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## **Hatred, she wrote: an analysis of the extreme right and Islamic State women's only forum**

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## CHAPTER 11

# HATRED SHE WROTE: A COMPARATIVE TOPIC ANALYSIS OF EXTREME RIGHT AND ISLAMIC STATE WOMEN-ONLY FORUMS

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### ABSTRACT

*Purpose – In order to explore how gender and sexual politics are played out in everyday practice within both the extreme right and jihadi-Salafist movements online, this chapter analyzes the content of two women's only forums: The Women's Forum on Stormfront.org and Women Dawah, a Turkish language pro-IS group chat on Telegram.*

*Methodology – The Women's Forum and the Women Dawah data sets were analyzed using structural topic modeling to uncover the differences and similarities in salient topics between White Nationalist and Islamic State women-only forums.*

*Findings – The cross-ideological and multi-linguistic thematic analysis suggests that the safety of online spaces enables women to be more active, and serves digital support network for like-minded individuals. It also highlights that religion and ideology, whilst interwoven throughout posts on both platforms, they were more explicitly discussed within Women Dawah data.*

*Originality/Value – This research uses a unique data set which was collected over one year to conduct a cross-ideological and multi-linguistic thematic analysis, a relatively uncommon approach.*

**Keywords:** Women; White Nationalism; Islamic State; Jihadi-Salafism; online forums; gender radicalization

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## INTRODUCTION

The internet, with its built-in perceived anonymity (Koehler, 2014; Weimann, 2006), low publication barrier, continued availability (Callahan, 2017), post-geographical connectedness (Sardar, 1995; Veilleux-Lepage & Archambault, 2019) – combined with the minimal cost of publishing and managing content online, has enabled the emergence of digital communities where relationships among individuals with apparent shared backgrounds or mutual interests are easily established (Albert, Flournoy, & LeBrasseur, 2009). Those with a shared common background include assemblages such as family groups; past and present schoolmates; shared ethnic, religious, or other identity-based traits; and those with shared occupational responsibilities or comparable job titles. Online communities also frequently form around interests and hobbies such as sports, food, travel, social causes, and political affiliations (Sutherland, 2019). Frequently, there is categorical overlap: a group may be dedicated to people of a given religious affiliation with a particular interest in a social cause, for example, the Facebook group *Intuitive Eating & Body Positivity For Jewish Women* seeks to unite Jewish women with a particular outlook on nutrition and food (Intuitive Eating & Body Positivity For Jewish Women, 2019).

The internet also provides an ideal venue for individuals across the ideological spectrum interested in extremist movements to interact with likeminded individuals (Bhui & Ibrahim, 2013; Kitchin, Linehan, O’Callaghan, & Lawton, 2013; Sunstein, 2001; Wojcieszak, 2010). The emergence and growing popularity of increasingly sophisticated social media platforms has created a paradoxical illusion of intimacy and anonymity, where individuals can explore extremist ideologies while making virtual affiliations that seem as real as physical relationships (Veilleux-Lepage, 2016). By transcending distance and time to create virtual spaces, social media platforms has become an ideal radicalizing tool for technology savvy extremism organizations such as the Islamic State and various White Nationalist groups (Bhui & Ibrahim, 2013; Farwell, 2010; Pujazon-Zazik & Park, 2010).

While extremist participation online is by no means new phenomenon – jihadist websites emerged during the first Chechen War (1994–1996) (Veilleux-Lepage, 2016) and Stormfront.org has served as a digital home for white supremacists since 1996 (De Koster & Houtman, 2008) – the Islamic State’s highly sophisticated digital media campaign has led to an exponential boom in scholarly research on the intersection of computer-mediated-communication and extremism (Schuurman, 2019). Despite this increased focus, researchers still understand little about the nature of digital-based radicalization (Brauer & Tittle, 2012; Pauwels & Schils, 2016; Tittle, Antonaccio, & Botchkovar, 2012). Moreover, existing research into this phenomenon has largely neglected any gendered dimensions of online participation on extremist forums.

This chapter specifically aims to address this gap in knowledge by exploring the role of Islamic State and White Nationalist women-only forums in the online-radicalization process of women, focusing on how gender and sexual politics are played out in everyday practices of extremist movements, and particularly in women’s online practices. To this end, this chapter analyses the content of two extremist online forums purposefully reserved for female members: *The Women’s*

*Forum* on the White Nationalist internet forum Stormfront, and *Women Dawah*, a Turkish language pro-ISIS group chat on the cloud messaging service Telegram.

The aim of this study is to substantiate several observations from ethnographic and sociological studies using computerized and automated linguistic analysis to investigate the following research questions:

1. What are the most common topics in White Nationalist and Islamic State women-only forums?
2. What are the differences and similarities in salient topics between White Nationalist and Islamic State women-only forums?
3. What is the role of ideology within these forums?

Where previous studies in the same realm have focused on a particular group or a conflict (Schmid & Forest, 2018), this chapter attempts to examine women's participation across two ideological different movements, a relatively uncommon approach (Lehr, 2013). This approach provides a clear insight into the multi-causal relationship between women's participation in these moments and the role of computer-mediated communications.

