



# The Right Men: How Masculinity Explains the Radical Right Gender Gap

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## Abstract

The radical right is disproportionately supported by men, yet there is little research on masculinity's role in creating this discrepancy. This article breaks new ground in using masculinity as an analytical construct to explain the gender gap in one of the UK's most significant radical right organisations: the English Defence League. Drawing on original qualitative data and interviews with past and present English Defence League activists, this article argues that English Defence League beliefs and practices were distinctly masculine. In promoting an ideology that subordinated Muslim men and women, and in providing a forum for displaying and enacting manhood, the English Defence League facilitated the supply of masculinity and therefore attracted far more men than women. The approach used in this article shows how theoretical analyses of masculinity can be incorporated within political science and offers a powerful new lens through which to understand radical right parties and movements.

## Keywords

radical right, gender, masculinity

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## Introduction

Radical right voters, activists and party members are overwhelmingly male. Although this overrepresentation of men is one of the radical right's most salient features, there is a dearth of research on the role that masculinity plays in shaping the ideology and appeal of these political organisations. This is an important omission: gender can shape political attitudes and behaviours, and the failure of political scientists to interrogate the role of men *as men* within the radical right means that masculinity within these organisations remains invisible (see Kimmel, 1993). Although sex – usually in the form of the biologically determined male/female – is a common variable in political science, the discipline is reluctant to engage with gender as an analytical category. Men and masculinity remain particularly undertheorised within political science, with this lacuna contributing to the

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‘de-gendering’ of men and an implicit assumption that only women have a gendered identity (Carver, 2014; Tolleson-Rinehart and Carroll, 2006).

Many studies have documented the radical right gender gap, yet very few have sought to analyse it through the lens of masculinity. Instead, scholars often seek to understand the gender gap by identifying reasons for women’s aversion to the radical right. While these explanations might tell us *why women* are reluctant to embrace the radical right, they tell us little about *why men* are its most ardent supporters. Other approaches, which posit that the gender gap exists because men are more likely than women to have lost out to globalisation and modernisation, reduce radical right support to a passive consequence of economic change and fail to contemplate that employment and unemployment are gendered experiences.

This article breaks new ground in using masculinity as a conceptual tool to explain the radical right gender gap and does so via a case study of the English Defence League (EDL), an anti-Muslim protest organisation founded in the United Kingdom in 2009. I depart from previous studies by hypothesising that men are overrepresented within this radical right organisation because its ideology and practices are masculine. In doing so, I make two key contributions: I develop masculinity as an analytical construct that can be used to explain radical right political participation, and I illuminate the role that masculinity played in the ideology and appeal of the EDL. I contend that at its core, masculinity is about the dominance of men over women, and the dominance of some men over other men. I draw on original ethnographic data and interviews with present and former EDL members – including founder and original leader Tommy Robinson – to reveal that the EDL facilitated the supply of masculinity to its supporters by promoting an ideology that subordinates women and other men, and by turning demonstrations into a masculine arena in which participants could display physical strength and engage in sex-segregated violence.

This article is structured by, first, reviewing the literature on the radical right gender gap and setting out my hypothesis; second, using the gender studies literature to define the key terms of males, men and masculinity and relating this literature back to my hypothesis; third, outlining my case study and methods; fourth, explaining how EDL ideology subordinated women and Muslims while bolstering the status of its men; fifth, identifying how EDL practices allowed members to display and enact masculinity; sixth, contending that women and LGBT EDL supporters were assigned a relegated status within the organisation; and seventh, concluding and identifying areas for further research.

## Theory

### *Gender and the Radical Right*

Since the 1980s, researchers have found that more men than women generally support the radical right, with the gender gap documented throughout Europe (Spierings and Zaslove, 2017). Mudde’s (2007) study of populist radical right parties ascertained that around 70% of party members were male; Goodwin’s (2011) qualitative research on the British National Party found that men dominated every aspect of the organisation; and at least 69% of participants in Klandermans and Mayer’s (2006) study of European far-right activists were male. It is important to acknowledge that there are some limited exceptions to the gender gap; Mayer (2015) notes that the National Front attracted almost equal numbers of male and female voters in the 2012

French presidential election, Mudde (2007) observes that radical right and centre-right parties have a similar share of women parliamentarians, and Vasilopoulou and Halikiopoulou's (2015) study of prospective Golden Dawn voters found that women and men were equally likely to support the party. Nonetheless, the existence of the gender gap 'is among the most consistent and universal findings' about radical right parties (Harteveld and Ivarsflaten, 2016: 369).

Political science generally puts forward two explanations for the radical right gender gap. The first seeks to identify why the radical right is unappealing to women, with reasons including: women favouring a strong welfare state because they are more altruistic, and less employable, than men; more women than men affiliating themselves with churches which condemn anti-immigrant rhetoric; women possibly construing radical right ideology as antifeminist; and women being motivated to control prejudice (Betz, 1994; Givens, 2004; Harteveld and Ivarsflaten, 2016; Kitschelt, 1997). It is true that identifying possible reasons for women's reluctance to embrace the radical right can help us understand why a gender gap exists. However, explaining *women's aversion* to the radical right does not explain *men's attraction* to it.

