WOMEN IN EXTREME RIGHT MOVEMENTS: MATERNALISM AS A SURVIVAL AND RECRUITMENT STRATEGY OF THE FAR-RIGHT

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ARSTRACT

Female presence and influence in Extreme-right movements (ERMs) has been a matter of fervent debates in terrorist studies. Nonetheless, women's roles in ERMs have often been reduced to their compliance with traditional gender roles, within which women are depicted as an attribute to men who merely conceive them as wives, mothers or companions. Hence, this paper seeks to further analyse the impact of feminine presence within these groups, placing special emphasis in their role as mothers. This paper will thus expose that maternalism represents one of the vital and most effective tools that contribute to the survival and endurance of ERMs. Mothers are not passive entities within these groups. They should be regarded instead as indispensable agents for the social nuclei and prosperity of ERMs.

Keywords: Far-right, Gender, Motherhood, Extremism, Recruitment

INTRODUCTION

Extreme-right movements (ERMs) have been often portrayed as exclusive masculine circles where women are conceived to be mere sexual or familiar attributes to their male companions. Little attention has been dedicated to "the potential for (re)framing femininity, women's role in the nation, or discussions of women's right to be used for recruitment or radicalisation by far-right political parties and movements" (Miller-Idriss and Pilkington, 2019). From the Third Reich – the cradle of ERMs – to new alt-right online movements, the complexity of women's involvement in these groups has been

recurrently overlooked.

This paper seeks to demonstrate that "women as mothers" are indispensable agents in ERMs who contribute to the endurance and propagation of the latter. The first section will analyse women's engagement in ERMs as a largely overlooked phenomenon. The second section will explore how motherhood has been constructed and promoted by ERMs to illustrate the pivotal role that mothers play in recruiting and radicalising new members. Finally, the third section will present QAnon as a case study where identities centred on motherhood are employed in the online sphere as a recruitment strategy.

WOMEN IN EXTREME-RIGHT MOVEMENTS: AN OVERLOOKED PHENOMENON

The predominant masculine presence in extremeright movements (ERMs) has often eclipsed the pivotal role of women in these groups. Indeed, Campion (2020) finds that female presence in ERMs is considerably small compared to that of men. To substantiate this claim, she presents the study developed by the University of Maryland on Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the US where 2226 radicalised individuals are evaluated. Hence, the study supports that out of all the individuals evaluated, of the 977 identified as far-right extremists 920 were male, while a small portion of 57 was composed by females (PIRUS, 2020).

The publicity of male members as primary constituents of ERMs has also been a product of the hypermasculinity culture that characterises the structure of these groups (Arkhis and White, 2022).

As per Arkhis and White (2022), this is because both ERMs and the armed forces milieus "predominantly male and there is some overlap in the values they hold". For instance, these scholars emphasise how ERMs often emulate the values, symbols and organisational structures of the armed forces, even adopting the archetypes of the ideal martial man. This phenomenon was visibly illustrated by the rally "Unite the Right" 2017 in Charlottesville, where all camera coverage was monopolised by angry white men chanting and marching with tiki torches (Love, 2020). Hence, such startling manifestations of ERMs have contributed to perpetuate public perceptions of the alt-right as a hyper masculinist environment (GNET Team, 2021). In fact, the hyper masculinist, misogynist and antifeminist character of alt-right narratives has been widely addressed in academia (Vandiver, 2020). Therefore, the increasing active involvement of females in these movements has been conceived as an unconventional phenomenon that many scholars (Boehme et al., 2019) have attempted to explain.

1.1 Traditional Archetypes of Femininity in ERMs

Uncovering the real extent of women's involvement in ERM movements remains a vital task (Boehme and Isom Scott, 2019). Indeed, mainstream media and popular notions often depict women's contribution to ERMs as passive - mere wombs for the cause or caretakers of children and men - or, in the case of exerting a more active role in the groups, as persuaded members subjugated by men to participate in the struggle (Mattheis, 2018). Hence, women are generally portrayed as indirect members who do not present a real will or initiative to conduct significant actions. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that this is a highly misleading assumption. It is misleading simply because not only do women carry out direct and voluntary contributions in ERM, but they are vital participants. As Love (2020) states, "this dominant image of the alt-right as a hyper masculinist environment, however accurate it may be, obscures and overlooks the long history of white women's participation in white supremacy". Women have been active agents

of ERMs since the very foundation of these groups (Matfess and Margolin, 2022). Although female members are conceived as mere supportive subjects deliberately defined as sexual or familiar attributes to their male companions, Laura Smith (2017) has observed that:

"While the march in Charlottesville occurred in reaction to the proposed removal of a statue of a Confederate general, women were responsible for the erection of many of these Confederate statues across the country at the turn of the 20th century. In the 1920s, women composed the most influential arm of the KKK. And lest we forget the election that emboldened these modern white supremacists: More than a half of white women voted for Trump. To overlook the comprehensive picture of who makes up the extreme right is to seriously underestimate its reach."