The increasing Internet savviness of Jihadi-Salafist and White Nationalist organizations underscore the timeliness and importance of such inquiries (Halverson & Way, 2012; Veilleux-Lepage, 2016). Indeed, current research on online radicalizations have been heavily influenced by the patriarchal nature of Jihadi-Salafist and White Nationalists organizations, resulting in counter radicalization and counterterrorism policies that are primarily male centric (Makin & Hoard, 2014; Saltman & Smith, 2016; Sjoberg, 2009; Von Knop, 2007). Research on vulnerabilities, conscious targeting, and self-radicalization has focused almost exclusively on the male perspective, disregarding any recognition that gender and sexual politics may impact the process of radicalization (Egerton, 2011; Omelicheva, 2010; Özeren, Sever, Yilmaz, & Sözer, 2014), or indeed that women can also become radicalized, despite clear evidence to the contrary (evidence of women being radicalized). This gender-blind focus has created a fundamental gap in the understanding of how some women become involved within Jihadi-Salafist or White Nationalist communities online.

## WOMEN AND EXTREMISM

Understanding the role of women in terrorism requires a recognition of how women have largely been expunged from terrorism's historical past as a result of the relative small number of female terrorists and as a result of gender stereotypes which often paint women as victims of male-instigated violence (Banks, 2019; Bloom, 2011b; Desmarais, Simons-Rudolph, Brugh, Schilling, & Hoggan, 2017). However, a close reading of history shows that women have been actively involved in a multitude of extremist movements. While establishing a precise start date for women participating in terrorism is near impossible, women were involved in anarchist radical organizations in Tsarist Russia (Knight, 1979; Kucherov, 1952; Millar, 2004); Jewish terrorist organizations in British controlled Palestinian

(Perliger & Weinberg, 2003); left-wing groups in Europe and North America such as the Rote Armee Fraktion (Red Army Faction) in Germany (Melzer, 2015; Scribner, 2014; Varon, 2004), the Brigade Rosse (Red Brigade) in Italy (Orton, 1998; Weinberg & Eubank, 2011) and the Weather Underground in the United States (Churchill, 2005; Stern, 2007; Varon, 2004); and in Marxist–Leninist rebel groups in South America, such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia and the Shining Path in Peru. This list is by no means exhaustive, and women have also been involved in varying degrees in various nationalist struggles in East, South, and Central Africa (Talbot, 2000).

In recent conflicts, women – for various reasons and coming from different cultures, and with different experiences – have enthusiastically joined terrorist groups, fought, and suffered the repercussions of this involvement in a similar manner to their male counterparts. However, prior to the late-twentieth century, women's participation in extremist groups was largely understood as them serving in support functions (despite evidence to the contrary as mentioned above). Removed from the front-lines, they were seen to serve solely as cooks, healthcare providers, propagandists, intelligence gatherers, spies, scouts, weapon and supply couriers, maintainers of safe-houses, and perhaps, most importantly, as the mothers of a future generation of fighters (Spencer, 2016). In the past two decades, as groups like the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka, Boko Haram in Nigeria, and the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade in the West Bank have gained notoriety for their use of female suicide bombers, the research on the role of women in terrorism has increased considerably (Mahan & Griset, 2013).

Existing literature illustrates that the number of women involved in political violence has not only increased, but that the role of women has also changed, as many are now serving in progressively more active and expansive roles (Anderson & Sloan, 2009; Bloom, 2011a; Cragin & Daly, 2009; Cunningham, 2003, 2007; Jacques & Taylor, 2009). Women's participation in these terrorist organizations has been demonstrated to vary considerably depending on the ideologies and practices of particular groups (Alexandar, 2019; Jacques & Taylor, 2009; Yon & Milton, 2019). For example, Jacques and Taylor (2009) and Raghavan and Balasubramanian (2014) argued that women are more likely to hold operation roles in left-wing terrorist groups fighting for independence or to liberate nations from dictators and oppressors, as a result of these groups' progressive outlooks and promises of better quality of life for women through active participation. In contrast, Blee (1996, 2005) and Jacques and Taylor (2009) contends that while women are increasingly active and visible within the extreme right, they are rarely found in positions of power. Blee (1996) adds another layer to this analysis, and contends that the role and place of women within the movement is further dictated by the attitudes of individual extreme right groups. Women within Christian Identity sects are assigned an "overly separate subordinate and ancillary roles within the movement as the helpmates of men and the nurturers of the next generations" whereas, white power skinhead and Aryan neo-Nazi groups "espouse a more gender-inclusive organizational ideologies" (Blee, 1996, p. 682).

