



FACHSTELLE GENDER UND
RECHTSEXTREMISMUS

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Overlooked and Underrated: Women in Right-Wing Extremist Groups in Germany

Theoretical Analysis and Practical Recommendations
for State and Civil Society

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The focus of the research is the serious misrepresentation of women in right-wing extremist groups. During the last three decades there has been an increasing amount of research and monitoring conducted on the subject of right-wing women in Germany. Despite this, right-wing extremism continues to be perceived by mainstream media and statutory organisations as a predominantly “male problem.” The stereotypical view regards white women as peaceful, non-violent, loving and caring individuals. This is highly problematic as it hinders an accurate perspective on the power, the influence, as well as the activities of right-wing women in Germany. The result is that the development of effective counter-strategies to deal with these women is severely impeded. By way of example, one of the two case studies included in the report takes a closer look at the rise and fall of the by now infamous right-wing terrorist Beate Zschäpe. Although her racist, even violent activities, were known to the social services and police departments, she was always viewed as little more than a side-kick and therefore not the focus of serious investigation.

The report shows that there is a very low general level of awareness concerning the racist, anti-Semitic and right-wing extremist attitudes of girls and women in German civil society, within the social work and public education sectors, in the media, as well as within local government. The consequences of underestimating the role of women in right-wing organisations are clear and, in the case of the victims of the NSU (National Socialist Underground) murders, severe. There is an urgent need for a gender-sensitive approach in all strategies and actions to prevent and counter right-wing extremism.

Right-Wing Extremism in Germany and the Underestimation of Women

Over the last few decades, Neo-Nazi and other extreme right-wing organisations have grown in popularity in Germany, particularly amongst the youth. In many regions, but especially in the Eastern part of Germany, Neo-Nazi violence is an omnipresent threat for everyone who is assumed not to have a white German identity. Neo-Nazis and other extreme right-wing organisations are responsible for the growth of so-called “no-go areas” for People of Color and other Black people, immigrants, Jewish people, gays and lesbians, disabled and homeless people or for anyone who appears to be affiliated to an “alternative” youth culture.

Right-wing families settle in various regions across Germany (East and West) and attempt to exert their dominance in these regions both by seizing political power as well in terms of sheer numbers (in comparison to the rest of the population).

White German women are stereotypically regarded as peaceful, non-violent, loving and caring individuals. However, women were actively involved as perpetrators in the 20th century German National Socialist movement in a variety of positions and functions. And even after the end of World War II, women assumed positions in right-wing extremist organisations and political parties in West Germany. Some were ideological masterminds and propagandists working in leadership positions. Some also participated as members of militant (and even terrorist) groups. Very often women were significantly involved with youth work.

During the last 20 years, there has been a marked increase both in the number of active right-wing women as well as a growth in the number of women's groups in the right-wing extremist scene. The possible roles and positions which can be assumed by women have also expanded: from activists, street fighters and gang leaders to local government politicians, demonstration coordinators and internet activists. Many right-wing families settle in the rural areas of eastern and western Germany, with ultra-nationalist families often focussing on specific regions. Right-wing women seek to influence the social environment of these areas by assuming roles in local government or simply by becoming "friendly neighbours." Individuals cannot always be recognised right away as being Nazis. The report shows how particularly right-wing women work strategically to impose their racist and anti-Semitic ideas on their local environment by becoming heavily engaged with care and social work (for example in neighbourhoods, in nurseries and in sports clubs).

Right-Wing Women and Health & Social Care

In recent years, the number of young women from the NPD (German right-wing political party) choosing careers in the health, education and social sectors has increased. Similarly ultra-right-wing mothers have been getting more involved in parents' organisations at schools and kindergartens. This development is not by chance. Already back in 1998, Udo Voigt, the then head of the NPD, advocated for a specific focus on social themes. Much later, in 2006, NPD party members were encouraged to get even more involved in German daily life: in local initiatives, sports clubs and the voluntary fire service for example. Following the Women's congress of 1996, female members of the NPD became even more engaged in kindergartens, schools, youth centres, sports clubs as well as old people's homes.

The aim of these women is to gain trust, forge relationships and networks, as well as to establish a (right-wing) normality. Employees in educational and social institutions employees are confronted with these developments and usually taken by surprise. Often right-wing women work with them for many years before their political identities are exposed. When this occurs, the institutions naturally find themselves under pressure to react quickly and there is not always a consensus within the staff team about how the situation should be tackled. For this reason it is important that professional support is sought straight away.

