



ACTRI PERSPECTIVE

The Imperative of
Acknowledging American
Women's Role in Violent
Extremism and Terrorism

Teagan Hale
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ACTRI is a cross-disciplinary 501c(3) nonprofit research organization focused on the broad spectrum of transnational extreme-right, extreme-left, and militant-jihadi political violence. We study the relationships between them and their effect on how ideologies emerge, spread, dominate, and influence countermeasures.

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Introduction

How do American women operate within violent domestic extremist communities and contribute to their goals, and how do their roles threaten and challenge national security? These questions have largely been understudied within extremism and terrorism studies. Most current studies tend to overlook the American women's contributions to domestic extremist communities and fail to account for their potential and capacity to facilitate political violence. Mainstream research has long excluded American women as objects of analysis, or as potential extremists or terrorist. Furthermore, the greater scope of research is challenged by the fact that women indeed serve as active agents of politically violent movements by their own volition. This position is no longer tenable given that violent domestic extremist communities "pose the most lethal and persistent terrorism-related threat to our country today."¹ Effective strategies must seriously contend with threats stemming from American women and consider their impact, lethality, and contributions with the same seriousness as men. Understanding the security vulnerabilities created by women's lack of consideration is the first step in rectifying this concern.

The purpose of this perspective is to highlight the dangers of American women within domestic extremist and terrorist communities in the United States. This author contends that the failure to consider women as significant threat variables leaves the United States in a compromised position where women can subvert their lack of consideration as threats to the benefit of extremist and terrorist communities. Women should not be considered as exceptions to their causes and the case is made that future practice must equalize the threat of women as it does with men in extremism and terrorism research. This argument will be made by first consulting scholarly literature critiquing the status of women within extremism and terrorism research as well as exploring how women within extremist and terrorist communities have exploited their lack of concern to execute operations and achieve their goals.

Likewise, the emphasis on women's passivity in conflict as victims or as peacebuilders will be challenged to illustrate how this prioritization has consequently led to a dearth of frameworks which consider women as actors with their own agencies. The consequences of this dynamic will be shown by critiquing how the lack of consideration by the United States has left it in a compromised position in its engagements abroad and at home.



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This paper will also draw upon a collection of actions from domestic women extremists or women who support violent domestic extremist or terrorist organizations across the American political spectrum to illustrate a diverse, persistent threat. American women will be defined by six roles: a mix of combat and support roles, based on Campion's study. This perspective ultimately aims to offer insight as to why women within extremist and terrorist organizations need to be taken more seriously, it offers instances of domestic women-perpetrated political violence illustrating numerous forms of threats, and it gauges recommendations for future practices.

Limitations to Women's Role in Political Violence

Mainstream conflict studies literature limits our understanding of women's role in political violence as it is predominantly rooted in several engendered assumptions that exclude women's potential for political violence and devalue their agency within politically violent movements. There are inherent biases that skew the idea of women within conflict. Women associated with political violence tend to be discussed for their relationship with male perpetrators (i.e. as their wives, lovers, mothers, sisters, or daughters) or portrayed as the innocent victims of unjustified bloodshed whose deaths and injuries reinforce the securitization of violent groups.² These perspectives portray women's capacity for political violence as being fully dependent on men or relegated women for their status' as 'unacceptable victims' whose casualties indicate the seriousness of a threat. Conversely, women whose actions break these assumptions are characterized in exoticized, fantastical stories distinguishing them from 'traditional' male criminals, combatants, terrorists, and extremists.³ They are fetishized and exoticized as abnormal occurrences of women's participation in all forms of conflict. The idea of women as terrorists succumbs to these same pitfalls as Gentry and Sjoberg note:

“Media, scholarly, and policy world reactions to women's participation in violence classified as terrorism is to treat women's terrorism as not terrorism but women's terrorism, and women terrorists are at once characterized as aberrant, personally motivated, and beyond the agency of the female perpetrator.”⁴



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Naco's 2005 study highlighted how women roles were commonly devalued under women's terrorism. For instance, women terrorists are discussed for their physical appearance. There is Lela Khaled who is described as the combination of beauty and violence and mocked about her bombs (slang for breasts).⁵ Lopez Riano was similarly discussed for her sexual prowess and iconic-like stature for being "flirtatious, pretty and the furthest away from someone you would think of as a terrorist."⁶ Another construction per above is women terrorist being framed for their relation to men, such as the Black Widows of Chechnya, the Wives of the Ku Klux Klan, and the recent "phenomena" of ISIS Brides or Jihadi Brides. These engendered definitions chain women to their connection towards men in terrorist groups and thus deprives them of their agency (there is no mention of ISIS Husbands). Moreover, women who become politically violent are described as immoral from "normal" women insofar they are damningly contrasted as being butch, lesbians, sexually deprived or as being women who are naïve, out of touch with reality, and deluded towards an unworthy cause. These frames belittle the idea of women as terrorists, as women terrorists are characteristically discussed in engendered ways which injects stereotypes, biases, and assumptions towards their potential for violence. Women within these frames are unable to become objects of study in extremism and terrorism as they are effectively relegated to periphery where their agency is disregarded or overlooked, fetishized and exoticized, anomalous and unfathomable, or pitied. There is effectively a culture of unease that is unwilling to comprehend and accept the reality of women being politically violent, especially as terrorists.⁷ It is unsurprising that women terrorists receive less punishment than men in judicial systems.⁸ Discussions over repatriation from Iraq and Syria are far more favorable and specialized for women,^{9,10} and women's motivations and reasons for joining are characterized differently than those of men.¹¹

Lastly, there is an overemphasis where women are assessed for how their femininity can bolster peacebuilding processes and be utilized to facilitate preventative radicalization strategies.¹² These assumptions of women's inherent dispositions towards peace runs the risk of reinforcing gender-biased stereotypes of women's roles in society; they are contrasted by women who support conflict and propagate political violence and results in oversimplified inefficient strategies where women are solely conceptualized for their capacity as peacekeepers.¹³ In this conception, there is little consideration for women as politically violent elements and the normative assumptions see women as dependent variables for peace. While aspects of these two elements are necessary dynamics to consider, they devalue the agency of women who participate in political violence and underplay the fact that their contributions are critical to the survival and success of extremist and terrorist communities.¹⁴

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These conceptions deemphasize the fact that women willingly participate in violent domestic extremist communities for a myriad¹⁵ of ideological, political, and personal reasons and ignore the immutable participation and leadership of women in a multitude of roles throughout history in various forms of conflict. Women are no strangers to conflict and failing to integrate them within the present conflict environment by treating them as an abnormality of political violence or compartmentalizing their roles has created vulnerabilities for national security. For officials viewing “men and women adherents as distinct threats bearing different degrees of risk, such perception may translate into flawed policy design or implementation,”¹⁶ which is detrimental to national security. The lack of consideration of women within extremist and terrorist communities may mean they can exploit their low threat perceptions, gender-biased assumptions, and stereotypes of their passiveness to facilitate their goals on multiple fronts.