The second explanation for the gender gap suggests that men are overrepresented within the radical right because of occupational structure. This explanation posits that men are attracted to radical right protectionism and xenophobia because a globalised economy poses a particular threat to them; unlike women, men are overrepresented within blue-collar industries and may therefore have to compete with immigrants for jobs (Arzheimer and Carter, 2006; Betz, 1993; Coffé, 2018a). However, women are increasingly employed in the service industry, which is also vulnerable to economic competition (Mayer, 2013), yet the gender gap persists. That men and women might exhibit different political behaviour in the face of economic competition suggests that employment (and unemployment) are gendered experiences.

Recently, a small but growing number of scholars have used masculinity as an analytical tool to better understand the radical right. Some research identifies the gendered needs and identities of supporters. Kimmel's (2018: 20) study of extremist political involvement observes that participants 'enter feeling like failed men, like men who need to prove their masculinity, need to feel like real men'. Coffé (2018b) found that voters with masculine personality traits (who are typically men) were more likely to support the radical right. Other scholars have chosen to focus on the masculinist messages and operations of the radical right. Norocel (2010, 2013) identifies how the discourse of the Swedish Democrats imagines the nation as a family governed by a patriarchal structure which protects dependents from sexually or ethnically different 'Others' and venerates traditional roles for women. Further, Daddow and Hertner's (2019) framework of toxic masculinity in political parties reveals that the policy positions, discourses and practices of UKIP and the AfD are toxically masculine.

From this nascent body of literature, I distil two main theoretical claims, (1) that radical right organisations have masculinist discourses and practices and (2) those discourses and practices are likely to resonate with individuals who have masculine personality traits and wish to feel like men. I hypothesise that the gender gap exists because radical right ideology and practices are masculine and therefore particularly appealing to men. My hypothesis raises two auxiliary questions: if radical right ideology and practices are distinctly masculine, then what features of ideology and practice would we expect to see? And why might masculine ideology and practices appeal to men? Neither of these questions can be answered without the gender studies literature, to which I now turn.

## Males, Men and Masculinity

Contemporary understandings of sex, gender and the differences between the two can largely be traced back to West and Zimmerman's (1987) landmark article. West and Zimmerman treat *sex* as a determination based on biological criteria to classify people into the categories of male or female. *Gender* refers to the behavioural aspects of being a man or woman (as opposed to biological differences between the two) and activities conducted 'in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category' (West and Zimmerman, 1987: 127). Sex is assigned, but gender is achieved and results from particular social conduct and interactions. In short, if a biological male wants to claim he is a man, he will need to display appropriately masculine behaviour.

Despite its pre-eminence within gender studies literature, West and Zimmerman's framework and its application have been criticised. First, scholars observe that West and Zimmerman's framework does not adequately consider transgender experiences, with Connell (2010) pointing to instances of transgender people creating hybrid gender identities that fuse both masculine and feminine components as evidence that not everyone seeks to present their gender as exclusively that of a man or a woman. Second, Deutsch (2007) and Risman (2009) contend that the framework has almost exclusively been applied to ascertain how gender relations are maintained, rather than to understand how men and women can be liberated from traditional gender roles. Notwithstanding these criticisms, West and Zimmerman's framework is still widely used – not least because it illuminates how gender is achieved through social interaction – and informs how I understand the differences between *male* and *man* within this article.

What, then, is masculinity? Schrock and Schwalbe (2009) credit Carrigan et al. (1985) with starting modern masculinity studies by identifying that the concept of masculinity is dynamic and can change over time, that certain forms of masculinity are privileged and others subordinated, and, critically, that masculinity is a series of practices that have the effect of subordinating women and other men (e.g. homosexuals). However, Carrigan et al. (1985) did not specify *which* practices constituted masculinity. These omissions meant that in subsequent years, scholars at times reduced 'masculinity to man and femininity to woman' and suggested that every act performed by a male-bodied person constituted masculinity (Martin, 1998: 472–473; Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009).

In a bid to identify practices that have the effect of ensuring the subordination of women to men, and the subordination of some men to others, Schrock and Schwalbe (2009: 281) direct their attention to what they term 'manhood acts' which are acts that exert control, resist control and elicit deference. Men can exert control over women by devaluing femininity, valourising masculinity, excluding women from positions of power and claiming that women need guidance, support and protection from men (Schwalbe, 2016; Sumerau, 2012). Heterosexual men might attempt to subordinate homosexual men through sexualised teasing and homophobic violence (Pascoe, 2005). White men have historically sought to dominate men of colour through slavery and colonialism and, more recently, by claiming that men of colour are both too masculine and not masculine enough (Hill Collins, 2004; Kimmel and Ferber, 2000). Muslim men specifically have been subordinated through assertions that they are sexually insatiable predators (Anand, 2008). Men's capacity to resist control can be inferred from verbal jousting, displays of physical strength and signifying 'emotional toughness' that conveys an unwillingness to be swayed by 'feminine' feeling such as tenderness or compassion (Collinson, 1988; Schwalbe,

2016: 61, 70). Of course, these categories overlap; men can use physical strength to both exert control and resist control, and eliciting deference is contingent on credibly establishing one's ability to control others or resist control.

To relate this definition of masculinity to this study, if I am correct that radical right ideology and practices are masculine, we might expect the EDL's ideology to valorise masculinity; undermine other men by challenging their status in the dominant masculine culture; and exert control over women, whether that is through excluding them from positions of power or alleging that women need protection and guidance from men. If EDL practices are masculine, we might expect to see displays of physical and emotional toughness running alongside an exclusion of women and undermining of other men.