Right-Wing Female Terrorists in the History of the German Federal Republic

Women in right-wing organisations have been severely underrated in the historical sciences. In the beginning of the 1980s there were a number of right-wing terrorist attacks which resulted in 20 deaths by 1982. The report details the role of right-wing women in these crimes through their active participation in the organisations "Deutschen Aktionsgruppen" (DA), "Volkssozialistischen Bewegung Deutschlands" (VSBd) , "Wehrsportgruppe Hoffmann" (WSG Hoffmann) and the "Kameradschaft Süd" from Munich. In each of these groups,

members carried out racially-motivated or anti-Semitic terrorist attacks which resulted in fatal casualties. Academic research, media reports and police investigations on all the organisations named severely underestimated the role of women. This meant that in the case of serious crimes and murder, women like Franziska B. would be questioned during police investigations (concerning the activities of the “WSG Hoffmann”) but - despite clear evidence to the contrary - would not be found guilty of any crime.

The Case of Beate Zschäpe

The report details the case of Beate Zschäpe, a leading figure in the NSU (National Socialist Underground) which coordinated a series of racially-motivated murders between 2000 and 2006. Zschäpe grew up in Thüringen and her right-wing tendencies were apparent already during her adolescence. During the late 1990s, Zschäpe was active in the right-wing scene, taking key positions in organisations like the “Kameradschaft Jena” and the “Anti-Antifa Ostthüringen.” She was also physically involved in several violent attacks against left-wing activists, including one in 1993, where she reportedly broke the arm of a punk.

In the late 1990s, the police found several bombs and large amounts of explosive material in the Jena homes of Zschäpe and her “colleagues” Uwe Mundlos and Uwe Böhnhardt. The three of them fled and went into hiding. With the help of right-wing activists in Saxony they were able to found the NSU in 1998. Between the years 2000 – 2006 the NSU was responsible for a series of racially-motivated murders. Nine individuals of Turkish and Greek descent were killed; a bomb attack took place in Cologne in 2004, injuring many; and a police officer was killed in 2007. Despite the fact that Zschäpe was clearly one of three equally senior leaders of the NSU, she was able to use her white privilege and her gender specifically to disguise her activities. For example at the end of 2006, Zschäpe was questioned by the police about water damage in an unused flat. She gave contradictory answers and suspiciously used a false name (different to the one on her identification card). Nonetheless, the police were not alarmed. That fact that the violently racist activities were able to go unrecognised for so long was in no small part due to the fact that the role of women in the NSU was so grossly underrated.

In November 2011, following the deaths of her colleagues Mundlos and Böhnhardt during a botched bank raid, Zschäpe decided to hand herself over to the police. In that moment she instantly became the most well-known right-wing woman in Germany. However, this did not automatically lead to the media carrying out a detailed analysis of the role of women in the right-wing groups. Even Zschäpe’s own biography was largely ignored, with assumptions instead being made about the (presumed sexual) nature of her relationship with Mundlos and Böhnhardt, and her role being initially assumed to be one of a passive side-kick. In 2013 Zschäpe was eventually charged with the murder of 10 people and negligence / attempted murder. However the role of other women in the right-wing organisations remained unseen and grossly underestimated. Initial media reports on the trial tended to focus on Zschäpe’s clothing, hairstyle and body language. These personal aspects of the right-wing men on trial

were not commented on in a similar way. Similarly, the ability of the accused men to show regret for, or empathy with, the victims was ignored in the case of the right-wing men, but not in the case of Zschäpe.

In June 2013, one of the accused men testified that a conversation about a planned terrorist attack had taken place with the other two leaders of the NSU - a talk which Zschäpe had not been involved in. According to the testimony, as soon as Zschäpe approached the talking men, they had immediately changed the subject and started to talk about something else. The media reported on this piece of evidence as if it were hereby proven that Zschäpe was less informed about the planning of the crimes and therefore less responsible and less guilty overall, although there is no legal basis for this assumption. Various academic research reports have concluded that the inability to correctly assess the role of women in right-wing extremist groups is dangerous. Underestimating the role of women can lead, in the worst cases, to the facilitation of right-wing crime. This is a subject that urgently needs to be addressed in the training programmes of police officers and other employees in the German justice system.