Pondering the role of women in organizations such as al-Qaeda, Hamas, and al-Shabbah, several scholars have argued that while traditionally women in

Islamist extremist organizations – due to the dominant traditional gender norms in jihadist ideology and conservative societies – were limited to supporting roles (such as propaganda, recruitment, raising families and marrying strategically to form alliances), women are now increasingly taking on operational roles in the planning and execution of attacks, including as suicide bombers, although women’s participation in suicide mission varies based on the group (Bloom & Lokmanoglu, 2020; Byrd & Decker, 2008; de Leede, 2018; Lahoud, 2014; Speckhard & Almohammad, 2017). For example, Chechen groups adopted the practice of using women as bombers from the beginning, whereas Palestinians and Iraqi Islamist extremist organizations abstained from using female bombers until it presented a clear advantage (Speckhard & Almohammad, 2017). While the Islamic State has not (yet) deployed, women as suicide bombers, since shortly after its inception, female members have taken on armed and unarmed roles: they have served as police in the group’s all-female Khansaa Brigade (Moaveni, 2015), as members of the all-female counterinsurgency brigade Umm al-Rayan (Saripi, 2015), as recruiters and propagandists (Creswell, 2015), and have participated in the brutal torture of Yazidi captives (Easton, 2015), while also taking on more domestic roles supporting male Islamic State fighters.

The active participation of women within both the extreme right and the Jihadi-Salafist movements represents a remarkable paradox, as both movements have been historically characterized by rampant sexism and misogyny. Finding its roots in the Christian rightists’ response to the sexual revolution, hatred against women has long been ingrained within extreme right ideology (Spadaro & Figueroa, 2017). While the rhetoric of sexism is often less strident than that of racism, it is nonetheless apparent that white nationalist groups strive to retain European heritage and whiteness by controlling the behavior and bodies of white women. From these extreme perspectives, just as the civil rights movement has led to black people to “forget their place,” so too has the sexual revolution distorted the “natural” relationship between men and women, which poses a direct threat to the white race as a whole (Morgan, 2019; Pollard, 2016). This has been met with forms of misogyny varying in intensity and kind, from the exclusion of women from some groups, to online threats and harassment, and to outright violence (Baele, Brace, & Coan, 2019; Van Valkenburgh, 2018). For its part, the Islamic State has enforced rigid gender roles; women and girls living in territories conquered by the Islamic State have been subjected to harsh restrictions that impact nearly all aspects of their lives and constrain their ability to move, to work, and to determine their own behavior or appearance including clothing. As part of this effort to control and contain women bodies, the Islamic State has promoted and justified some of the most severe and heinous forms of gender-based violence, including rape, sexual enslavement, forced marriage, trafficking, and extreme social control, and has brutally punished women it deems out of compliance with its prescribed gender norms, subjecting them to physical and sexual violence, torture, and murder (Ahram, 2019).

Despite this remarkable paradox, women’s participation on extremist forum is undeniable, if perhaps unexpected and certainly understudied. Indeed, White Nationalist and Jihadi-Salafist groups both create specific online-spaces to

encourage women's digital participation. Thus, ostensibly providing a venue for those who seek greater understanding about these ideological positions to meet and consolidate their views. As (Silke, 2010) argues that the Internet serves as a critical link between those seeking to participate in extremist movements and those seeking support or recruits for their organizations:

[a] key advantage of the internet for extremists is that it can make the cause seem much more popular and much more mainstream than is actually the case. Newcomers are exposed to online discussion groups and chat rooms which are populated by individuals who believe in the cause. Even though these individuals may be geographical [sic] very isolated from each other – and overall still very small in number – exposure to the group creates the impression of a clear and vibrant community of support. (p. 34)

In order to rectify the knowledge gap that exists in the scholarly understanding of the function of such women-only forms that exist for many extremist groups, this chapter analyzes the content of two extremist online forums purposefully reserved for female members of White Nationalist and Islamic State groups.

## DATA COLLECTION

The data for this project was collected from two women-only forums: *The Women's Forum* on Stormfront.org and *Women Dawah*, a Turkish language pro-ISIS group chat on the encrypted network, Telegram.

### *The Women's Forum*

Stormfront is one of the first Internet forums dedicated to individuals who self-identify as White Nationalists. First emerging as an online bulletin board system to support David Duke's campaign for United States senator of Louisiana, the website Stormfront.org was founded in April 1995 by Don Black, a former grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan and member of the National Socialists White People's Party. In its early years, the website consisted mostly of articles and essays written by well-known American white supremacists such as David Duke and William Pierce of the Neo-Nazi Alliance. However, with the advent of web 2.0, new features such as a discussion forum and interactive chatrooms were added to the website. While the website continues to host essays and articles on current events, the discussion forum Stormfront.org is by far the most popular section of the site. As of September 2019, over 13,250,000 posts have been submitted in response to over a million threads.

With over 344,000 registered users – but far fewer active ones – the forum facilitates community discussion on a wide range of cultural, theological, and ideological issues related to the extreme right. The forum consists of 149 sub-forums, and each sub-forum has an explicitly stated focus, sometimes divided into further levels of sub-forum. Some sub-forums have a particular geographical or linguistic focus. For example, there is a sub-forum entitled *Stormfront Canada*, but also a dedicated sub-forum for the Province of Quebec, which is listed under *Stormfront en français*, a sub-forum dedicated to “Nationalism among French-speaking peoples.” There currently exist sub-forums for Europe, South Africa,

Britain, Australia and New Zealand (named *Stormfront Downunder*), Greece, the Baltics and Scandinavia among others. Additionally, there are various sub-forums that facilitate ongoing community discussion related to a number of different topics and specific areas of interest, such as ideology and philosophy, culture and customs, revisionism, science, technology and race, privacy, network security and encryption, business and finance, self-defense, martial arts and preparedness, strategies and tactics, homemaking, education and home-schooling, and youth issues. Amongst these sub-forums, is *The Women's Forum* – a sub-forum intended exclusively for women members.