Security Concerns

Practical and conceptual security concerns have been created through the lack of analysis assessing women in extremist communities.¹⁷ Counterterrorism policies remain relatively uninformed about these calculations and governments are regularly caught flat-footed by terrorists' exploitation of gender norms.¹⁸ Practically not considering women to be impactful or significant elements of extremist organizations enables them to exploit their bodies and stereotypes, resulting in strategic and tactical benefits for malign actors. For instance, women operatives are used to avoid detection by security personnel to achieve certain goals, boost media attention by serving as symbols and faces of their organizations, shame other individuals into action, serve as familial encouragers of violence, and keep organizations afloat through propaganda, recruitment, fundraising, and other support activities.¹⁹ The assumptions of the ‘inherent peacefulness of women’ have additionally enabled them to serve as ideal operatives insofar they are more easily able to pass defensive measures such as checkpoints and searches, are able to penetrate their targets and get closer to their objectives with less scrutiny, and are able to infiltrate and gain intelligence more easily and provide excellent cover to their organization using assumptions of innocence to feign ignorance.²⁰ Conceptually, the lack of frameworks considering women as combatants, terrorists, or extremists leaves the largely male dominated security environment disadvantaged.



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For instance, security personnel may take less action in an effort to avoid outrage by appearing as too aggressive or hostile towards women; special care must be given towards counteracting the sexual, cultural, and attractive appeal of women in propaganda and recruitment mediums; women receiving less penalties and punishment than men despite convictions of similar crimes signals that women can undertake higher risk missions; and socially the idea that women are less violent or capable than their male counterparts in terrorist and extremist organizations must be purged.²¹

Gender Exploitation

Numerous extremist movements worldwide have successfully utilized women to challenge states and governments in various capacities. Cunningham summarily described how terrorist and extremist communities exploit gender biases to the advantage of their organization: “First, their non-threatening nature may prevent in-depth scrutiny at the most basic level as they are simply not considered important enough to warrant investigation; second, sensitives regarding more throughout searches, particularly of women’s bodies, may hamper stricter scrutiny; and third a woman’s ability to get pregnant and the attendant changes to her body facilitate concealment of weapons and bombings, as well as further impeding inspection because of impropriety issues. Finally, popular opinion typically considers women as victims of violence including terrorism, rather than perpetrators..., such a perspective is frequently translated into official and operational policy wherein women are not seriously scrutinized as operational elements within terrorist and guerilla organizations because of limited resources and threat perceptions.”²²

Tamil Tigers operative Thenmozhi Rajaratnam assassinated Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi during a short rally with his supporters. Gandhi objected to security concerns and allowed her to garland him where she detonated a bomb at point blank range as she bowed for his blessing. Women of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) were infamous for exploiting women’s lack of consideration to achieve their goals in activities ranging from bombings to shootings to honeypot traps to intelligence collection to infiltration missions. Figures such as Mairead Farrell, Rose Dugdale, Geraldine Anne Ferrity, and Dolours and Anne Price are infamous examples. Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State prominently uses women successfully in their ‘jihadi girl-power propaganda’ and have seemingly baffled the security environment as to how they attract women and young girls to their cause in traditional and non-traditional roles.²³

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The Al-Khansa Brigade, an all-female enforcement group of the Islamic State, is a glaring example of the real-world implications of this dynamic. Gudrun Ensslin and Ulrike Maire Meinhof founded the infamous Baader-Meinhof Gang and were notoriously responsible for the acts of terrorism involving the bombing of multiple institutions and the killings of European and American personnel throughout Germany, France, the Netherlands, and Sweden.

U.S. Armed Forces were constrained by conceptual challenges with understanding women as terrorists throughout the Middle East.²⁴ One soldier reported, “If we are not allowed to look at Iraqi women, then how can we search for the bomb under the abaya”²⁵ and “were told to allow cars with women and children to bypass.”²⁶ The security environment disregarding women as potential threats severely underestimates “the importance of women in the growth and survival of extremist and insurgent groups.”²⁷ Similar to their men counterparts, women are pivotal parts to these groups, and ignoring them within this capacity creates security vulnerabilities exploitable by malign actors. These perceptions, cliches, and biases have essentially lulled security forces and research into a state of complacency.²⁸ Ignoring women essentially enables extremist and terrorist organizations free reign to operate under the radar with less scrutiny and more accessibility than men. The lack of attention towards women in this regard have effectively made them analytical blind spots in the terror and extremist ecosystems.

The United States Counterterrorism Strategy Shortcomings

These pitfalls have negatively impacted the United States' approach towards the idea of women as extremists and terrorists. Counterterrorism strategies from the Bush, Obama, and Trump Administrations did not signal the dearth of women's roles throughout extremist or terrorist groups abroad and threats from American women in the homefront. Amid the ‘War on Terror,’ post 9/11 counterterrorism and foreign policies have been criticized for thematically invoking a saviorism complex of liberating women from evil men, solely seeing women who support extremist or terrorist group as being manipulated to do so and seeing women for their impact as mitigators for extremism and radicalization.²⁹ For instance, The Women, Peace, and Security Act of 2017 focuses on how the United States can “promote the meaningful participation of women in mediation and negotiation processes seeking to prevent, mitigate, or resolve violent conflict”³⁰ but does not make mention of combatting and counteracting women, especially American women, who support and contribute to political violence. Once again, the focus remains on women as victims, perpetrators, and mitigators but not supporters and contributors of violent extremism and terrorism.



