

# Book Review | Gender and the Radical and Extreme Right: Mechanisms of Transmission and the Role of Educational Interventions edited by Cynthia Miller-Idriss and Hilary Pilkington

*In Gender and the Radical and Extreme Right: Mechanisms of Transmission and the Role of Educational Interventions*, editors **Cynthia Miller-Idriss** and **Hilary Pilkington** bring together contributors to offer an interdisciplinary perspective on an often overlooked topic: the intersections between the radical and extreme right, education and gender. This volume will be invaluable in present and future efforts to better understand the role that women play in these movements, write **Katherine Williams**.

Cropped version of Alice Wiedel, AfD Bundesparteitag, 23 April 2017, Köln Picture: Olaf Kosinsky/ [kosinsky.eu](https://www.kosinsky.eu) CC BY-SA 3.0 DE)

**Gender and the Radical and Extreme Right: Mechanisms of Transmission and the Role of Educational Interventions.** Cynthia Miller-Idriss and Hilary Pilkington (eds). Routledge. 2019.

Drawing on essays [originally published in the Gender and Education journal](#), *Gender and the Radical and Extreme Right*, edited by [Cynthia Miller-Idriss](#) and [Hilary Pilkington](#), brings together seven chapters which directly address gender as a factor in radical right or extremist mobilisation. This is particularly prescient when we consider, for example, the growing academic and media interest in the participation of women in radical right and extremist groups, as discussed in a [recent article](#) by Miller-Idriss and Pilkington for *The Guardian*.

As the editors point out in the introductory chapter, there is a wide body of research literature that attends to the gendered dimension of radical right mobilisation. However, this has resulted in the establishment of a false dichotomy which asserts, to put it crudely, that individuals are more likely to support the radical right if they are male, and less so if they are female. This has reinforced the idea that women are uninterested in politics generally, and less inclined to support the radical right particularly due a range of gendered socio-cultural indicators, such as religiosity and support for feminism. There is evidence, the editors suggest, that this so-called gender gap – in this context, describing the differences in the political behaviour of men and women – is closing, with radical right groups in fact incorporating tenets of gender equality and seemingly embracing the LGBTQ+ community (though, as the editors point out, the adoption of these issues is usually part of groups' wider anti-Islam agenda). The [increased visibility of women](#) in the radical right also suggests that groups' attendant ideologies are being 'mainstreamed' in attempts to appeal to a broader, and more receptive, audience.

Subsequently, the volume seeks to explore female support for the radical right, as well as challenge the masculine image of these movements. The intersection of education in this context is especially important as it refers to the setting in which an individual comes to understand the radical right; the editors are keen to point out that this analysis is not restricted to formal (i.e. compulsory) education. Historically, formal education has played an important role in shaping how individuals come to view the social world, but equal consideration is given to the education an individual may receive outside of these formal sites in popular culture as well as within subcultures. Additionally, the volume is concerned with the implications of radical right discourse, and the pivotal role that institutions play in disseminating the ideas of the radical right to the public. The linguistic choices we make when referring to the radical right are considered critically important, as they can be interpreted as either 'softening' or 'legitimising' the impact of radical right or racist discourse. Accordingly, 'radical right' is employed throughout the volume as an umbrella term that encompasses the diverse range of parties, groups and ideologies on the right of the political spectrum.



The volume is comprised of seven principal chapters, with an afterword by acclaimed scholar [Kathleen Blee](#), whose [own seminal work on women in the 1920s Ku Klux Klan as well as on contemporary hate groups in the US](#) is considered to have laid the foundations for research in the field today. The chapters cover a variety of topics ranging from homophobia in the British National Party (BNP), masculinity and the body in Germany and women's involvement with Golden Dawn in Greece. All contributions attempt to bridge the gap in the academic literature when it comes to the relationship between gender, education and the radical right, and effectively illustrate the interdisciplinary nature of the volume itself.

We are witnessing women's increased visibility in radical right and extremist movements across Europe and beyond, including in leadership positions. As the editors posit, national context is important, and this is an issue effectively unpacked by Anita Stasulane in Chapter Three throughout her discussion of women in the Latvian National Front (LNF). Like many other nations, Latvia is experiencing an increase in the number of women assuming positions in the radical right. Evidently, gender is central to this mobilisation, and while this participation is framed more generally as [irrational or exceptional](#), the Latvian case demonstrates that women's support of the radical right is shaped by contextual factors such as, for example, the socio-cultural influence of esotericism and the mystical teachings of [Nicholas Roerich](#).