At a cursory glance, the discussion on *The Women's Forum* range from threads entitled “Ladies, What Have You Done to Contribute to The White Race?” and “What would Attract More Women to [White Nationalism] WN” to “Nursing mothers thread” and “Don't put your cellphone in your bra!” Throughout the sub-forum are reminders that this is a gender-specific area and that men are not to participate. For example, in a thread named “Knock it off, gentlemen” male users are warned that participating in *The Women's Forum* will lead to a week-long ban from the site; another post titled “Attention Males” states that:

This is a WOMEN'S ONLY Section, You are free to view the threads and get some insight into the female mind, but If ANY MALES are caught posting in this section: You will be fed to Mama Wolf, Lycia.

Lycia is one of the administrators of the sub-forum, who later clarified that she will “issue infractions and temp bans” to men participating in the sub-forum.

*The Women's Forum* data set is composed of 35,250 distinct posts from 1,842 English language threads on *The Women's Forum*. The posts were collected over a 14-year period between 2001 and 2015 by the Southern Poverty Law Center and made available to the authors. In total, *The Women's Forum* data set contained a staggering 580,787 words.

#### *“Women Dawah”*

In the years leading up to the Syrian civil war, Jihadi groups expanded their activity from classical forums and bulletin message boards and started adopting relatively open platforms like Facebook and Twitter to communicate with supporters. As technology evolved, a growing number of online platforms provided avenues for militant groups to proliferate. Responding to push factors such as increasingly aggressive content removal and account closures, and pull factors such as the great utility, file-sharing potential, encryption, and range of services on offer, the Islamic State developed a clear preference for using Telegram to engage with core supporters (Bloom, Tiflati, & Horgan, 2017; Veilleux-Lepage, 2019).

Telegram is a free, cross-platform messaging app that offers secure messaging and was launched in 2013 by Nikolai and Pavel Durov (the founders of VK Вконтакте, Russia's largest online social network) after several run-ins with Russian intelligence services (Veilleux-Lepage, 2019). Citing Edward Snowden as one of the founders' main inspirations, the service was originally created to provide a safe place to quickly send files and messages without interception from

government intelligence services (Murdock, 2015). Aside from its security features, such as self-erasing messages and relatively robust encryption, Telegram also offers both “group chats” rooms, multidirectional chat rooms that can host up to 100,000 members, and “channels,” a unidirectional messaging service allowing administrators to broadcast messages to an unlimited number of subscribers.

For the purpose of this study, we focused on the Telegram group chat *Women Dawah*, which roughly translates to “The Women’s Cause” or “The Women’s Fight.” *Women Dawah* is dedicated to female sympathizers of the Islamic State and appears to have been operational for at least two years as of September 2019, with roughly 1,000 members, distributing about 10–15 new messages a day, each of which are viewed about 2,100 times. The group chat’s administrators appear to enforce this by checking the usernames of accounts joining the channel. Attempts by the authors to join this group chat with an account with an anonymized username with “Abu” to designate the gender of the user as male resulted in the researcher’s account being banned by the administrators. Conversely, the authors were able to “lurk” on the group chat for a two-year period using a discernible female username.

The *Women Dawah* data set was collected daily over a one-year period between 1 June 2017 and 1 June 2018. The collection required the researchers to monitor the group chat daily, and scrape the content using Selenium web scrapping in R Studio. In addition, screenshots were taken of all the activities on the group chat. This collection was conducted within the course of a Department of Defense Minerva Grant. In total, 2,836 Turkish language messages were collected.

## METHOD

Both *The Women’s Forum* and the *Women Dawah* data sets were analyzed using structural topic modeling. Structural topic modeling is a probabilistic way to describe various topics contained in a document, or in this case large textual data sets. Topics represent latent structure in the corpus being analyzed. It combines inductive and quantitative analysis to look for “hidden thematic structure” (Maier et al., 2018, p. 93) within the textual data. This approach demonstrates how words are clustered together within the data corpus (Blei, Ng, & Jordan, 2003). The most common form of topic modeling is Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA).

LDA was developed by Blei et al. (2003) to distill topics from textual data set so large that “comprehension cannot be feasibly attempted by reading them” (Li, Rapkin, Atkinson, Schofield, & Bochner, 2019). For example, Blei et al. (2003) applied LDA to a corpus composed of 2,500 news articles and 1,400 technical abstracts in a statistics literature containing more than 45,000 unique words (Blei et al., 2003). Others have employed LDA to extract latent topics from large textual data sets such as online postings (Arun, Suresh, Veni Madhavan, & Narasimha Murthy, 2010; Gayo-Avello, 2013; Kennedy, Silva, Coelho, & Cipolli, 2019; Mittal, Kaul, Gupta, & Arora, 2017) educational materials (Ezen-Can, Boyer, Kellogg, & Booth, 2015; Hsu & Glass, 2006; Steyvers & Griffiths, 2011), images on social media platforms (Mittal et al., 2017), aviation incident reports (Kuhn, 2018), and to determine whether John Lennon or Paul

McCartney wrote the music for the 1965's Beatles hit *In My Life* (Glickman, Brown, & Song, 2018).