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The U.S. national security apparatus has thematically downplayed and struggled to comprehend women in the same capacity as men, only increasing the danger with the skepticism brought by downplaying or misrepresenting their contributions.³¹ Bigio and Vogelstein, for example, note that security frameworks incorporated both by Republican and Democrat Administrations consistently neglect the participation of women within extremist communities and declare that counterterrorism strategies dangerously ignore roles women serve within these communities.³² START's 'Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States' database assessment noted that despite the fact that American women whom are radicalized operate similarly to men and have comparable success rates in their activities, women are rarely considered as serious for their capacity for violence as men and receive lighter punishment from the judicial systems. Indicatively, the surge of conflict literature amid the proverbial 'War on Terror' continues to either devalue or ignore the subject of women as extremists and terrorists as compared to men. Even within the increase of internal threats from domestic extremist communities, strategies in the Biden Administration proclaimed first ever 'National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism'³³ have no significant statement regarding, or acknowledging, the impact of women within domestic extremist and terrorist communities. Federal and state agencies seem to still underestimate women's potential for political violence; this lack of attention results in an incomplete picture of the domestic terrorism ecosystem that may affect national security.³⁴ Neglecting women from this ecosystem severely depreciates the U.S.' capacity to secure itself from internal threats and resultantly this omission cedes the benefit of women's involvement towards domestic terrorist and extremist networks.³⁵ The biggest threat to the United States, as previously noted, stems from domestic sources, and new perspectives for counterterrorism use should begin to include women.³⁶

Geographical Prioritization

Analysis to date on women in political violence tends to prioritize those communities in the Global South, while women within the United States have remained largely neglected. For instance, while notable attention is brought towards women who participated in gang rape throughout Sierra Leone, women who joined terrorist groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, and notably the 'phenomenon of female suicide bombers and increasing rates of female combatants in intrastate conflicts,³⁷ rarely are American women considered in this capacity. Those who are considered in this manner tend to be overwhelmingly Muslims, of Arab and Southeast Asian backgrounds, and are discussed in a manner which excludes them as distinctively American terrorists.



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Hoda Muthana, an Alabama raised woman (aka "ISIS Bride") with a significant twitter following gained prominent coverage when then President Trump and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo stated she was not a US citizen after her departure to Syria.³⁸ Samantha Marie Elhassani of Indiana "turned her back on her country to support a terrorist organization."³⁹ Nicole Mansfield gained attention for being a woman who was 'brainwashed' into joining ISIS and later died a "violent" death in Syria.⁴⁰ Jill Marie Jones "espoused violence in furtherance of Islamic extremist ideology" and supported "retaliation against the United States military and government actions occurring outside the United States."⁴¹ Noelle Velentzas and Asia Siddiqui who planned attacks in their local community were "inspired by radical Islam" to wage jihad and were "more than prepared to kill Americans and fellow New Yorkers."⁴² Compared to women in similar situations, there is a particular dearth of research which does not seriously contend with the idea of an American woman operating within specific VDEs unique to the political circumstances of the United States.

Women have served as the active proponents of conspiracy theories such as PizzaGate, the 'Stop the Steal' 2020, and QAnon yet their recognition for their expansions are largely undervalued and ignored.⁴³ Women of the Ku Klux Klan are eclipsed by the actions of male members despite their role towards its revival in the 1920s and their continued support for racist ideologies. Little studies exist of women within the Earth/Animal Liberation Fronts despite being named in 2002 by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) as the top domestic terror threat.⁴⁴ In the breach of the Capitol, 13% of arrests related to the incident have been of women, with many more still wanted by the FBI for their involvement.⁴⁵

Framework and Methodology

Whether recruiters, propagandists, quartermasters, fund-raiser, soldiers, spies, suicide-bombers, spokespersons, writers and editors, trainers, handlers, nurses, or doctors, women like men have served numerous roles throughout extremist and terrorist movements in history. This begs the question of how best to illustrate and assess the dangers and threats of American women DVEs uniquely within the domestic extremist space, especially as they apply within the threat categories previously outlined. Policies and strategies throughout the 'War on Terror' fail to seriously consider women in the same manner as men. Coupled with the acknowledged higher participation of men in extremist and terrorist groups compared to women, illustrating the threat of women must be accomplished in a manner that does not represent them as rare, abnormal, and exceptional but rather as consistent factors. Furthermore, women must also be considered for their effectiveness throughout active and supportive roles in a manner that avoids the pitfalls associated with women in conflict studies.



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This approach will incorporate Champion’s 2020 study “Women in the Extreme and Radical Rights: Forms of Participation and Their Implications” as its conceptual basis. Champion’s study advances a robust framework for conceptualizing women’s activities by asserting six forms of participation: “violent actors, thinkers, facilitators, promoters, activists, and exemplars.”⁴⁶ This perspective examined women’s participation in extremist groups worldwide to understand the consequences of ignoring them and to formulate counter ideological, operational, and identity responses to their implications. This framework was initially applied to assess the various roles of women throughout right-wing extremist organizations worldwide; however, the examinations of the various roles women can serve and fulfill and how they threaten to exploit the security environment can proficiently describe and mold the specific threats of American women. The violent actors engage or attempt to execute illegal, illicit, and violent activities to support their movements. The thinkers contribute towards organizational values and beliefs by creating new ideas to advance ideological appeals. Facilitators aid by working safe houses and supplying weapons and resources. Promoters propagate theories and beliefs on social media platforms. The activists openly support movements via protests, rallies, and meetings, including in private engagements. Lastly, the exemplars serve as paragons or models for other females within their communities who are celebrated for their contributions.⁴⁷

Methodology

As this perspective involves assessing the threat of American women as ‘violent domestic extremists’ within the United States, it will specifically use the Office of The Director of National Intelligence’s understanding as designated in their unclassified “Domestic Violent Extremism Poses Heightened Threat in 2021” Report. The Intelligence Community describes domestic violent extremist as “individuals based and operating primarily in the United States without direction or inspiration from a foreign terrorist group or other foreign power and who seek to further political or social goals wholly or in part through unlawful acts of force or violence.”⁴⁸ Domestic violent extremists are classified under five categories as described further below:

- Racially or Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremists – Those with ideological agendas derived from biases related to race or ethnicity.
- Animal Rights and Environmental Extremists – Those seeking to end or mitigate the exploitation or perceived exploitation and destruction of animals and the environment.
- Abortion Related Violent Extremists – Those with ideological agendas supporting pro-life or pro-choice beliefs.