Men are likely to be attracted to masculine ideology and practices for two reasons. First, men are subject to particularly strong social pressures to display masculinity; we ask whether someone is 'man enough' for a job and insist that men 'man up' (Vandello and Bosson, 2013: 1). Studies suggest that the gender boundaries for boys and men are strictly enforced; boys and men who transgress gender roles are often treated and perceived more harshly than girls and women who do the same, and displays of gender non-confirming behaviour in girls are seen as less concerning to parents than similar displays by boys (Kane, 2006; Sirin et al., 2004; Vandello et al., 2008). Second, although masculinity is socially esteemed, not all masculine identities are equally valued (Willer et al., 2013). Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity observes that certain practices of masculinity are 'culturally idealised' and allow men's dominance over women to continue by ideologically legitimating the subordination of the latter to the former (Connell, 1995, 2015: 141; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Although hegemonic masculinity varies across time and contexts, it is typically understood to be embodied by a White, heterosexual man who is 'strong, successful, capable, reliable, in control' (Kimmel, 2007: 60). Of course, few men meet these standards; those who fall short may suspect they are inadequately masculine and, in an effort to 'pass as something they suspect they are not', embrace ideas and practices that exaggerate certain aspects of masculinity (Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009: 287; Sumerau, 2012: 463; Willer et al., 2013: 981).

That men embrace masculine ideologies and practices in a bid to shore up gender identity is strongly suggested by both laboratory and field research. Willer et al.'s (2013) experiment found that men who were randomly given feedback suggesting they were feminine were more likely to express support for war and homophobic attitudes than men who had received feedback suggesting they were masculine. Field research has reached similar conclusions. Connell (1995: 116) contends that 'showy' collective practices – including violence and heavy drug and alcohol use – engaged in by economically and culturally marginalised men provide a pretence of power in the absence of actual power. Kimmel (2018: 8) argues that young men plagued by feelings of 'humiliation and shame' may be drawn to extremist political movements that affirm gender identity by purporting to provide adherents with an opportunity to uphold honour and duty – concepts that Nagel (1998) observes are closely tied to masculinity – and be seen as a man.

For the purposes of this study, I cull two theoretical propositions from this literature. If the EDL's ideologies and practices are masculine, I expect those ideologies and practices will be particularly attractive to men who fail to meet the standards of socially desirable manhood. As noted by Willer et al. (2013), men may consider it embarrassing to admit to fears of insufficient masculinity. Therefore, I do not expect to find an explicit acknowledgement of masculine shortcomings but do expect that participants may potentially allude to feelings of shame and lack qualities of socially desirable manhood.

Following the inferences drawn by qualitative researchers such as Connell (1995) and Kimmel (2018), I expect EDL participants may imply that upholding EDL ideology and engaging in its practices affirms gender identity by characterising their involvement in terms of honour and duty and suggesting that engaging in movement practices makes them feel powerful and manly.

## Case Study and Methods

The EDL started in Luton in 2009. The catalyst for its formation was a protest of the now-banned Islamist group Al-Muhajiroun at a soldier homecoming parade. The demonstration came to the attention of founder and former EDL leader Tommy Robinson who initially recruited likeminded individuals from football messaging boards to form the organisation. The EDL initially grew rapidly and held regular demonstrations of between 500 and 5000 participants before steeply declining (Goodwin et al., 2014). Although Robinson resigned from the organisation in 2013, the EDL still remains active today, albeit with a much-reduced presence.

As is the case with most radical right organisations, there is a significant gender gap associated with EDL activism; several studies estimate that at least 70% of EDL participants are men (Bartlett and Littler, 2011; Meadowcroft and Morrow, 2017; Pilkington, 2016). Although the disproportionate number of men is one of the EDL's most striking features, only one study – Treadwell and Garland's (2011) analysis of three EDL members' motivations for engaging in racially motivated violence – uses masculinity as an analytical tool. Instead, existing research which examines the role of identity in facilitating support tends to focus on class and race (Gest et al., 2018; Winlow et al., 2016). Busher's (2016) ethnography provides a detailed account of the motivations of grassroots members but largely neglects to consider whether masculinity can galvanise support, and Morrow and Meadowcroft's (2019) analysis of the selective incentives EDL supporters received through their participation mostly overlooks gender. Pilkington's (2016, 2017) studies of the EDL do examine gender but primarily in the context of discussing women rather than men.

The EDL's (2016) mission statement claims it is a peaceful organisation that aims to promote democracy and human rights and use the UK's laws and Parliament to achieve its aims of stopping the spread of Sharia and 'Islam-inspired intolerance'. However, the organisation favours hostile, direct action targeted at Muslims, with EDL demonstrations being characterised by public disorder and aggressive anti-Muslim chanting (Kassimeris and Jackson, 2015; Meadowcroft and Morrow, 2017). Its website (2013a, 2013b) claims that Islam 'runs counter to all that we hold dear within our British liberal democracy' and contends that the burning of Remembrance Day poppies amounts to 'a vile act of sedition'. The EDL, therefore, displays nativism and authoritarianism and can be characterised as a radical right organisation (Mudde, 2007).