Disregarding the influence of women in ERMs is thus ignoring one of the essential pillars of the social nuclei of these groups. In fact, some alt-right sympathisers conceive women as indispensable actors to stop the supposed white genocide (Ganesh, 2020). "It's the birth-rates, It's the birthrates, It's the birth-rates," states Brenton Tarrant the Christchurch terrorist - at the beginning of his manifesto (Tarrant, n.d.). Women are thereby not mere auxiliaries for the cause but instead, essential agents to perpetuate the ethos of ERMs such as white pro-natalism, the return to tradition, and the endurance of a canonical white aesthetic (Salice, 2019). Although some authors such as Dworkin (1983) argue that "the Right offers women a simple, fixed, predetermined social, biological, and sexual order." female members of **ERMs** demonstrated to perform much more complex roles (North, 2021). In reality, alt-right discourses about gender complementarity - the idea that men and women, despite being biologically complement each other - denote that ERMs do not entail a hierarchical but instead a linear relationship between men and women. As Lana Lokteff (2019), a prominent alt-right activist, claimed in one of her speeches:

"for ages Europeans [had] the perfect union of the sexes based on what was natural in order to survive;... We honoured both gods and goddesses. It wasn't a competition but each piece of the whole that worked together to ensure our survival."

Therefore, the general belief about the intrinsic subjugation of women in ERMs is somehow fallacious. The relationship between male and female members in ERMs cannot be interpreted as a master-and-slave relationship but instead as two polarities that complement each other. Empirically, men and women have cooperated together to ensure the "survival of the ingroup", a phenomenon that has sometimes entailed the desertion of the sopraised traditional gender roles (Leidig, 2021).

1.1 A Volatile Doctrine: New Feminine Archetypes?

The compliance of traditional gender roles has been regarded as a core factor of ERM narratives (Ebner Davev, 2019). However, Leidig emphasises that women of the alt-right have frequently escaped such fixed conceptions by adopting new roles. Conventionally, discourses and propaganda have portrayed women according to three main archetypes: the beloved mother, the sex symbol, and the female fighter (Latif et al., 2020). Nevertheless, authors such as Campion (2020) identifies that women have found new manners to actively participate in **ERMs** corresponding to the following criteria: violent actors, thinkers, facilitators, promoters, activists, and exemplars.

Such a metamorphosis of the feminine archetypes can be clearly illustrated by the evolving discourses of the Front National in France, one of the leading ERMs in Europe. Before the 1990s, women were explicitly celebrated as 'mothers of the nation' meaning (Scrinzi, 2017) that women were perform housekeeping encouraged to caregiving duties. Nonetheless, the new emphasis of the Front National on issues of employment, social protection and welfare state has generated a new romanticised female archetype based on women as

working mothers" (Scrinzi, 2017). Moreover, Le Pen – leader of the Front National – presented herself as the main supporter of "real feminism" where she celebrated women as indispensable agents in society during the last electoral campaign in 2022 (DailyMotion, 2022). This focus on modern femininity demonstrates how the female archetypes in ERMs are undergoing a change. Indeed, women of ERMs are increasingly adopting more active roles in society.

Similarly, some young women of the alt-right are significantly breaking up the stereotype of females as mere subordinated members to their male companions. For instance, Isabel Medina Peralta also portrayed as the "new muse of Spanish fascism" (Última Hora, 2021) – illustrates another clear example alt-right women adopting "unconventional" roles as leaders in ERMs. "It is our supreme duty to fight for Spain and for a Europe now weakened and destroyed by the enemy (the Jews)," said Peralta during a rally in 2021 (Aguilera-Carnerero, 2021). This is because, as some authors such as Chrisafis, Connolly and Giuffrida (2019) have identified, since some years ago, "angry white women" have emerged as an indispensable actors of ERMs. "At least half a dozen women", they say, "lead rightwing, populist European parties, such as Alice Weidel, of the AfD, and Georgia Meloni, of the Brothers of Italy" (2019).