Following the dissolution of the USSR in the early 1990s, Latvia attempted to purge itself of its Soviet legacy after 50 years of communist rule. Many Latvians considered the ideology of Nazism to be less harmful than communism, despite the former only having held political influence for four years during World War Two (1941–45). After more than 15,000 Latvians were deported to the Soviet Union in 1941, National Socialists arriving in Latvia were welcomed as liberators, enabling the country to throw off the shackles of communism – however short-lived this emancipation turned out to be. Consequently, the radical right has been able to gain ground in Latvia as a force primarily opposed to communism, though, as Stasulane points out, it does not enjoy broad public support in Latvia today. Despite this, Latvia remains a 'vivid example' of how the increased participation of women in the radical right has the potential to change the gender composition of movements. This is due, in part, to the influence of esotericism on the LNF. Resultantly, the LNF is arguably the only radical right group in which women take 'hierarchically leading' positions.

The mystical teachings of Roerich, and others like [Helena Blavatsky](#) (founder of the [Theosophical Society](#) in 1875), recognised the central importance of the 'female archetype' inherent across religious systems and called for 'the restoration of the lost balance between the masculine and feminine'. Women could fulfil their theosophical duty by giving life (i.e. bearing children), and by being 'a man's inspirer and companion'. These are tropes commonly associated with radical right or extremist movements, but in this context, it does not necessarily mean that LNF women are downtrodden or relegated to behind-the-scenes tasks, despite their belief that, in general, women are 'subordinate' to men in politics and business. Matters of the spirit are another concern altogether: in this respect, LNF women consider themselves to be 'spiritually superior' to men, describing themselves as 'daughters of the Great Mother of the world', as per theosophical teachings.

In her study of the role of women in the English Defence League (EDL) in Chapter Six, Pilkington notes that the English case presents another 'compelling' reason to again revisit assumptions that have typically guided scholarship on the subject. This is due in part to the increased visibility of women in radical right and extremist groups, as well as the mainstreaming of topics typically associated with the broader feminist movement, such as gender equality and LGBTQ+ issues. Pilkington's study interrogates whether these shifts toward progressive policies are real, or simply instrumental to the EDL's anti-Islam agenda.

The EDL itself was founded in 2009 as a 'feet on the street' movement to protest against 'militant Islam', and in support of British military forces. Like many radical right and extremist groups, the EDL does not have formal membership processes, making it difficult to pinpoint the exact number of members, but the author estimates that there are approximately 25,000–30,000 active EDL supporters. Pilkington studied the group over a three-year period, making ethnographic observations of activists by attending more than twenty EDL demonstrations, and travelling to and from events with supporters. This gave Pilkington a unique opportunity to observe the 'gendered social interactions and cultural practices'. The EDL's 'openness' to women is facilitated through its women's division – known as the EDL Angels – whose members proclaim that women should 'stand up and be heard, it's not all about the fellas'.

Despite this apparent openness to women, the EDL is still largely dominated by men, but the author observes that many female respondents made a 'conscious choice' to become active in the EDL, needing an avenue to vent their 'growing anger and frustration' following [cases like Rotherham](#), where at least 1,400 young vulnerable girls were sexually abused and exploited by gangs of men predominantly of Pakistani origin between 1997 and 2013. However, while traditional ideas surrounding femininity have been challenged or transgressed by women in the EDL to some extent, traditional masculinity is 'unquestioned'. While the movement is in numerical terms dominated by men, it presents opportunities for women and members of the LGBTQ+ community to create 'affective bonds' within the movement, despite the remonstrations of more extreme (typically male) members. Although on the face of it, the EDL has been able to successfully mobilise women and members of the LGBTQ+ community (three participants identified as being gay or lesbian) on a gender equality and pro-LGBTQ+ platform, these platforms have been cynically coopted to promote the 'core civilisational values of the West' in opposition to the perceived threat of Islam.

It becomes evident, then, that researchers need to further explore the socio-cultural and political factors that broaden the appeal of these groups to women; the dissemination of gendered and 'civilisational' discourses by groups like the EDL and others is something that should concern us all. Thus, *Gender and the Radical and Extreme Right* gives readers a vital insight into the intersections between gender, education and the radical or extreme right. It is a timely work that effectively unpacks the ways in which radical or extremist ideology is disseminated through 'informal education processes', and demonstrates how women are often an integral part of these movements, despite the contradictions. As Blee notes in the Afterword, we must pay attention 'to the many dimensions of gender and of educational messaging operating in the radical right today'. The analysis presented in this volume will prove invaluable to these efforts.

*This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Democratic Audit. It was first published by the [LSE Review of Books blog](#).*

**Katherine Williams** is an ESRC-funded PhD candidate at Cardiff University. Her research interests include the role of women in far-right groups, feminist methodologies and political theory and gender in IR. You can follow her on Twitter: [@phdkat](#).

## Similar Posts

- [Book Review | The Far Right Today by Cas Mudde](#)
- [Book Review | The Extreme Gone Mainstream: Commercialisation and Far Right Youth Culture in Germany by Cynthia Miller-Idriss](#)
- [Book Review | The New Populism: Democracy Stares into the Abyss by Marco Revelli](#)
- [How populist radical right parties have eroded the EU's human rights agenda in the Mediterranean](#)
- [Why the radical right is no longer the exclusive domain of older, male voters](#)