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- **Anti-Government/Anti-Authority Violent Extremists** – Those with agendas derived from anarchist, anti-government or anti-authority sentiments which oppose perceived economic, social, or racial, including perceived government overreach, negligence, or illegitimacy. This category includes subgroups such as militia violent extremists, anarchist violent extremists, and sovereign citizen violent extremists.
- **All Other Domestic Terrorism Threats** – Those with ideological agendas not defined under the other categories, including a combination of personal grievances and biases related to religion, gender, and sexual orientation.

Data Collection

The ensuing charts classify American women in one of Campion's six frameworks as they correspond to one of the above domestic extremist threat categories specifically within the United States.⁴⁹ To that end, there are 47 chartered instances of women portraying and fulfilling these six frames. Each section will be accompanied by charts which list the name of the individual, the threat categories they can be classified by their role classification, and descriptions of their actions and how they contributed to VDE. Each case is only mentioned once and even though women, like men, can serve multiple roles, for illustrative purposes cited individuals are given only one role designation. The subsequent charts are designed to provide diverse instances of the various roles women have served in propagating VDE ideology through their actions whether criminal or legal. The perspective acknowledges that compared to men, their overall criminal nature within VDE is low, but argues that failure to contend with them as serious threats make the United States vulnerable. The purpose of the charts articulates concisely the scope of women's VDE across the political spectrum and does not prioritize one faction over the other (ex. far-right extremism over left-wing extremism).

Following Campion's rationale, those who carried out or helped facilitate violence were classified as Violent Actors and Facilitators. Those who created foundations for original ideas or who helped repackage them are the Thinkers and Promoters respectively. Those who advanced ideology through their activism and those who became paragons of the VDE communities are the Activists and Exemplars. For the Violent Actors and Facilitators, those cited are individuals who were charged and formerly found guilty of their crimes, including those who escaped prosecution and are still wanted criminals.



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Their cases were located through law enforcement sources, including the Department of Justice (DOJ) and the FBI website, and from various other local police jurisdictions, or found in articles reported by verified media agencies. For the Thinkers, Promoters, and Activist individuals fitting these classifications were identified through sources such as the Southern Poverty Law Center's Hatewatch, Extremist Files, and Intelligence Report, and the Anti-Defamation League's H.A.T.E. Map, alongside their other research and database tools. In addition, few private websites and media outlets associated with VDE were consulted and statements written by users identifying as women were extracted. Free speech and the right to assembly in the United States are constitutionally protected rights and does not necessarily indicate one is a VDE, thus selected instances are those with clear themes inciting hate, extremism, discrimination, or violence, as they fit within the defined threat categories. For the Exemplars, those women who are cited are included based on their deaths, imprisonment, or stories used by VDE communities to create models for members in the community to follow, or to create examples of the ideal women within these communities should strive to be.

Findings

Violent Actors

As previously highlighted, women have performed functions where they were directly responsible for inflicting political violence against those deemed their enemies throughout numerous conflicts, including within terrorism and extremist communities. American women are no different in this regard, and to illustrate the point this section will highlight numerous examples across the threat spectrum of American women serving as violent actors. Campion uses the term 'violent actor' because of its neutrality and accuracy, as women engage in illegal violence against enemies amongst other criminal acts of deadly intent against persons and symbols representing that which they opposed. The word 'combatant' is incompatible, as this term is generally applied to those participating in formal hostilities against armed state forces. As Campion posited, the term 'militant' as well is avoided as "it is more often applied to activists as a measure of their political commitment rather than a neutral description of their activity."⁵⁰

Classifying American women as violent actors covers the threat categories and creates a lens to highlight varying degrees of political ideology. There are a diverse number of roles violent actor women have performed across the political and threat spectrum.



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Kathryn Ainsworth of the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan in 1968 bombed the Congregation Beth Israel of Meridian, Mississippi, and was later killed in an FBI ambush after attempting to perpetuate another bombing. Ashli Babbitt was killed after breaching a barricade built by security in the 2021 Capitol Hill Riot and Dawn Bancroft alongside Diane Santos-Smith breached the grounds express desire for violence including “looking for Nancy to shoot her in the friggin brain.”⁵¹ Catherine Marie Kerkow hijacked Western Airlines Flight 701 in June of 1972 to demand the release of black rights activists, and Assata Shakur of the Black Liberation Army is wanted for murder and for her role in bank robberies. Meredith Lowell is a ‘lone wolf’ animal rights activist who has a history of stabbing people wearing fur and environmental activists such as Jessica Reznicek and Ruby Montoya were responsible for sabotaging industrial pipelines causing millions in damages. The following chart highlights more examples of American women operating as violent actors and illustrates a diverse, violent threat from terror and extremist communities.

Chart 1: Violent Actors

| Name | Threat Category | Action |
|--|------------------------------------|---|
| Elizabeth Anna Duke | Anti-Government/ Anti-Authority | Elizabeth is a fugitive sought for her role in criminal activities in the 1970s and 1980s, such as bombings, including the 1983 Senate Bombing Attack for her role in the May 19th Communist Organization. The organization advocated communism and the overthrow of the federal government. ¹ |
| Rachelle Shelley Shannon | Abortion Related | Rachelle is an anti-abortion militant sentenced to 11 years in prison for the 1993 attempted assassination of physician Dr. George Tiller. In addition, Rachelle was responsible and convicted for six firebombing and two acid attacks at women's clinics throughout California, Oregon, and Nevada. ² |
| Assata Shakur (Joanne Deborah Chesimard) | Racially or Ethnically Motivated | Assata is wanted for domestic terrorism as part of her involvement with a revolutionary extremist organization known as the Black Liberation Army. In 1977, she was found guilty on charges such as first-degree murder, assault and battery of a police officer, armed robbery, and assault with a dangerous weapon. She escaped prison in 1979 and is thought to have relocated to Cuba in 1984. ³ |