Such events thus elucidate that women of the farright cannot longer be labelled as passive entities. Female participants of ERMs have demonstrated over the years that this dichotomic conception between men and women is fallacious. In order to support this argument, the next section will analyse how the archetype of the mother has been an indispensable constituent in diverse ERMs, from the Third Reich to online alt-right fierce moms.

MOTHERHOOD IN ERM: FROM THE THIRD REICH TO ONLINE ALT-RIGHT FIERCE MOMS

The cult of motherhood has always been an inherent foundation of ERMs. Far-right supporters generally emphasise that to perpetuate their desired canonical white society, women should adopt traditional female roles such as childbearing, maternal caregiving duties and domestic labour (Skjelsbæk et al., 2020). These ideals of Kinder, Küche, Kirche – children, kitchen, church – traces its origins back to Germany, where the slogan was subsequently adopted and massively employed during the Nazi period as the feminine epitome (Bridenthal, 1973).

The Nazi national policy adopted towards women was thus explicitly centred on the idea of motherhood. As Fox (2009:21) indicates, "the maternal figure became central to the Nazi vision of the female whose selflessness, bravery, unquestioning devotion, and sacrifice mirrored the role individuals would be expected to play in the Volksgemeinschaft (national people's community)". What is more, the historian Claudia Koonz (quoted in Heineman, 2001:139) has emphasized that the 'ideal couple' of Nazi Germany was composed "not by the husband and wife, but by a soldier and his mother". Notwithstanding this, it is important to acknowledge that the feminine, and specifically, the maternal duties, were not equally promoted among the different generations of women, a fact that was highly influenced by the historical context.

Historical events such as war often generate major disruptions in social orders, and the Nazi regime was not an exception. The outbreak of WWII led the Third Reich to restructure gender roles by promoting new feminine roles that would contribute to the perseverance of their community (Stephenson, 1982). As opposed to the archetype of the beloved mother promoted in the previous years, the Nazi regime had to motivate younger women to become active agents in the labour force to reactivate the national economy. As Heineman states (2001:140), "the Nazi regime had two reasons for deemphasizing younger women's maternal functions emphasizing those of older women. The first and

primary one was economic". Because the majority of men were sent to the battlefields, younger women were regarded as the ultimate solution to boost the national economy (Stephenson, 1982). Hence, "a propagandistic focus on young women's mothering work" (Heineman, 2001:140) would have interfered with their recruitment to the war economy, a factor that could disrupt the prosperity of the nation.

"The second reason concerned men's emotional lives" (Heineman, 2001:140). While younger women were encouraged to take active roles in the labour market, older women were required to perform caregiving duties to ensure the wellbeing of society (Brashler, 2015). Mothers were thus regarded as the primary emotional support for men, an event that enhanced the already existent cult to motherhood in WWII (Koonz, 2014). This is also due to the fact that "almost every soldier had a living mother, but fewer than one-half had wives, and not all wives had children" (Heineman, 1996:26). This explains why the figure of the mother became the main feminine archetype to be praised by the regime, especially among the male population.

2.1 Eutaxy as Predominant Principle of ERM

As it was previously stated, the survival of what is conceived as the ingroup is of utmost importance for ERMs. Far-right groups attend, in this sense, to the principle that this paper calls eutaxy. The term "eutaxy" is etymologically composed of two Greek words, «ɛu» meaning "good, right" and «ταξις» which means "order and rule" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Hence, in its political context, eutaxy has to be understood as "good order" where "good" means capable – in power or virtue - to maintain itself in the course of time (Filosofia.org, n.d.). Therefore, the eutaxy of an institution – ERMs in this context – is measured by the extent to which it endures in time.

Nazi Germany illustrates an example of how an institution implements significant changes to ensure its eutaxy, even if that entailed a contradiction of their most deeply rooted principles. What is more, this principle of "group survival" has been employed

numerous times by ERMs, a fact that explains the mutable role of women – transcending the traditional gender roles – aimed at ensuring the eutaxy of the ingroup. Hence, the pursuit of the group's eutaxy justifies the increasing active role of women in the cause, especially in the last decades. With the rise of the online sphere and the emancipation of women, female members of ERMs are now conceived as very useful agents to attract new sympathisers to the group. As Rogers and Litt (2003:96) concluded by analysing the far-right group World Church of the Creator (WCOTC), two main feminine roles can be currently detected in these movements:

"First, mothers' everyday practices and attitudes play a central role in the production of white supremacy. Second, women should be given a more public and visible role in the movement, which would bring them, if not into leadership, at least into public forms of activism. Both approaches hold an ideology that constructs women as purposefully oriented toward and responsible for securing white racial superiority"

Rogers and Litt provide a very insightful example of how the feminine white members of ERMs are used as a vehicle for normalising white supremacy and attracting female support by promoting women as powerful agents within the movement (Neufeld, 2018). The next section will thus further explore how motherhood is being instrumentalised by these groups to attract and radicalise new members due to its high effectiveness, especially in the virtual sphere.