We then followed the typical steps in text an analysis: (1) preprocessing, (2) determining the number of topics; and (3) setting the control parameters. The text preprocessing was done by first cleaning the Stormfront Data set, namely by removing grammatical words which lack sematic meaning (e.g., as, and, the), stemming the words and trimming the total data set by 0.99 maximum and 0.001 minimum, which made the most sense after multiplication with the total number of words. The same text preprocessing method was applied to The *Women Dawah's* Data set, which was translated from Turkish to English by a native Turkish translator.

Four different model comparison metrics in the R package, namely "Griffiths 2004," "CaoJuan2009," "Arun2010," "Deveaud2014" were tested to establish the desired number of topics to be extract using LDA (Arun et al., 2010; Cao, Xia, Li, Zhang, & Tang, 2009; Deveaud et al., 2014; Griffiths & Steyvers, 2004). The graph find-topic-model resulted in an optimal  $k = 60$  topics for the Stormfront content and  $k = 25$  topics for the *Women Dawah* content, provided the most frequent words for each of those topics within the data sets.

Topic clustering was then used to build the comparative analysis between both data sets by merging similar topics into topic clusters. Topic cluster headings for these merged topics were decided upon based on the most frequent 30 words therein. The theta values – or the prominence of each word within the topic across all the documents – was aggregated in columns under the overall cluster heading to find the prominence of each cluster (Roberts et al., 2014). For *The Women's Forum* data, the 60 topics according to their top words and overall content were assigned to one of the 13 cluster categories, whilst the 25 topics in the *Women Dawah* were arrogated in 8 distinct cluster categories (see Fig. 1). In both corpora, an additional category named "miscellaneous" made up of prepositions, determiners, articles, and words pertaining to the format of the forums was compiled but excluded from the analysis.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We can observe that seven cluster categories, identified with "\*" in Table 1, appear in both *The Women's Forum* and the *Women Dawah* data sets. Differences in topics which have arisen may have as much to do with collections period lengths and subsequent differences in the sizes of the data sets, as they do with cultural and ideological differences. However, there are clear similarities in the topics, even though each of these themes has different levels of prominence across the two data sets. This discussion will examine each of these seven areas of overlap, following *The Women's Forum* order of prominence in Table 1.

### *Ideology*

Ideology was a major theme in both data sets, representing 17.71% of *The Women's Forum* data set, and 8.79% of the *Women Dawah* data set.

**Table 1.** Cluster Categories Comparison and Prominence.

The Women's Forum Data set		Women Dawah Data set	
Cluster Categories	Prominence	Cluster Categories	Prominence
Ideology *	17.71%	Religion	41.09%
Pregnancy *	16.62%	Family *	20.96%
Appearance *	15.51%	Violence *	11.66%
Family *	11.87%	Ideology *	8.79%
Relationship *	10.04%	Relationship *	8.78%
Women	7.87%	Appearance *	8.72%
Forum Rules *	7.46%	Forum Rules *	5.90%
Entertainment	3.77%	Pregnancy *	2.89%
Education	3.67%		
Violence *	2.87%		
Shopping	1.58%		
Money	0.77%		
Household	0.26%		

Examples from *The Women's Forum*:

- “I feel sorry for the male race traitors. Their kids are not going to be like them at all. I couldn't stand to have a non white kid. To think that I have given the world another non white to pollute society with. It makes my blood run cold.”
- “I don't know about any of you girls – but my faith in finding a good solid white man hasn't been very strong lately. Not that I'm looking or anything – but in general its like finding a needle in a haystack – BUT my faith as been renewed – I had the pleasure of meeting the most respectful, down to earth, solid as they come white man. Very intelligent, solid, hot as hell, over 30, soldier. Did I mention hot as ever? My faith has been restored and I now have a whole new outlook. I will no longer say that there are no single good white men left – One soldier turned it around for me and damn was he hot!!!! Complete with David Lane (RIP) memorial tattoo.”

Examples from *Women Dawah*:

- “Cooperate with your husband about jihad. Encourage your husband to join the jihad. Send your husband to battlefield with immortal words.”
- “The path of jihad begins with creating a congregation of believers who believe in the jihad, encourage others and prepare for him in the best way.”

As the exemplified above, the manifestation of ideological discussions in both forums was notably different. In *The Women's Forum*, relatively few posts dealt directly with White Nationalism. Conversation and debates about the essence of White Nationalism generally took place elsewhere on Stormfront.org rather than within *The Women's Forum*. In contrast to the women writing on *Women Dawah*,

female members of Stormfront.org are free to engage with discussion throughout the entirety of the website; discussion about the White Nationalist ideology generally took place in the “mixed gender” section of the websites, particularly within the *Ideology and Philosophy* sub-forum, which is dedicated to such topics and had both male and female contributors. Instead, ideology was presented in *The Women’s Forum* data as an integral part of discussions surrounding other themes such as “pregnancy,” “family,” “relationship,” “women,” or “violence.” Indeed, as will be subsequently demonstrated, these discussions are all interwoven with ideological discourse. For example, discussing finding a new partner and a renewed faith in love and romance, one user not only describes and exalts her partner’s physical appearance (in particular, his whiteness) but also his deep commitment to White Nationalism.