The data for this article were primarily gathered from ethnographic fieldwork and both formal and informal interviews. I commenced fieldwork in February 2013 when I contacted an EDL division on Facebook upon becoming aware that it was planning to stage a local demonstration. I introduced myself as a PhD student who was seeking to understand their motivations for activism as part of my research, and asked for, and received, permission to attend the demonstration. By attending this demonstration, I established a rapport with an EDL Regional Organiser, which led to me being invited to attend additional events.



Between February 2013 and June 2018, I attended a total of 13 demonstrations in English towns and cities held by the EDL and Pegida UK (an anti-Islam protest organisation previously led by Robinson), and a 'Free Tommy' event that took place following Robinson's imprisonment for contempt of court. I also attended social gatherings for EDL activists at a pub and two meet-and-greet sessions for new members.

Throughout this period of fieldwork, I conducted 31 interviews with 18 activists. As is common in ethnographic research, my field interviews did not follow a question guide and were open-ended (Bray, 2008). I made field notes either *in situ* or directly following the event. I additionally conducted four formal interviews with experienced EDL activists, including Robinson. The formal interviews used a semi-structured question guide that addressed participant motivations for joining and ceasing activism. In total, I spent approximately 65 hours interacting with, and observing, present or former EDL activists and conducted 35 interviews with 19 individuals.

The respondents in this study comprised 14 men and 5 women, were aged from 16 to 54 years and resided primarily in Greater London, the Midlands and Norfolk. I used purposive sampling to ensure that key categories of participants – men and women, employed and unemployed, young and old, leaders and rank-and-file – were included in my study (Ritchie et al., 2014). All research was conducted after I had received ethical approval from my university's Research Ethics Panel. Although I alerted all individuals with whom I interacted in the field to my status as a researcher, the large demonstration crowds meant that I could not identify myself to every activist.

As a White, cis-gendered woman, I was both similar and dissimilar to my participants. Sharing a White racial identity with most activists meant that I could engage in participant observation at EDL events without experiencing the marginalisation that researchers of colour might have experienced in that context (see Phillips and Earle, 2010). Some scholars have previously suggested that racially matched interviews will elicit more accurate and genuine responses than racially mixed interviews and are therefore to be preferred (Schaeffer, 1980). However, these assertions have been challenged by scholars who contend that neither approach is superior: different responses provided to a Black interviewer will not negate an account given to a White interviewer, although may cast those responses in a different light (Rhodes, 1994). Therefore, while sharing a racial identity with my participants may have shielded me from marginalisation, I do not believe that this similarity provided me with richer data or greater insights than would be available to a researcher of colour.

As a woman conducting fieldwork in a male-dominated environment, my gender helped and hindered my research. On the one hand, men may discuss their personal lives more openly with a woman researcher (Britton, 2020). Throughout my study, men spoke to me about mental illness, childhood trauma and bereavement, thereby providing me with rich insights into their lives outside of the EDL. On the other hand, women fieldworkers may experience sexism (Lumsden, 2009). During fieldwork, I occasionally experienced benevolent sexism with some participants apologising for the 'laddish' behaviour of their peers or for swearing. It is therefore possible that my gender may have led participants to self-censor in interview.

My fieldwork yielded over 80,000 words of fieldnotes and interview transcripts. I also had access to the organisation's website, social media output and transcripts of speeches given at demonstrations. To interpret this data set, I followed established qualitative data analysis practices by using a deductively and inductively derived coding framework that reflected my hypothesis that the gender gap exists because radical right ideology and

practices are masculine, and therefore particularly appealing to men (see Benaquisto, 2008; Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

To test whether the EDL's ideology and practices are masculine, I deductively identified concepts from the gender studies literature's definition of masculinity: exerting control, resisting control and eliciting deference. I then manually examined my data to identify segments relevant to those concepts and coded those segments with a short word or description (see Saldana, 2016). At times, the code reflected the language used by participants, while at other times I formulated a label. For example, the chant 'No surrender to the Taliban' was coded with 'no surrender' whereas Robinson's assertion that the EDL endured 'because you had men turning up who are going to fight . . .' was coded with 'violence'.

To test whether the EDL's ideologies and practices are appealing to men, I turned to existing literature to deductively identify the concepts that can be used to infer masculine gender affirmation: honour, duty and power. I then turned to my data to see whether activism was characterised in gendered terms. For example, a participant's claim that his activism 'is a duty' and a speaker's remark that 'We have a duty of care to our young generation . . .' were both coded with 'duty'. A participant's assertion that '[Muslims] put me through hell, I'm not going to back down' was coded with 'dominance' and Robinson's statement that 'For too long we've been . . . worried about treading on people's feet. Right now, we need to be stamping on their feet . . .' was coded with 'retaliation'. I also examined my data to identify whether participants possessed the features that Kimmel (2007) suggests exemplify socially valued manhood.

I then grouped those segments together based on patterns of similarity, with some of these patterns becoming my inductively derived categories (see Saldana, 2016). For example, I identified a similarity between 'No surrender' and 'violence'. The former refers to EDL attempts to withstand perceived Islamic incursion, whereas the latter makes clear that physical aggression was used as a tool in a power contest. I used this pattern to create my inductive category of *defiance*, itself an observable implication of my hypothesis because the defiance exhibited by EDL members in words and actions amount to an effort to resist control. I also identified a similarity between 'dominance' and 'retaliation'; this pattern was used to create my inductive category of *reclaim power*, also an observable implication of my hypothesis that amounted to an attempt to exert control. At other times, though, the patterns I identified hewed so closely to the literature and my deductively derived concepts that an inductively derived category was unnecessary, as was the case for 'duty'. The quotes that appear in this article to illuminate my inductively and deductively derived framework were selected because they are 'power quotes' that compellingly and effectively illustrate my points (Pratt, 2009: 860).