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|--|--|---|
| Briana Waters, Sarah Harvey, Chelsea D. Gerlach Josephine Overaker, Joyanna Zacher | Animal Rights and Environmental | They were a part of "The Family" who were members of the Animal Liberation Front and the Earth Liberation Front. They were caught and charged within in the largest 'eco-terrorism' case in U.S. history. The Family was responsible for several arson and destructive acts across five states that were deemed as threats to the environment and animals. They committed an estimated \$48 million worth of arson, vandalism, and property damage from 1995-2001. ⁴ |
| Nasim Aghdam | Anti-Government/ Anti-Authority | Nasim was the perpetrator behind the 2018 YouTube Headquarters mass shooting which left 4 injured. Her motive was her frustration with YouTube's policies and the demonetization of her media channels. ⁵ |
| Jessica Reznicek Ruby Montoya | Animal Rights and Environmental | Jessica and Ruby were indicted September 2019 on nine federal charges related to the sabotage of the Dakota Access Pipeline across Iowa and South Dakota. Their actions resulted in \$3 million dollars of damages. ⁶ |
| Julia Ann Poff | Anti-Government/ Anti-Authority | Julia mailed homemade package bombs to President Obama, Texas Governor Greg Abbott, and Carolyn Colvin, the former acting Social Security Administrator in October 2016. Julia pleaded guilty to the transportation of explosives with intent to kill, injure and intimidate. ⁷ |
| Shannon Richardson | Anti-Government/ Anti-Authority | Shannon mailed ricin-laced letters to then President Obama, New York City Mayor Bloomberg, and the Director of Everytown Against Guns Mark Glaze. Her letters contained the threat "You will have to kill me and my family before you get my guns. The right to bear arms is my constitutional God-given right. What's in this letter is nothing compared to what I've got planned for you." ⁸ |
| Nicole Poole Franklin | Racially or Ethnically Motivated | Nicole attempted to kill two children because of their race and nationality. Using her vehicle, Nicole struck the first child-victim believing him/her to be of Middle Eastern descent who "was ISIS" and struck the second child because s/he were Hispanic and that were "takin [sic] over" and "wasn't supposed to be in our country." ⁹ |
| Maria Terry | Abortion Related | Maria tweeted threats to bomb Planned Parenthood facilities and harm staff in April 2019. She "admitted that she intended to intimidate or interfere with persons seeking access to, or providing, reproductive health services through Planned Parenthood." ¹⁰ |

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|--|---|--|
| Catherine Marie Kerkow | Anti-Government/ Anti-Authority; Racially or Ethnically Motivated | Catherine, alongside her boyfriend, hijacked Western Airlines Flight 701 in June 1972 to force authorities to free Angela Davis of the Black Panthers who was on trial for murder, kidnapping, and conspiracy. Threatening to detonate a bomb on a plane with passengers, Catherine was paid a \$500,000 ransom and they fled to Algeria. Catherine and her accomplice were eventually arrested in France; however, Catherine escaped and has been wanted since. ¹¹ |
| Donna Joan Borup | Racially or Ethnically Motivated | Donna is wanted for tossing acid into the eyes of a Port Authority Police Officer in a participation at a violent anti-apartheid demonstration at JFK International Airport. ¹² |
| Kathy Boudin, Cathy Wilkerson, Diana Oughton | Anti-Government/ Anti-Authority; Racially or Ethnically Motivated | The trio were a part of the Weather Underground movement and known for the 1970 Greenwich Village Townhouse Explosion. The bombs they were constructing to target Fort Dix and Columbia University accidentally exploded destroying the building killing Oughton and wounding two other accomplices. ¹³ |
| Neely Petrie-Blanchard | Anti-Government/ Anti-Authority | Neely, who was a part of the 'sovereign citizen' E-Clause group, shot its leader after she believed that he was conspiring with the government to keep her children away from her. ¹⁴ |

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|--|---------------------------------|--|
| Margaret Katherine Millet, Ilse Washington Asplund | Animal Rights and Environmental | Alongside two other members of the Evan Mecham Eco-Terrorist International Conspiracy, the duo damaged the pylons and cables supporting the lifts at the Fairfield Snow Bowl Resort in Arizona. In a letter explaining their actions, they demanded that if the ski operations were not discontinued then more damages would occur. Their actions resulted in \$26,000 in damages. ¹⁵ |
| Emily Johnston and Annette Klapstein | Animal Rights and Environmental | The duo, two out of five climate change activists known as the 'Valve Turners', broke into an Enbridge-owned pipeline site in Minnesota and |
| Regina Rene Dinwiddie | Abortion Related | Regina has on numerous occasions issued either death threats or physically impeded Planned Parenthood staff and patients. An example of a threat of her includes " Robert, remember "Dr. Gunn [a physician who was killed in 1993 by an opponent of abortion] This could happen to you.... He is not in the world anymore.... Whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed." ¹⁷ |
| Meredith Lowell | Animal Rights and Environmental | Meredith, who has a history of assaulting people wearing fur, is charged with attempted murder for stabbing a woman. Lowell, in a sting, once told an undercover agent she wanted to set up an animal rights militia. ¹⁸ |

Source: Author and Literature Review

Thinkers

Campion specifically describes the thinkers as those who are heavily involved in creating and propagating the ideology in extremist and terrorist communities. They can be women who have established themselves as respective intellectuals within VDE communities or women who make significant contributions to the pool of ideas influencing their ideology around current events. The thinkers might not necessarily engage in violence, but as Campion asserted, “they create the justifications which may enable other people to validate violent actions.”⁷⁰



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The thinkers can have their ideas spread amongst various VDE communities to which they themselves have no organizational links, illustrating a viral appropriation of potentially dangerous beliefs and ideology influencing the worldview of the other roles. For instance, Barbara Coe founded the California Coalition for Immigration Reform responsible for pushing California Proposition 187. The legislation was criticized for being xenophobic, racists, and discriminatory towards minorities across the state.⁷¹ Summer Soleil (or Rachel Summers) who calls herself the Dropout Philosopher authors Europa Sun and Red Ice Iv; her writings combat Christianity over paganism, criticize the Nuremberg trials for being abominations of justice, and calls the current left wing, "witch hunters."⁷² Elaine Brown was the former chairwoman of the Black Panther Party and under her leadership she helped to advance the position of women within the party, spurned the idea of black women as leaders in black liberation movements, and turned the Black Panther Party into one supporting women's rights.⁷³ More examples of thinkers can be found in Chart 2.