In 2007, suspicion was aroused that the series of murders taking place could have a racist motivation (all the victims were small business owners of Turkish or Greek descent based in Nuremberg). The police began to investigate the right-wing scene in Nuremberg: specifically they were looking for white men between the ages of 18 and 35. Tragically, this investigation was unsuccessful. If the police investigation had also included women of a similar age profile, they may have come across a Mandy S. who lived in Nuremberg at the time and was a very dedicated supporter of the NSU. The crimes of the NSU were discovered four years late, but this was due to the NSU's botched attempt at bank robbery and had nothing to do with police investigative action.

Sport clubs

The report also details the case of Nadja Drygalla, was forced to leave the Olympic games rowing team in 2011 because her long-term relationship to a Neo-Nazi activist became public. For at least four years prior to this, she and her boyfriend had been training in their sports club without any serious response or discussion being initiated by the club management. Their right-wing affiliation was apparently common knowledge. The media response to the case was gender-biased and problematic: Drygalla was presented as an innocent victim of circumstances. Moreover, the senior managers of the national sports association and the rowing club were unclear about their responsibilities. Drygalla's right-wing "career" was downplayed as a "love-relationship" which was of no interest to the sports club. It is unclear to which extent other members of the Olympic rowing team were aware of Drygalla's political affiliations before the games. Clearly, there was at least informal knowledge about her relationship with - and support of - her right-wing extremist partner.

Because right-wing extremists have pursued a strategy of becoming increasingly integrated into mainstream society in order to be able to more subtly spread their message, it is clear that

sports clubs (especially martial arts groups) will be likely to have right-wing people in their membership. Therefore there remains a need for the managers of sports clubs to accurately perceive and swiftly deal with right-wing members. The report recommends that all employees of sports clubs participate in awareness-raising training specifically tailored to the role of people in charge of running sports associations. Moreover it is recommended that a “democratic principle” for sports associations be developed and implemented. Such a principle should include: how to recognise right-wing ideology and how to respond to it. Finally the report suggests that there should be a coordinated publicity campaign targeted at sports clubs members as well as the wider public.

Media

There is already a lot of information concerning the strategies and actions of right-wing women in Germany (for example academic research and monitoring by civil society since the 1980s). Still, many media reports on right-wing extremism are either not at all gender-sensitive (for example documentaries in which only men appear) or are gender-biased (for example documentaries where women are presented in a very stereotypical way). Those reports ignore the role of gender ideology in extremist right-wing politics. One current example is the media coverage of the NSU murders. As already mentioned above, a leading perpetrator, Beate Zschäpe, is often presented as “the girlfriend of...” or only in connection to sexualized topics. Her racist ideology and violent actions are extremely downplayed in comparison to those of male terrorists.

The report recommends that the topic of right-wing women in extremist groups is included in the professional training of journalists. Similarly, the need to ensure mainstreaming of gender-reflected perspectives in the media reports is emphasised.

Exit Programmes for Right-Wing Women

The level of hostility targeted at women in general, and mothers in particular, who wish to leave right-wing extremist groups is underrated. The report highlights this as an area of concern for which urgent steps need to be taken. In Germany there are various privately- as well as state-funded programmes for former right-wing activists who wish to exit the scene. To date, none of these programmes have focussed specifically on the needs of women, even though these situations can be very gender-specific (for example when mothers with children try to leave the scene). Professionals in various fields (for example divorce courts, social welfare offices, etc.) lack awareness of the situation of former right-wing women and are not trained to deal with the needs of those who are considering leaving the scene.

The report concludes that the conceptualisation and implementation of exit-programmes need to be gender-specific and gender-sensitive. State funded programmes should include gender-

mainstreaming strategies. Moreover professional training programmes for legal professionals, civil servants and social workers need to be developed.

Summary

The key focus of this report has to highlight the role of women in right-wing extremist organisations as well as to criticise the tendency to underestimate their seniority and level of influence in these organisations to date. It has been shown that underrating the influence of women in right-wing extremist organisations can have deadly consequences – as shown in the case of the NSU murders. Regrettably, even in 2014, we are still not close to developing gender-sensitive reporting and investigation when looking at anti-Semitic and racist crime. For sexist reasons, women are construed as “witnesses” or “side-kicks” and rarely taken seriously as the senior co-ordinators and strategists, who they very often are.

Similarly, the very specific needs of women who wish to exit the right-wing scene are overlooked by programmes designed to help former Nazis. Institutions and organisations must develop policies to deal with right-wing extremism at a strategic level instead of merely responding to individual cases as if they were “one-offs.” Clearly, further attention needs to be paid to the role, potential and requirements of women in right-wing extremist organisations.