The qualitative research methods literature makes clear that using a prior theoretical framework is a valid approach to data analysis, and that the credibility (or internal validity) of qualitative data analysis can be improved by transparency about coding processes (Benaquisto, 2008; Saldana, 2016). However, it is possible that adopting a coding or theoretical framework 'might lead one to "prove anything"' and force data to fit a theory (Ezzy, 2002; Morse and Mitcham, 2002: 30). To lessen this risk, Morse and Mitcham (2002: 30) recommend researchers consider alternative explanations – something I do in the penultimate section of this article when I address whether the presence of women and LGBT participants challenges my argument about the organisation's masculinist appeal.



This case study is not claiming generalisability. However, in supplying a detailed description of my fieldwork and the data it yielded, and in recounting my processes of data analysis, I anticipate that my study can assist other researchers who are examining the role of masculinity in radical right political participation.

## Findings

### *A Masculine Ideology: Deviant Muslims, Vulnerable Women and Heroic Men*

Previous research (Pilkington, 2016) and this study found that the EDL's central ideological concern coalesced around the alleged sexual threat that Muslim men posed to English women and girls. While it was rare for participants to condemn consensual sexual relationships involving Muslims (although one participant revealed that he called his sister a 'Paki breeder' after she had children with a Muslim man), discussion of the sexual threat posed by Islam was ubiquitous. Frequent chants at demonstrations included 'Allah is a paedo' and 'Muslim paedos off our streets'; a speaker at a 2013 national demonstration told the audience that Islam permits using 'a baby for sexual pleasure as long as you sodomise, rather than penetrate it'; and Robinson publicly asserted that 'these Muslim grooming gangs are taking non-Muslim women as sexual slaves'.

Shortly before and during the time that fieldwork was conducted, several cases of child sexual exploitation surfaced in towns including Rochdale, Rotherham and Oxford<sup>1</sup>. These cases, which often featured White victims and Asian offenders, received prominent media attention (see Cockbain and Tufail, 2020). However, it would be too simplistic to suggest that the EDL's discourse simply mirrored public concerns. Instead, EDL supporters and official channels were at pains to stress the purported link between the offender's adherence to Islam and their criminality. The EDL's (2011b) website, for example, reprimanded the media for having referred to offenders as being Asian, writing:

Asian crime is a lie. It doesn't exist . . . The importance of identifying Islam as a major contributing factor is demonstrated by the arrests for child-grooming that have recently swept across the country . . . This [article referring to an 'Asian sex gang'] really should have referred to a 'Muslim sex gang' . . . many Muslim men see little wrong with applying the example of the prophet (sex with young children) to those who they regard as 'dirty kuffar'.

Instead of merely reflecting public concerns, the EDL's preoccupation with the sexual threats allegedly posed by Muslim men can be understood as an exercise in facilitating masculinity. First, it allowed EDL participants to undermine the masculinity of Muslim men, and differentiate themselves from the purported perversions of Islam. Second, it provided an opportunity for men to fashion themselves as a protector and signify a creditable masculine self (Sumerau, 2012). In short, the relentless association of Islam with sexual threats allowed EDL members to subordinate women and Muslim men while bolstering their own manhood.

Within the EDL, Muslim men are represented as both hypermasculine and hypomasculine in a manner akin to the militia members' portrayal of men of colour in Kimmel and Ferber's (2000) study. On the one hand, the Muslim man is hypermasculine and possessed with a voracious sexual appetite for (presumably) White English women and girls.

One participant, a factory worker from Greater London, recounted that he had tears in his eyes as he watched a documentary about ‘grooming gangs’ and claimed, ‘They rape our girls again and again’. At a meet-and-greet session, the divisional leader who addressed the audience alleged that 87% of convicted rapists are Muslim. Multiple participants asserted that Muslims worship a prophet ‘who raped a nine-year-old girl’. On the other hand, Muslim men are also hypomasculine. In addition to contending that Muslim men have a predilection for children, EDL members also implied that Muslim men engage in other deviant sexual practices such as bestiality. Therefore, despite their rapacious sexual drive, Muslim men are not ‘real men’.

This opportunity to undermine the masculinity of Muslim men may have been particularly attractive to EDL members who viewed Islam as a threat to dominance that may lead to their own subordination. On one occasion, this was personified as homosexual rape when an intoxicated participant at a 2013 London national demonstration warned that Islam will ‘fuck you up the arse’. Such language is telling; Belkin’s (2012: 83) study of military masculinity observes that ‘penetration is associated with masculinity and dominance while penetrability is a marker of subordination’. Another participant – a divisional leader and delivery driver – explained that he has always hated ‘how we bow down to Islam’. A further three participants explicitly expressed the view that Islam ‘disrespected’ the troops and claimed that this lack of respect was instrumental in their activism.