2.2 New Forms of Motherhood: Women as "Lionesses and Shieldmaides"

"We have to be lovers, mothers, friends, teachers, and now, shield maidens ready to go to battle", claimed Lara Lokteff in one of her speeches (2017). New ERMs are gradually incorporating new models of motherhood where mothers are celebrated as fierce fighters ready to protect the ingroup. Similarly, Ayla Steward – another prominent female activist in the alt-right – stated the following in the podcast

Debunking the Claim that Nationalism is Hostile Towards Women:

"We are all called to say something against this system, and speak out and be loud about it because the system, this anti-white system, wants to come after our children, wants to destroy our children." (2017)

By the use of such Manichean rhetoric between the ingroup and "the system", women of the alt-right appeal to common feminine fears - their children being in danger - as a strategy to radicalise new sympathisers. As Dworkin (1983) has argued, farright movements generally employ sophisticated tools in which they instrumentalise a wide feminine set of anxieties and fears to mobilise a distinctively feminine species of anger. Since the protection of ingroup seems imperative, women are encouraged by these alt-right figures to actively engage in the struggle, even if that entails the temporary desertion of traditional gender roles (Salice, 2019). Hence, this conception of "fierce mama" (Mattheis, 2018:139) has become incredibly popular in ERMs, specifically in the online sphere. Narratives of alt-maternalism feminine guardians who organize rallies and social media campaigns to protect children from sexual and moral contamination (Sommer, 2020) - are proving to be an effective recruiting strategy (Argentino, 2021). To further address this point, the next section will provide a more detailed study about the engagement of mothers in the QAnon movement and their impact on the audience.

CASE STUDY: 3. QANON MUMS ONLINE

The analysis of the QAnon movement conducted in this paper corroborates the argument that maternalism does indeed constitute one of the vital and most effective tools that contribute to the survival and endurance of ERMs. Hence, the reason why the QAnon movement was selected in this paper as a case study is twofold. First, because QAnon is commonly categorised as a new far-right movement due to its coalescence with far-right

values and operability (Zihiri et al., 2022). Moreover, its utilisation of the online platforms for the dissemination of its ideology has proven to be overwhelmingly successful in seducing new members into their cause (Haimowitz, 2020). Second and most important, because this movement elucidates how femininity, and particularly feminine identities centred on maternalism, are utilised to engage and recruit women in populist politics (Bracewell, 2021).

3.1 What is the QAnon phenomenon? An overview

QAnon is defined by the GNET - Global Network on Extremism and Technology - as "a decentralised violent ideology rooted in an unfounded conspiracy theory that sustains that a globally active 'Deep State' cabal of satanic paedophile elites is responsible for all the evil in the world" (GNET Team, 2021). They fervently claim that this cabal executes and eats their child victims to extract the chemical compound "adrenochrome", which is destined to keep the politicians and celebrities unnaturally young (Roose, 2021). Surprisingly, such meta-narratives employed by QAnon have proven to be remarkably effective in attracting new feminine members to the cause, specifically mothers (Kelly, 2020). Hence, what could have possibly influenced the popularity of such a conspiracy theory?

The global Coronavirus pandemic in 2020 forced millions of people to confine themselves to their homes, thus leading to a large increase in the use of online networks (De', Pandey and Pal, 2020). This unprecedented use of social media allowed such movements as OAnon to become overwhelmingly popular. According to an analysis of Facebook data conducted by social-media research firm Storyful, the membership in 10 large public QAnon Facebook groups expanded by nearly 600% from March to July (Deepa Seetharaman, 2020). Furthermore, a study carried out by Statista identifies that women spend more time on social media than men (Statista, 2021), a fact that the RAN (Radicalisation Awareness Network) has identified as a prominent leading cause of women's radicalisation

online (Krasenberg and Handle, 2020). Therefore, this phenomenon would explain why the disproportionate participation of women in QAnon is not accidental (Pandith, Ware and Bloom, 2020).

