navigate the tensions and constraints of their activism and manoeuvre internal conflicts. Their conversations and interactions online confront us with signs of disillusionment and frustration with their possibilities to maintain agency and dignity over time within the patriarchal structures of the organisation. These insights from the particular national context of Sweden echo and bring further evidence to what Kathleen Blee (2017) identifies as a current trend across Europe and the US—a growing tension over the role of women participants in far-right movements, as female recruits expect to be treated as full and active members leading them to challenge gendered subordination in both subtle and overt ways (p. 195–196).

In the analysis, I have tried to “make feminist sense” of the gendered discourse and claims to emancipation and agency by women within the deeply misogynist and patriarchal structure of white (male) supremacy. We might understand the media practices of these online influencers as public displays and mediated performances of an internalised misogyny that serves to keep themselves and other women in check. The public NRM media space in many ways works as spaces of self-disciplining and internal control. There is a continued relevance to these inner workings and gendered dynamics of white supremacist movements are relevant for understanding women’s position and possibilities as both the potential appeal and source of disgruntlement for women. Their media spaces are dense with cracks or openings into these internal conflicts and disaffections. These cracks may prove a way to generate crucial knowledge to disrupt the process through which women enter these movements. Women have proven to be important actors in men’s desistance and disengagement from hate groups (Randy Blazak 2004). Therefore, carefully following their trajectory may also facilitate the exit processes of neo-Nazi supporters, just as it provides us with a window into the intricate relationship between gender and right-wing extremism more generally.

Notes

1. This “slogan” figures prominently across their online media, for example as a “jingle” accompanying their English-spoken podcast Nordic Frontier.
2. Like other white supremacist groups, NRM is a male-dominated organisation and men are in the majority in terms of members just as leadership positions are taken up exclusively by men. However, female participation is on the rise in Sweden as in liberal democracies elsewhere. Swedish security services and monitoring groups estimate that women made up 15% of active members in this particular organisation in 2018 just as research shows that 10,7% of those involved in violent right-wing extremism suspected of crime in Sweden today are women (Amir Rostami, Amir Rostami, et al. 2018).
3. The eleven episodes of Radio Regeringen include #8: Shitty radio, real men and sexual harassment; #47: International women’s day; #106: A conversation with Vera Oredsson; #107: Moral and family constellations; #114: Fourteen words, metoo and a sweet reunion; #115: Harmful hormones; #130: Pregnancy and giving birth; #133: Feminism; #137: After childbirth; #146: White and beautiful; #167: Gender roles with Paulina Forslund.
4. The insistence on the need for armed revolution and a violent toppling of democracy is in many ways what distinguishes the NRM from other groups and organisations on the extreme right in Sweden who share ideological beliefs system and worldview with the organisation but who due
to difference in tactics, are not categorised as violent extremist according to state security services.

5. Research shows that women tend to be more involved when violence is narrative as opposed to strategic—that is, more spontaneous, unplanned attacks that seem to lack clear purpose or predictable effects (Kathleen Blee 2005).

6. For a discussion on the divisive debate on women’s complicity in Nazi Germany’s atrocities between historians (Claudia Koonz 1987 and Giesella Bock 1983, see Andrea Dauber 2014).

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Notes on contributor

Tina Askanius is an associate professor in media and communication studies at Malmö University and affiliated researcher at the Institute for Futures Studies in Stockholm, Sweden. Her research concerns the interplay between social movements, media technologies and processes of mediation. Her work in this area spans topics such as media practices of social justice movements, including gender justice and environmental justice activism and the role of online media in violent extremism and white supremacist mobilisations in Scandinavian. E-mail: tina.askanius@mau.se

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