Of course, the flip side of the deviant masculinity of ‘other’ men is the righteous masculinity of their critics. In his ethnography of the Minutemen – a vigilante group that patrol the US/Mexico border – Shapira (2013: 117) observed that the supposed ‘immorality’ of people smugglers was ‘rooted in a notion of a depraved masculinity’ based on the belief that smugglers raped the women they were transporting. Shapira (2013: 117) notes that the people smugglers’ ‘vile machismo’ was contrasted with ‘the Minutemen’s virtuous masculinity, based on protecting the troubled female’. The EDL were similarly quick to contrast the alleged perversions of Islam with their own role of protecting girls from sexual exploitation. EDL higher-ups and grassroots members alike affirmed that their EDL participation was a duty that discharged a moral obligation. A speaker at the 2014 Slough national demonstration told the audience that:

We’re also here for those who can’t speak for themselves. We’re here for the victims of child grooming . . . That’s why the EDL must keep going and must keep making a voice saying we do not accept this. We have a duty of care to our young generation, to our children and our grandchildren . . . This is the reason why we’re here, we’re EDL and we’re proud to do our duty . . .

A similar perspective was expressed by Darren, a Leicester-based warehouse worker, who stated:

. . . I feel it is a duty, it is a duty because our forefathers, their duty at that time was to fight for us, so our duty, at this time, we may not be at war currently . . . is to raise awareness and speak about issues that we find in today’s society. And if we don’t speak about issues then they don’t get solved and brought into the limelight, as proven by the fourteen hundred children who were sexually exploited in Rotherham.

In addition to undermining the masculinity of Muslim men while valourising their own, a focus on sexual threats allows EDL members to purport to protect women and girls, thereby reinforcing ‘a form of consciousness that sees women as weak and in need

of men's strength' (Schwalbe, 2016). Day (2001: 119) further notes that portraying women as fearful reinforces men's representations of themselves as brave and tough. The language used by participants frequently lauded their own role as the protector of defenceless girls at risk of sexual exploitation. As one divisional leader at a 2014 Slough national demonstration recounted to the audience:

When talking to my 15-year-old cousin, I found out first-hand how grooming gangs work. By chance, she chatted to me about her experiences of Muslim men working out of a kebab van. At the time, I was concerned by the increasing number of girls hanging around the van and told them to go home . . . It is clear that our children need to understand the seriousness of what is happening to them. They were young and vulnerable and they were being groomed.

The anecdote ended by the speaker relaying – to enthusiastic applause – how he had used his cousin's phone to pose as a teenage girl, arranged to meet the man, and showed up instead with members of his division to stage a confrontation. As the speaker made clear, teenage girls are in fact children that need men's protection to keep them safe.

This key tenet of EDL ideology – that Islam poses a sexual threat – allowed participants to subordinate Muslim men, affirm their own masculinity and reinforce the view that women and girls need their protection. Therefore, the EDL's ideology is distinctly masculine and attempts to uphold it represent an opportunity for its men to exert control over women and Muslims and affirm their own gender identity by purportedly discharging a moral obligation to safeguard the vulnerable.

### *Masculine Practices: Demonstrating to Prove and Enact Manhood*

Observation at EDL demonstrations revealed that many participants engaged in the 'showy' collective practices that Connell (1995) identifies as providing a pretence of power in the absence of actual power. Demonstration chants were replete with language that explicitly revealed the urge to resist and assert control, such as 'No surrender to the Taliban', 'Whose streets? Our streets' and 'You burn our poppies, we'll burn your mosques'. Events usually began and ended at the pub, with the result that activists were frequently intoxicated. Participants were also observed using drugs before charging to the front of police lines to taunt counter-demonstrators, and protests were often characterised by actual or threatened violence.

EDL members and leaders suggested that participating in demonstrations indeed gave supporters an opportunity to show that they could not be controlled and provided a pretence of power. Darren explained how he had been 'victimised' by Muslims at high school. He implicitly described his experience of attending an EDL demonstration as an opportunity to reassert control:

I've seen all these men and on the other side I've seen a load of Muslims trying to start, chucking stuff at us, and obviously what's going through my head is that . . . they've put me through hell, I'm not going to back down, I never back down.

Robinson's speech at the Birmingham 2013 demonstration similarly urged supporters to reclaim power that had been stripped from them vis-à-vis Muslims, claiming, 'I don't care if someone's offended. For too long we've been tiptoeing around these issues and worried about treading on people's feet. Right now, we need to be stamping on their feet and telling them what time it is'.

In addition, and consistent with Kimmel's (2018) observations, participating in the movement's collective practices allowed activists to overcome feelings of shame or inadequacy. For example, Luke, a former Regional Organiser, described himself as 'just a stay at home dad . . . I didn't have nothing for me'. Luke acknowledged that he found attending demonstrations 'addictive' because it gave him the experience of 'being someone, maybe not the right person, but for a little while I was somebody if you know what I mean'. Further, EDL participation was implicitly marketed by the organisation as providing an opportunity to feel like a man. One Facebook post promoting a 2013 national demonstration paraphrased an excerpt from *The Football Factory* – a film about a hooligan – to state:

What else are you gonna do on a Saturday? Sit in your fucking arm chair wanking off to X Factor. Then try to avoid your wife's gaze as you struggle to come to terms with your sexless marriage? Then go and spunk your wages on kebabs, fruit machines<sup>2</sup> and brasses?<sup>3</sup> Fuck that for a laugh! I know what I would rather do. Bradford away, love it!