Whilst the users on *The Women’s Forum* are provided with areas to discuss ideology in mixed gender settings, our research has shown that Islamic State sympathizers on Telegram are highly segregated by gender. Accounts believed belong to women users are routinely banned from IS sympathizer’s channels and group chats as gender mixing is frowned upon. Indeed, profiles of both men and women active on IS sympathizer’s channels frequently indicate that they do not wish to be messaged by the opposite sex. As such *Women Dawah* provides female IS sympathizers with a rare online space in which to discuss Jihadi-Salafist ideology or the recent events related to the Islamic State, and as such conversations relating to ideology tend to be less intermingled with topics. The same phenomenon is also observed with the theme of “religion,” which will be subsequent addressed, and is interwoven within a great deal of messages within *Women Dawah* chats.

Another important difference in the treatment of ideology in both data sets relates to the groups “responsiveness” to current geopolitical events. The discussants on *Women Dawah* were much more responsive to current events than were users of *The Women’s Forum*, often discussing ideological justifications for Islamic State’s actions and campaigns, along with the impact of its territorial defeats and denunciation of those responsible for such defeats.

### *Pregnancy*

The second shared topic that arises from *The Women’s Forum* data is “pregnancy,” which accounts for 14.95% of discussions on *The Women’s Forum*, and 2.89% on the *Women Dawah* data set.

#### Examples from *The Women’s Forum*:

- “The other morning, I woke up at 2:30am sick as a dog with vomiting. I mean, sudden, severe, projectile throwing up food from all my past lives vomiting. Finally started to feel better at around 10am, when I noticed that my face had gotten a little puffy looking. [...] My BP for the first couple of readings was [extremely] high, but the baby was monitoring very well, which was a huge relief for both of us [...] Also, I couldn’t help myself with the ultrasound this morning, and we found out that we’re

having a little boy! My pregnancy had been so easy so far, that it was quite a worrisome time there for a few hours. Thanks for letting me share.”

Examples from *Women Dawah*:

- “What are the duties of women who are pregnant or breastfeeding if they are afraid that fasting will hurt the baby? If a pregnant women or breastfeeding women is afraid that fasting will hurt her baby she can do the fasts in the future (kaza) and give food each day to the poor.”
- “It is not religiously permissible for a woman, even if she doesn’t want a child, to use birth control methods without her husband’s permission.”

In both *The Women’s Forum* and *Women Dawah*, users seek advice, support, and information about pregnancies. In fact, the most popular thread on *The Women’s Forum*, with over 3,500 individual posts, twice as much as second most popular thread, is entitled “The Pregnant/TTC thread” (TTC meaning “Trying to Conceive”). In this thread, users detail their attempts to start or expand their family, share fertility tips, comfort each other over miscarriages, announce pregnancies and birth, and congratulate their peers.

In both data sets, these conversations have an underlying ideological or religious thread: in *The Women’s Forum* pregnancy was frequently discussed as a means of continuing the white race, whilst in *Women Dawah* the purpose of precreation was frequently discussed as being supported and encouraged by religious *hadiths*.

### *Family*

A further shared topic is “Family,” making up 11.87% of the topics on *The Women’s Forum*, and 20.96% of the topics on *Women Dawah*. This includes discussions ranging from interfamily conflicts to child rearing, and, like discussions about relationships, beauty and pregnancy, these discussions were often prompted by a user seeking advice from other group members.

Examples from *The Women’s Forum*:

- “I intend to teach my children to remain loyal to their people and not to get involved in an interracial relationship. My husband, the potential father of my children, has to be on the same page.”

Examples from *Women Dawah*:

- “If you are afraid that a husband and a wife’s relationship is falling apart, you need to find a judge/referee from the husband’s and wife’s family and send them over to their house. If the referees want them to reconcile, God will make them reconcile; certainly, God knows everything and is aware of everything.”

These discussions further illustrate the role of these digital spaces as support networks for likeminded individuals navigated everyday life. Indeed, one unifying factor across the two data sets was the banality of a large percentage of discussions. In this sense, these digital spaces serve an important purpose in the everyday life of their members.

### *Appearance*

The fourth topic discussed here which appears in both data sets, 11.61% in *The Women's Forum* and 8.72%, related to women's beauty, ranging from hair and make-up tips to discussion of body size and clothing choices. These discussions coded as "appearance" also frequently had their start point in users seeking advice from their peers.

#### Examples from *The Women's Forum*:

- "I think it is unbecoming for a lady to purposely tan. I protect my beautiful white skin and that of my daughters."
- "I put some make-up on today, and one of my eyes started burning really bad. I had streams of tears from the burning, needless to say I had to wipe it all off and re-do that one eye. It was only one. I know some of my make-up is really old (a couple of years) because i don't buy it that much, I hardly wear it. When I do get new makeup a lot of times, I get it from the dollar store. Now, I'm wondering if it's at the dollar store for a reason, because they have decent brands like Loreal and Maybeline, and Cover Girl. Is it possible they are selling it there because it's old? And if my makeup is old, is there any harm in using it, if it still works ok?"