Chart 2: Thinkers

| Name | Threat Category | Action |
|------------------|--|--|
| Brigitte Gabriel | Racially or Ethnically Motivated; (Other) Religion | Brigitte founded 'ACT! For America' in 2007. It has grown into an organization propagating anti-Muslim conspiracies, denigrating American-Muslims and Islam, hosting "March Against Sharia" rallies, and advocating anti-Muslim legislation. In a 2011 CNN interview, Brigitte stated "America has been infiltrated on all levels by radicals who wish to harm America. They have infiltrated us at the CIA, at the FBI, at the Pentagon, at the State Department. They're being radicalized in radical mosques, in our cities and communities within the United States." ¹⁹ Brigitte has also stated, "I began to realize that the Arab Muslim world, because of its religion and culture, is a natural threat to civilized people of the world, particularly Western civilization." ²⁰ |
| Maria Espinoza | Anti-Government/Anti-Authority, Racially or Ethnically Motivated; (Other) Religion | Maria founded the 'Remembrance Project' whose goal is "educating and raising awareness about the epidemic of killing of Americans by illegal aliens - individuals who should not have been in the U.S. in the first place." ²¹ The platform is criticized for misrepresenting crime by immigrants, vilifying immigrants as invaders, reportedly cooperating with white nationalist platforms, and is stated to provide a major platform of bigotry for other anti-immigration movements. ²² |

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|----------------|--|--|
| Jennifer Morse | Other (Religion, Sexual Orientation) | Jennifer founded the Ruth Institute to stop and counter she is called the Sexual Revolution, which is "a catch-all concept that has become an axiom on the Christian Right and is used to describe an apparently conspiratorial project to undermine the "traditional" heterosexual family in the name of sexual freedom." ²³ |
| Linda Thompson | Anti-Government/Anti-Authority, Racially or Ethnically Motivated; (Other) Religion | Linda produced two documentaries titled "Waco, The Big Lie" and its sequel "Waco II, the Big Lie Continues," alleging anti-government conspiracies and cover ups regarding the Waco Siege. In addition, Linda declared herself the "Acting Adjutant General of the Unorganized Militia of the United States," and proposed an armed march to Washington D.C. to try politicians for treason. ²⁴ |
| Lisa Turner | Racially or Ethnically Motivated | Lisa began the 'Women's Frontier' of the neo-Nazi World Church of the Creator Group. She argues for more activism, leadership, and participation from white women within supremacist communities. She authored 'Women of the Creativity Revolution' and 'The Co-Option of White Women.' ²⁵ |
| Lana Lokteff | Anti-Government/Anti-Authority; Racially or Ethnically Motivated | Lana, who hosted white nationalist radio programs among other platforms, invokes Viking imagery such as shield maidens, Valkyries, and lionesses to advocate how women can assist men in extremist communities which traditionally exclude their participation. Lokteff appeals to women and men by championing traditional gender roles that appeal to the values of tradition and hierarchy structuring racist communities. ²⁶ |
| Barbara Coe | Racially or Ethnically Motivated | Barbara founded the anti-Hispanic hate group California Coalition for Immigration Reform and was a member of the Council of Conservative Citizens, a white supremacist organization. Barbara, who described immigrants as "malignancy destroying the host" was influential in pushing conspiracies that Mexicans were planning to reconquer the Southwest and that the government was being taken over by globalists. Barbara led numerous rallies and presented her views across multiple channels. She is credited for pushing forth California Proposition 187, a controversial bill criticized for being xenophobic and for deliberately targeting minorities. ²⁷ |

Source: Author and Literature Review

Chart 3: Facilitators

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Facilitators

Campion describes the facilitators as “individuals who act in an enabling, organizational, or logistics role as part of, or on behalf of, a movement or group.”⁸³ The term is applied “because of its connotations with indirect or unobtrusive assistance,⁸⁴ the direct bringing about of an outcome, or assisting in the progression of a goal or task.”⁸⁵ Facilitation can include illegal—and sometimes legal, depending on jurisdiction—activities and operations which help to achieve a terrorist and extremist communities’ objective. Some illegal activities⁸⁸ can include trafficking unregistered firearms, harboring fugitives and providing safehouses, racketeering and counterfeiting operations, and conspiring with other members to plan activities. Legal activities include purchasing materials or resources to be used in attacks, financing or fundraising money, supporting communication efforts, accommodating others, and hosting organizational meetings. The act of facilitating often implies organizational links to designated terrorist or extremist networks, meaning that the facilitators often play a key role within their internal conjunction. Examples of women who acted illegally in this regard can be found in Chart 3.

Chart 3: Facilitators

| Name | Threat Category | Action |
|--------------------|------------------------------------|---|
| Donna Jean Wilmott | Anti-Government/ Anti-Authority | Donna bought and transported explosives aimed at blowing up United States Penitentiary Leavenworth in Kansas. The plot was part of a foiled attempt to free Oscar Lopez, leader of the Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional (FALN). FALN was a Puerto-Rican communist and anti-imperialist group responsible for more than 130 bombings in the United States between 1974 and 1983. ²⁸ |
| Patricia Parsons | Anti-Government/ Anti-Authority | Patricia, alongside Canadian citizen Suzanne Holland, solicited and conspired to kidnap Fumas County Sheriff Kurt Kiperman and Tipton County Judge Joseph Walker III in 2017. They wanted to take the officials to Canada to face "criminal charges." ²⁹ |

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|---------------------|---|--|
| Erica Chase | Racially or Ethnically Motivated Violence; Other (Religion) | Erica, alongside Leo Fulton, planned to bomb multiple institutions and individuals associated with African Americans and Jewish communities to instigate a racial war. ³⁰ |
| Riley Williams | Anti-Government/ Anti-Authority | Riley stole a laptop used for presentations belonging to Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the House, during the Capitol Hill Riot. It is reported that she allegedly intended to sell the laptop to Russia, although the matter remains under investigation. ³¹ |
| Deborah Davila | Anti-Government/ Anti-Authority | Deborah, alongside her husband, attempted to sell classified and sensitive documents containing information about nuclear, biological, and chemical warfare. She personally distributed more than 300 documents to addresses linked to anti-government and militia groups in North Carolina, Texas, and Georgia. ³² |
| Christine Greenwood | Racially or Ethnically Motivated | Christine, a leader of the Women for Aryan Unity and organizer for the Aryan Baby Drive, was charged for possessing bomb making materials and for associating, promoting, and assisting a criminal street gang. ³³ |
| Elizabeth Lecron | Anti-Government/ Anti-Authority; Racially or Ethnically Motivated | Elizabeth, inspired by mass shootings, including those on minorities, planned a shooting in Toledo, Ohio, and a bombing on an interstate pipeline. She expressed anti-government beliefs and her willful intent to become a mass shooter of her own. ³⁴ |
| Cynthia Abcug | Anti-Government/ Anti-Authority | Cynthia is a QAnon Adherent who conspired with other QAnon believers to plan a raid on a foster home to "free" her son and strike back against Colorado. She was arrested after authorities were tipped off by her plans. ³⁵ |

Source: Author and Literature Review

Chart 4: Promoters and Activists

Promoters and Activists

The promoters are the women who help “engage in information sharing, dissemination, and provocation (commonly online) but who largely repackage and share ideas rather than create them.”⁹⁵ The word promoter has neutral implications that directly involves the spreading, promoting, sharing, and distributing ideas central to the ideology of VDE communities. Champion posits that little evidence suggests women in this category are being deceptive deliberately, and in fact authentically subscribe to the views they are pushing and accept them as truth.