The economic marginalisation of many of the EDL's participants may have made these collective practices particularly attractive; between a quarter to a half of supporters are unemployed and those who work tend to do so in low-paying industries (Bartlett and Littler, 2011; Pilkington, 2016). Employment is highly salient to masculinity with occupational status and income enabling men to exert control and elicit deference, particularly in the context of family or domestic relationships (Lamont, 2000; Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009). Although many EDL participants possessed other qualities of Kimmel's (2007) socially desirable masculinity – namely, Whiteness and heterosexuality – their economic marginalisation meant that they may have lacked the necessary financial resources to exert control and elicit deference; therefore, the movement's practices may have appealed to them by providing a substitute.

This study found that although the EDL's women shared in demonstration drinking and chanting, they did not partake in violence. The failure, or refusal, of the EDL's women to participate in violence meant that they were excluded from an opportunity to elicit deference in an organisation that revered members who engaged in 'appropriate forms of violence' (Busher, 2016: 141). When asked why he had sought to recruit hooligans to join the EDL, Robinson explained 'Because they're the men that will do something about it . . . you don't want female school teachers coming with you, yeah, because they're gonna get hurt'. Robinson credited the violence of men for the EDL's early success, stating:

. . . because you had men turning up who are going to fight, who will fight, and want to fight, you can't beat it, you can't shut that up . . . [w]hen you've got loads of young lads – who [say] 'go on, do that, I'll smash you back' – or that attitude.

Implicit in Robinson's account is that women are vulnerable to physical harm and therefore posed a liability, whereas hooligans were men of action whose displays of physical aggression were essential to the EDL's success. That the highest level of EDL leadership understood demonstration violence to be both a high-status and masculine-coded activity ensured that women within the organisation ultimately remained inferior to men.

While there is nothing to suggest that the violent disorder synonymous with early EDL demonstrations was a conscious strategy to isolate and devalue women, its use nonetheless had the effect of venerating manhood at the expense of women, and, in being a sex-segregated activity, ensured that the EDL provided 'a man's world where masculinity can

be proven or enacted' (Asencio, 2011: 343). Therefore, violence within the organisation enabled the EDL's men to exert control, resist control and elicit deference while simultaneously subordinating women.

## What About Women and LGBT Participants?

Of course, the EDL is not an *exclusively* male organisation: approximately 20% of supporters are women, at least two women held leadership positions and many more gained prominence by giving speeches at demonstrations. Women members also shared the EDL's core ideological concern in expressing the view that Muslim men posed sexual threats. Nor is the EDL exclusively heterosexual; the organisation also has a division for LGBT participants whose leader addressed a national demonstration, and activists frequently flew rainbow flags. Does the presence of women and LGBT participants challenge this article's argument that men are overrepresented within the EDL because its ideology and practices are masculine?

First, it is important to note that women leaders do not undermine men's interests *per se*, particularly when they are upholding a masculinist ideology. Rashkova and Zankina (2017) note that gendered ideologies are important for substantive representation; in the same way that a man can represent women's interests, so too can a woman represent men's interests. As this article has established, core tenets of EDL ideology are masculine, and the championing of that ideology by women does not undermine its masculinity. That the EDL was prepared to accept rare women leaders, therefore, appears to bear out Manne's (2018) prediction that women in positions of power will be tolerated when they are pursuing patriarchal interests, such as those articulated by right-wing political movements.

Second, the fact that women supporters also believed that Muslim men posed a sexual threat does not negate the masculinity of this aspect of EDL ideology. Anne, a survivor of domestic violence, asserted that she had been 'leered at' by Muslim men while living in a shelter, and Victoria, a mother and member of the Leicester division, claimed girls in her local area had experienced a run-in with Muslim men at a shopping centre and afterwards asserted that "'Islam eats women'". As Blee (2002) notes in her study of women in organised racism, portraying White women as racial victims gives them a political role that does not threaten traditional understandings of women's place. In addition, women in the EDL valorised male protection, with Pilkington (2016: 121) finding that the 'vision of men's role as to protect women is the most frequently referenced attribute of masculinity and is referred to positively by both male and female respondents'. As Butler (1990) observes, gender identities are always constructed in opposition to each other; therefore, the presence of women members who accepted feminine vulnerability, and expressed a desire for men's protection, may have in fact bolstered the organisation's masculinist appeal.

Third, the EDL's rank-and-file women were assigned a relegated status despite their visibility within the organisation. The use of violence within the EDL was a gendered aspect of participation, with this high-status activity only being engaged in by the organisation's men. In addition, women within the EDL typically performed devalued and non-combatant roles, such as supervising an EDL 'youth' division at demonstrations and drafting media releases. Samantha, the partner of a Regional Organiser who assumed responsibility for divisional communications, implicitly acknowledged her role's lesser status by asserting 'behind every great man is a great woman'. The feminised and

non-violent status of the EDL's (2011a) women members is also reinforced by a website post asserting: 'The EDL Angels are normal, law-abiding, housewives, mothers and concerned voters'. The EDL's women therefore remained subordinate within the organisation and their presence did not challenge the dominance of men.