#### Example from *Women Dawah*:

- "The purpose of hair in the hadith, the addition of a cloth to make it look bigger below the headscarf is haram."

Similarly, to discussion about "pregnancy," "family," and "relationships," ideology is profoundly interweaved within discussions about beauty. Discussion about female beauty is intertwined discourse about the ideals of Aryan beauty. This is perhaps unsurprising due to the fact that the idea of white women representing the ideal of female beauty is widespread within White Nationalist discourse. For example, the female body functions as an ongoing social and cultural battlefield, as well as a source of power and resistance (Canning, 1999; Freund, 1990; Synnott, 1993). Similarly to the conversations around pregnancy within *Women Dawah*, religion underpins discussions of beauty, but with the notions of chastity and modesty framing the discussion. The women are encouraged toward greater modesty and away from ornamentation, despite their already covered up appearances.

### *Relationships*

Relationships with male partners, appears to be an almost equally prominent topic in both data sets, accounting for 10.04% of *The Women's Forum* and 8.78% of *Women Dawah* and is the closest in prominence of all the shared topics.

#### Examples from *The Women's Forum*:

- “I have lost all of my immediate family, “WN” husband deserted me to chase younger girls. No children. No real friends in my area. I have tried to make friends online but am usually left disappointed by their true intentions. Anyways, Just kind of needing to vent here. I often feel out of place because of my situation – being childless and full of anxieties. I hope I won't be a long wolf forever, but it gets scary thinking “what if this is just my life now?” I thought I'd post and see if there happened to be any women in the same boat here?”

#### Examples from *Women Dawah*:

- “Marrying and having fun are separate things. It is not halal to meet and talk, to ask for advice, to meet secretly, to be friends, to have fun and spend time between any man and woman. This does not bring blessings to anybody. It makes both themselves and Muslims to be respected lightly. And it will break a lot of people's homes.”

These discussions range from users wanting advice on marital issues or dating, to discussion about finding a partner with the same values and ideological conviction.

### *Forum Rules*

The sixth shared theme was coded as Forum Rules and refers to discussion between administrators and users, and between users about the self-impose behavioral norms within each platform.

#### Examples from *The Women's Forum*:

- “Im a new [member], so I'm not quite familiar with the rules here. Can I post a link to an original dissent thread, or is that forbidden for some reason? I found something there, hidden in the depths, that might be of interest to some people here.”
- “I was curious why my thread was deleted. I don't think I violated any rules, and I think I was waging an intelligent debate. It turned into a lot of personal attacks, but I like those too.”

Examples from *Women Dawah*:

- “The chat room is for Women, and if you have questions we will answer them with evidence”.

These discussions appear to serve an importation function of establishing trust and order amongst the users and rooting out trolls, lurkers, or men. As previously mentioned, administrators of both forums appear to devote a considerable amount of effort in presuming the gender separation within these forums.

### *Violence*

The last shared theme “violence” is present in 2.87% of the discussion on *The Women’s Forum*, and 11.66% of the discussion on *Women Dawah*, and concerns a range of topics from violent mobilization, to discussions about the appropriateness or righteousness of such violent actions.

Examples from *The Women’s Forum*:

- “I’d like to post a thanks to you WN people who arm yourselves. We have far too many of us become victimized and humiliated by crimes of the inferior races. To arms! It’s time to take a stand against these criminals.”
- “To most of you women out there who are afraid of saying anything to get the Black or Hispanic morons to quit harassing you, here’s what I recommend: Buy a mace or carry a weapon. (You can always claim self defense because with these animals around thinking they’re the boss, anything can and will happen if they cannot get their way.”

Examples from *Women Dawah*:

- “Dear God, kill those that has set traps for Muslims! Do not leave a single one unharmed!”

In both data sets, violence is often framed as a form of self-defense, and moreover mirrors wider discourse within their respective communities about violence. Whilst the focus and nuance of each data set clearly varies, their similarity arises in that both groups of women tend to stick to the “party line.” Within *The Women’s Forum*, a great deal of discussion surrounded how white women can and should defend themselves from sexual violence perpetrated by non-whites. This narrative, which defines Black males as hypersexual, animalistic, savage, and inherently violent, is central to White Nationalism (Baker, 1993). Indeed, historically, these stereotypes were relied upon to justify scores of lynching’s in the

United States and remain entrenched in White Nationalist discourse to this day. As Fraiman (1994) argues

the paradigm of American racism, available during slavery but crystallized in the period following Reconstruction and still influential today, in which White men's control of Black men is mediated by the always-about-to-be-violated bodies of White women. (Fraiman, 1994, p. 71)

Within *Women Dawah*, the discussion about violence shifts from the individual to the group level. Self-defense remains a common theme, as users defend or call for further violence against enemies of the Islamic States in retribution for perceived wrongs. Posts also frequently use this argumentation to justify attacks in Western countries or executions by IS members; indeed, pictures of dead and mutilated bodies are often paired with texts justifying the acts of violence and killings. The Islamic State's adversaries are framed as aggressors or instigators of the conflicts, who aim to deny Muslims their caliphate and the establishment of Sharia Law, and attacks against the Islamic State are framed as attacks against Muslim interests. According to Heck, the narrative of self-defense is also well established within official IS propaganda, with magazines such as *Dabiq* performing a justification role through which the Islamic State "justifies its action proclaiming the right of self-defense and to take revenge" (Heck, 2017, p. 256).