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The danger in promoters lies within their skill for ideological magnification and manipulation, insofar they can craft ideology (especially from the thinkers) in ways that are attractive, trendy, concise, viral, and easily shared across the Internet throughout their networks. Likewise, promoters can span across platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Telegram, Gab, Instagram, blogs, and podcasts, where they operate under pseudonyms or their own identities. Similar are the activists who describe women who contribute “active participation and support for individuals, organizations, and movements”⁹⁶ that are associated with VDEs.

The term activist is used as it argues for rationality and choice in women's contribution, and as the largest domain of participation, Campion notes that women in the other roles are activists as well. Activists are those who number rallies, protests, and meetings, or those who go in the field, spread pamphlets and brochures, and voice their concerns, or work in private to devise ways to achieve their cause in the public sphere. Activism is thus a public and private role, which works well in conjunction with the other roles previously discussed.

Selected mentions go towards Katie Fedor, who organized Animal Liberation Front's North American Press Office and would regularly appear in the media speaking on behalf of the organization and arguing for the morality of their cause. Valerie Gilbert, or the QAnon Meme Queen, uses her various social media channels to spread conspiracy theories across the Internet. A cross section of promoters and activists, given their similarities, can be found in the following chart. April Gaede, an activist, formed a pop-duo group called Prussian Blue with her two daughters, whose songs were filled with themes of white supremacy and Neo-Nazism. Shirley Phelps-Roper of the infamous Westboro Baptist Church is featured in numerous videos and interviews explaining and promoting the beliefs and ideology. There are numerous creative ways that women can promote VDES and work on a grass-roots level to spread their views through activism. More examples can be found in the following chart.

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Chart 4: Promoters and Activists

| Name | Threat Category | Action |
|----------------------|--|---|
| Katie Fedor | Animal Rights and Environmental | Katie founded the Animal Liberation Front's first North American Press Office and would regularly appear in the media defending the actions of its members and advocating for the morality of their cause. ³⁸ |
| Shirley Phelps-Roper | Racially or Ethnically Motivated; Other (Religion, Sexual Orientation) | Shirley was the spokesperson for Westboro Baptist Church, a "virulently homophobic, anti-Semitic hate group." The group regularly uses inflammatory language such as "God Hates Fags," "Thank God for Dead Soldiers," and "No Fags in Heaven." ³⁷ She is featured in many interviews, blogs, documentaries, and speeches arguing for the position of the Church. Shirley is also a licensed lawyer and has represented the Church at legal procedures. |
| Nancy Oakley | Anti-Government/ Anti-Authority | Nancy is an author on the Oathkeepers website. The content she posts, and her own original contributions, thematically revolve around right-wing conspiracies such as the 2020 Election Fraud and QAnon, attacks on the Biden Administration, Democrats, and left leaning institutions, and the spreading of disinformation material across the platform. ³⁸ |
| Pamela Geller | Racially or Ethnically Motivated; Other (Religion) | Pamela promotes anti-Muslim and anti-Arab sentiments across her various channels and works on a grassroots level to spread antagonistic ads across the United States. She denies genocides where Muslims are victims, spreads conspiracy theories such as the Birther theory regarding President Obama's citizenship and was cited by Anders Breivik as being an influence for his attack. ³⁹ |
| Valerie Gilbert | Anti-Government/ Anti-Authority | Valerie, dubbed the "QAnon Meme Queen," is a believer of the QAnon conspiracy and makes dozens of daily posts to support the conspiracy on her media outlets. She additionally has accused Congress of treason, rants, and spreads conspiracies of COVID-19, compared pandemic regulations to Nazi Germany and considers herself a digital soldier in a propaganda war. ⁴⁰ |

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|--|---|---|
| Debbie Farnsworth | Racially or Ethnically Motivated; Other (Immigration) | Debbie, as a member of the 'United Constitutional Patriots,' an armed militia group acting as Border Patrol, filmed their illegal detainment of 200 persons seeking asylum at a border crossing in New Mexico. In the video, Farnsworth presents herself as a reporter and used demonizing and fear mongering tactics that characterized the detained as diseased ridden invaders. Her video went viral and was picked up by similar organizations as justifications for their actions. ⁴¹ |
| April Gaede | Racially or Ethnically Motivated | April formed Prussian Blue, a neo-Nazi pop-group consisting of her two daughters. Their songs spread white supremacist, neo-Nazi, and racist ideology; ⁴² as April stated, "What young, red-blooded American boy isn't going to find two blonde twins, 16 years old, singing about white pride and pride in your race ... very appealing?" ⁴³ |
| Tahnee Gonzales and Elizabeth Dauenhauer | Racially or Ethnically Motivated; Other (Religion) | The duo who brought children with them broke into the Islamic Community Center of Tempe Mosque claiming they were there to expose "the infiltration of the Arabic Muslim coming in and destroy America." ⁴⁴ They filmed themselves removing pamphlets, fliers, and brochures they called propaganda and described Muslims as pedophiles, freeloaders, and disease carriers. |
| Rachel Jackson | Abortion Related | Rachel broke and entered an abortion clinic. "Satan Den of Baby Killers God Sees All Mark 9:42," the verse is a threat of physical harm or death towards clinical staff and their patients. ⁴⁵ |

Source: Author and Literature Review

Exemplars

The Exemplars epitomize what Campion calls a “desired, gendered, and idealized identity.”¹⁰⁷ The actions of those constructed in this way turns them into effective symbols and subcultural paragons who serve as the highest example for other women to follow. Campion uses the term exemplar “because it describes people considered to display a high standard which should be imitated¹⁰⁸ or copied by others...it is used here to describe individuals who are elevated¹⁰⁹ within subcultures for displaying certain behavioral norms, values, or virtue worthy of imitation.”¹¹⁰ Their imprisonment, injury, or death can be hailed as giving the ultimate sacrifice (or martyrdom) to the ideology of VDEs and serve as fabled characters making up the¹¹¹ mythos of these subcultures. Important to note is that women in this category are often looked upon this way posthumously, become valued after committing a sensationalized crime or gaining infamy for their actions, or have their stories picked up by VDEs to be used without consent to advance the justifications of their cause.¹¹²