That women within the EDL were peripheral to the organisation is affirmed by the masculinist language used by the EDL's men which repeatedly established that they understood it to be a movement of men. In interview, Robinson acknowledged that his recruitment drive for the EDL had targeted '... young lads. Young men'. Jeremy, a night manager from Leicester attending his first demonstration at Tower Hamlets, revealed that he was a 'proud Englishman' and described the EDL as 'a group of genuine lads who all believe the same thing'. Luke reflected on the EDL's leadership struggles using language which suggested it to be a competition between men: 'everybody wants to be the main man but they don't want the hassle that go with it ... everybody wants to be the hero or everybody wants to be the top man'. Darren recounted that his first outing with the EDL was attended by 'eighty or ninety lads ... and everyone's made me feel welcome straight away'. Women might be part of the EDL, but there is little to suggest that they are anything other than secondary, supplementary and ancillary; for most supporters, the archetypal EDL member is a man.

Finally, although the EDL welcomed LGBT participants into the fold, their presence did little to dilute the organisation's heteronormative nature. The discourse of the EDL – including participant references to 'our girls', the suggestion that activism compensates for a sexless marriage and the understanding that women members are housewives – is overwhelmingly heteronormative because it assumes that men should act masculine and desire romantic relationships with women (Belkin, 2012: 59). In addition, as Jackson (1999: 173) observes, one of the ways in which the heterosexual norm is maintained is by conferring an outsider status on homosexuality, something – perhaps ironically – achieved by the creation of a separate LGBT division.

## Conclusion and Future Research

This article has made the novel argument that most radical right supporters are men because radical right ideology and practices are distinctly masculine. I depart from previous studies which seek to explain the gender gap either by identifying reasons for women's aversion to the radical right or providing an economic rationale which focuses on men only in their capacity as globalisation's losers. Using the case study of the EDL, I have shown that the organisation's ideological focus on the alleged sexual threat posed by Islam allowed EDL members to exert control: over Muslim men, whose 'deviant' sexuality was unfavourably contrasted with the 'virtuous' masculinity of the EDL's men; and over women, by highlighting their alleged vulnerability to Muslim sexual predators and consequent need for protection and guidance. EDL demonstrations additionally provided a forum for its men to engage in compensatory, hyper-masculine pursuits; that demonstration violence remained a sex-segregated and high-status activity ensured the further subordination of women within the organisation.

This article has shed light on how masculinity can be used as a concept to guide research questions, formulate hypotheses and understand political attitudes and behaviour. A key contribution has been to distil the concept of masculinity from the gender studies literature and provide a guide as to how masculinity can be identified in a political organisation. This article, therefore, provides a valuable template that could be used by researchers wishing to code publications, websites, speeches or interview transcripts for manifestations of masculinity.



Because this article focusses on a single case study, future research should consider whether the masculinity of the EDL's ideology and practices is similarly present within other radical right organisations such as political parties. Ideologically, the EDL seems to have much in common with radical right political parties when it comes to asserting a connection between Islam and sexual threats. Geert Wilders, the leader of Party of Freedom, co-authored an opinion piece asserting:

The hadiths . . . confirm that women are sex objects, that they are inferior beings like dogs and donkeys, and that there is nothing wrong with sexual slavery and raping female prisoners . . . thousands of women in Cologne . . . experienced rapists standing behind the door if they dare take to the streets (De Graaf and Wilders, 2016).

The AfD's leader and deputy leader expressed similar sentiments on social media, writing about 'groping . . . knife-stabbing migrant mobs' and 'gang-raping Muslim hordes of men', respectively (BBC, 2018). However, the EDL's practices – such as, its violent demonstrations – are not shared by all radical right parties, particularly those that have achieved electoral breakthrough. Future research could focus on whether radical right parties that seek to adhere to democratic norms facilitate the supply of masculinity through more subtle practices than those of protest organisations such as the EDL.

Of course, the radical right is not the only political grouping which contains a gender gap; voting patterns indicate that there is also a growing right-wing gender gap more generally. As Shorrocks (2018) observes, the gender voting gap is dynamic and has changed over time: until the 1980s and 1990s, men tended to be more left-wing than women. However, that situation has now reversed, with men increasingly supporting right-wing parties at a greater rate than women. Scholars seeking to understand these trends have suggested that societal modernisation, women entering the workforce and women's greater support for state intervention are responsible (Inglehart and Norris, 2000; Shorrocks, 2018). Future research also could apply this article's approach to ascertain whether centre-right party policies, ideologies and speeches purport to affirm masculine gender identity.

Finally, it is worth noting that gender gaps are prevalent throughout extremist organisations. Both right-wing and Islamist organisations are dominated by men, which suggests that even though these organisations often oppose each other, they in fact share important similarities. Kimmel (2018: 198) has found that masculinity is salient to participation in right-wing and Islamist extremist organisations, with both attracting followers who have been subjected to 'gendered experiences of shame and humiliation'. More research is needed to identify the ways in which masculinity is manifested in these organisations' ideologies and practices. If a quest for masculinity indeed drives diverse extremist behaviour, counter-terror scholars and practitioners should consider how to affirm gender identity in pro-social ways in a bid to discourage participation.

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## Notes

1. The percentage of group child sexual exploitation offences committed by Asians and/or Muslims is unknown; the Ministry of Justice collects information about the ethnicity (but not religion) of offenders and only reports on broad crime categories such as 'violence' and 'sexual offences'.
2. Gambling machines.
3. Prostitutes.

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