Another important difference relates to the *Women Dawah* data showing this groups' responsiveness to current events such as the coalition's efforts against IS and IS's territorial defeats. Given that this defeat was taking place during the data collection period, this might account for the large discrepancy in prominence given to "violence" within the *Women Dawah* data set when compared to *The Women's Forum*.

### *Women*

In addition to the seven shared categories, both corpora include unique themes. *The Women's Forum* also including "Women," and an aggregation of other topics with little prominence such as "Entertainment," "Education," "Money," and "Household."

The topic of "women" accounts for a significant 7.87% of *The Women's Forum* data sets and relates to discussions about the role of women within society as a whole, but more specifically, about the role of women within the White Nationalist movement as a whole and on Stormfront.org.

Examples from *The Women's Forum*:

- "we are not 'equal' to men. Equal means the same. We are not the same as men. It's just like people saying all races are equal, when clearly they are not. I've always said that men and women are not equal, but equally important"

- “I am a college educated 23 year old who is engaged to a wonderful WN raising our blue eyed fair daughter to also be WN (my step daughter). Her biological mother now only dates (and has 2 other children by) primates. So, I work twice as hard to put in her 6 year old brain that its wrong, indecent, and self degrading. We are fighting through the courts to get her placed permanently with us. I also preach WN & Pride to anyone interesting in hearing about it. I help rehabilitate animals and adopt them out to wholesome white families.”

This theme and its popularity is illustrated by two of the most popular threads on the sub-forums: “Ladies, What have you Done to Contribute The White Race?” with 151 replies and over 120,000 views; and “What would Attract More women to WN” with 472 replies, and a staggering 222,000 views. Within these threads, users of *The Women’s Forum* attempt to navigate their place within the White Nationalist community, sharing accounts of their involvement which ranges from reproduction, activism on social media, and participation in and organization of street protests.

#### *Religion*

In contrast to *Women Dawah* only some posts within *The Women’s Forum* had religious undertones; after all that White nationalism’s embraces of a variety of religion beliefs, including various denominations of Christianity has long been understood (Berry, 2017; Gardell, 2003). Indeed, the topic of religion was nearly insignificant within the data set. On the other hand, religion represented a staggering 41.09% of discussions in the *Women Dawah* data set, with nearly twice the prominence of the next most prominent topic.

#### Examples from *Women Dawah*:

- “It is forbidden to celebrate the New Year’s holiday and the ‘birthday of Jesus’.”
- “The women’s way of prayer is illustrated in the images above. There is no difference between the ways men and women should pray.”

The discussion surrounding religion within *Women Dawah* was highly similar to the chat room’s discussion of ideology, in that they could be observed on two levels. Religion was unsurprisingly intertwined with a variety of discussion about other topics ranging from family, justification for violence, relationships, pregnancy, and even appearance. However, a significant portion of discussion revolved around religion in of itself, with users asking and answering each other’s questions regarding religious matters, debating interpretations and discussion’s verses

from the Quran, and matters of legal customs and practices. Given the restrictions placed on women within wider IS channels and chat rooms – and within the jihadi-Salafist movement as a whole – it is perhaps unsurprising that women, finding a safe space within *Women Dawah*, take this opportunity to discuss religious topics with one another, especially given the central and driving role of religion within the movement.

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate the multifaceted aspects of interactions on White Nationalist and Islamic State women-only forums. While a considerable amount of scholarly work has identified the Internet as powerful tool for propaganda and recruitment, and has demonstrated that simple exposure to online messaging can have an important influence on violent behaviors (Koehler, 2014; Weimann, 2006; Winkler & Dauber, 2014), the findings in this chapter shows that women-only forums can also serve as important peer-support network for their users, and a space where Jihadi-Salafist women can explore their understanding of the religious doctrine underpinning their movement. In contrast, whilst ideology and religion were intertwined and prevalent in *The Women's Forum* discussions, serving as the “glue” which bound these communities of likeminded individuals together, nearly 65% of discussion in *The Women's Forums* dealt with “banal” issues related to everyday life. While the number of “banal” discussions in *Women Dawah* was significantly less in comparison, these discussions still represented about 40% of all dialog, giving these topics as much prominence – when combined – as religion, illustrating the importance of this forum within the everyday life of its members as a source of advice, council, support, and possibly even friendship. Within both forums, we see individuals seeking information, advice, debate and comradery from a trusted digital forum, where its members have been vetted and have agreed to adhere a similar worldview.

This raises a particularly important policy implication when it comes to deradicalization. Involvement in this radicalized online community comes to represent a form of “inherent reward” to borrow English’s (2016) term, in that they provide a sense of belonging, and insulate against the isolation of holding an extreme view. By being active within these digital spaces, users gain access to a support network which may not be available to them otherwise. The implications are clear, efforts to deradicalization these women cannot be limited to counter-messaging but also needs to address the rewards gained by participation in these forums, and movements more widely.

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