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Chart 5: Exemplars

| Name | Threat Category | Action |
|-----------------|--|--|
| Mary Stachowicz | Other (Religious, Sexual Orientation) | The 'Army of God' christened Stachowicz as a 'Hero of the Faith' after she was killed by Nicholas Gutierrez "when she challenged him to change his lifestyle" ⁴⁶ according to their website. Stachowicz's murder, supplemented by religious verse characterizing her as a heavenly woman, is used on their platform to criticize homosexuality and argue that violence against Christians is ignored. |
| Ashli Babbitt | Anti-Government/Anti-Authority | Ashli was among a mob rioting against the 2020 Election Results who breached the Capitol Building and gained access outside of the 'Speaker's Lobby hallway leading to the Chamber of the U.S. House of Representatives. Breaching the barricades positioned by law enforcement, Ashli was shot and killed by a Capitol Police Officer as she climbed through an opening in the door. She has since become a martyr within extreme, radical right channels and her story is used as an example of government injustice. ⁴⁷ |
| Brenda Shoss | Animal Rights and Environmental | Brenda is the feature of "Inside/Out: Diary of Madness," a publication spread throughout designated radical animal and environmentalist rights communities. She is hailed for not looking like a usual suspect in "militant campaigning" and is idolized as "her presence signaled a movement able to break through to a wider audience. Throughout her account of the demonstrations, she evokes the anger and outrage that prompted thousands to band together, despite their differences, to fight to shut down Huntingdon Life Sciences. ⁴⁸ |
| Judi Bari | Animal Rights and Environmental | Judi, who died in 1997, was a member of Earth First! and honored as a "fallen warrior" within radical environmentalist circles. Bari led campaigns such as Redwood Summer and gained infamy for surviving a car bombing. ⁴⁹ |
| Deborah Davila | Anti-Government/Anti-Authority; Racially or Ethnically Motivated | Deborah was killed by a sniper shot intended for her husband during the Siege of Ruby Ridge. Her death has been cited as a "model white woman they failed to protect from a rampant super state" ⁵⁰ by the Aryan Nations. |

Source: Author and Literature Review

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Analysis and Recommendations

The preceding sections have highlighted the examples of American women serving in six roles throughout VDE and the established threat categories from the Intelligence Community. The selected instances have shown that American women break far from the stereotypes limiting them as objects of analysis within conflict studies and illustrate how American women are just as responsible as men in influencing VDE communities. As discussed, and demonstrated, there are numerous examples of American women serving in violent capacities such as airplane hijackings, bombing the Senate chambers, murders and bank robberies, property destruction and raiding laborites, and sending death threats to those opposing their goals.

There are instances of women acting as lone wolves, such as Rachel Shannon Shelley in her assassination attempt of Dr. George Tiller, women acting within cells, such as Kathy Boudin, Cathy Wilkerson, and Diana Oughton of Weather Underground, and women attempting to kill politicians through biological means, such as Shannon Richardson. The actions of Facilitators such as Erica Chase, Christine Greenwood, and Donna Jean Wilmott show that women are capable of planning and organizing planned attacks within their networks, and do not just serve in passive roles traditionally associated with women in political violence. Across the political spectrum with varying ideology and throughout the various six categories, there is a persistent and diverse threat of women perpetrating or facilitating violence on behalf of their movement. Their examples show rationality in their actions and personal agency in carrying out violent actions to spur social, economic, and public change in which they genuinely believe.

American women have also shown capacity to spur movements and engage in active media outreach to spread VDE ideology. Promoters such as Katie Fedor and thinkers such as Brigitte Gabriel, Linda Thompson or April Gaede are also prime examples. These individuals exhibited that challenges to domestic security do not come just from those who carry out or facilitate violence, but also from those who can disseminate their beliefs and attitudes across the nation in creative ways, independently or with the backing of an organization. How their messages in turn influence the Activists and how the Activists manifest their beliefs into action is indicative of a threat of viral nature.



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While the threat of physical or property harm are tangible, the actions of women by these classifications are abstract and are legally protected actions (except in extreme cases). For the Exemplars, the way the deaths, imprisonment, and stories of women become idealizations within respective communities, insofar as they become heroines and paragons, should be considered for how their legacies will be used throughout subcultures. These examples show how women make ideological and practical contributions towards VDE that are not necessarily illegal.

From the sample highlighted in this perspective, overlooking women's role as incapable of enacting violence or influencing the survival of VDE ideology may lead to erroneous conclusions—and at the detriment of national security. Effectively, there is an ecosystem where women operate in roles making them politically violent actors and in roles that provide intelligence into the nature of their beliefs underscoring how their ideology will manifest into real world actions. Future assessments of domestic security should reflect upon its dismissal of women within conflict studies. The following recommendations have been set forth in this regard:

- Future scholarship should begin to more actively consider women in the same way as it considers men in conflict studies and remove biased gender assumptions of women in conflict which excludes them for their capacity for political violence or potential to spread violent ideologies.
- Current U.S. law enforcement agencies, institutions, and federal agencies should understand the physical threat posed by American women by reflecting on instances of women acting violently in each threat category and understanding the nuances of how each category operates in achieving their goals. Furthermore, special attention should be paid towards women worldwide who subvert societal assumptions about women's inability to be violent and how these subversions were exploited for their benefit. An immediate question raised is “How can malign actors subvert domestic assumptions of women in the United States to their benefit?”
- Observe the ideological network of women propagating and spreading potentially violent ideologies, alongside their male counterparts, throughout the threat category spectrum. It is not sufficient to consider women for how they serve as physical threats, but also for how they contribute to the ideological evolution of VDE beliefs and how their actions are distributed throughout the public.



Teagan Hale

Research Fellow at the American Counterterrorism Targeting and Resilience Institute (ACTRI). Prior to joining ACTRI, Teagan interned for the U.S.-European Media Hub at the Embassy of the United States in Belgium while studying for his Master's degree in International Relations, with concentration in Conflict and Security, at the University of Kent's Brussels School of International Studies. Teagan has professional and academic experience in Israel, Palestine, Australia, and the European Union under multiple scholars and experts.

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