3.2 QAnon recruiting strategies: How does QAnon seduce new female members into their cause?

Not only does QAnon present a persuasive discourse that appeals to the emotions of women but its online nature has also provided female sympathisers with the possibility to adopt an active agency in the cause (Bracewell, 2021). The promotion of online hashtags such as #Savethechildren has led numerous women of QAnon to employ discourses about alt-maternalism to vindicate their public and political speech online (Centre of Analysis for the Radical Right, 2021). Specifically, women blend maternalism - the specialised role they have as mothers - with this fierce imagery of an archetype of feminine warriors fighting on behalf of their children (Mattheis, 2021). Therefore, their role as mothers enable these women to keep exerting a highly persuasive effect on their followers online due to their proximity and the loyalty they have built over the years (Centre of Analysis for the Radical Right, 2021). To further address this point, the next section will provide more detailed study about the engagement of mothers in the QAnon movement and their impact on the audience.

3.3 "QAnonMoms": Operability and influence on the online sphere.

Through the portrayal of the ingroup – specifically the children – being under existential threat due to an "evil" – a paedophile Satanic cabal – QAnon has demonstrated to employ a similar rhetoric to that of other ERMs discussed in earlier sections. "QAnon understands that the best way to appeal to women is by exploiting their inherent altruism and desire to protect children" (Pandith, Ware and Bloom, 2020). While the appeal to "save the white race" or "save the individual liberties" has been highly effective among disillusioned young men (Blazak, 2001), QAnon has been able to evoke a more visceral, even maternal, reaction among women (Tiffany, 2020). QAnon's versatility – a consequence of their holistic inclusion of

many conspiracy theories – has allowed this movement to recruit a very broad spectrum of women. From anti-vaccine mums, to "mom influencers", QAnon disseminates a central message that resonates with millions of females who turn to these platforms every day for advice on how to optimise the health and wellbeing of their families (Bracewell, 2021).

The radicalisation strategies applied by QAnon have been thus perceived to be extremely sophisticated. Although the QAnon phenomenon is relatively new, many journalists (Breland, 2020; Butler, 2020; Flora, 2020; Kelly, 2020; Tiffany, 2020) have found that new QAnon female members have been introduced to this ideology "through images, videos, and stories shared by some of the most popular beauty, lifestyle, and parenting influencers on Instagram" (Bracewell, 2021:2). Such phenomenon has been further researched by Argentino (2021), who has identified that QAnon women often utilise a very specific type of aesthetic in their images and posts that he has termed as "Pastel QAnon". Such propagandistic posts are highly efficient because through the use of certain pastel tones that inspire innocence, QAnon camouflages and "softens its propaganda, thus giving rise to new recruitment and radicalization pipelines female dominated ecosystems" (Argentino, 2021). Hence, the use of these practically imperceptible techniques have also played a pivotal role in radicalising younger audiences who were not familiar with QAnon before the summer of 2020 (Argentino, 2021).

QAnon mothers represent the ultimate example where motherhood has been employed both as a survival and recruiting tool in ERM. Mattheis (2021) has found that small "mominfluencers" have also played a key role in such recruitment. These women, she argues, possess great persuasive power as they present what could be termed as "ethos in rhetoric" (Centre of Analysis for the Radical Right, 2021). This "ethos in rhetoric" represents the moral authority that is attributed to women as mothers to bolster the legitimacy of these movements and to frame

grievances surrounding threats to family and culture (GNET Team, 2021). The radical posts and narrativesspread by "Q Mums" online are thus generally conceived as inoffensive and even as understandable by their audiences. Maternity is used in this sense, both as a weapon and a justification for these women's narratives online. Moreover, since these women present high proximity and trust with their followers which they have built over the years (Mattheis, 2018), "those audience members are likely to give them the benefit of the doubt, at the very least, over wacky posts" (Centre of Analysis for the Radical Right, 2021).

CONCLUSION

The influence of women, specifically as mothers engaged in ERMs has been generally overlooked. In the current state of the literature, the puzzle of gendered strategies of far-right radicalisation requires more research. Nonetheless, this paper illustrates that maternalism constitutes an essential pillar in ERMs, both for their survival and recruiting strategies. Mothers have proven to be indispensable agents for the stability of social nuclei and the prosperity of these groups. It is thus important to acknowledge that further research is required in order to understand the extent that feminine identities on motherhood contribute to the endurance of ERMs and the ways in which this contributions are perpetuated.

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