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## From Swiffers to Swastikas: How the #tradwife movement of conventional gender roles became synonymous with white supremacy

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# From Swiffers to Swastikas

How the #tradwife movement of conventional gender roles became synonymous with  
white supremacy

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College

by

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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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*Dedicated to the women who came before, so that we can have these conversations now-*



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## **Introduction**

Alena Pettit stands tall, smiling in her wasp-waist 50's housedress and string of pearls. Her hair is perfectly curled, cat-winged eyeliner precise, and gloved hands placed firmly on her hips. No- this is not a vintage print advertisement for Ajax, but instead an example of the idealized version of a housewife that Pettit promotes online, known as a 'tradwife'. #Tradwife, short for traditional wife, started gaining traction online in January of 2020, following a BBC talkback with Pettit, where she described the lifestyle as "submitting to and spoiling her husband like it's 1959"<sup>1</sup>. This polarizing statement gained momentum in the mainstream media and she was quickly featured in news and lifestyle articles, talk shows, radio series, and podcasts. Increasingly, more women expressed their similar stance and the #tradwife movement expanded. Today there are countless youtube videos, twitter accounts and over twenty thousand tagged instagram posts that are dedicated to sharing and showing all elements of this, so called, #tradelife. However, what is not shown through curated instagram posts and edited youtube videos are the socioeconomic, religious, political, and racial lines by which it is surrounded.

## **What is a #tradwife?**

There is no singular definition that we can turn to to understand the entirety of what being a #tradwife entails. We also cannot accurately capture all of the reasons a woman may adopt this lifestyle with one broad sentence. Even choosing to overlook the complexity of the term 'traditional' for now, the vast variety of ways the role of a 'wife' can be interpreted make delineating the 'dogma' of the #tradwife tradition into one distilled description impossible.

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<sup>1</sup> Amy Hunt January 24 and 2020, "What Is a 'tradwife' - and Why Is the Idea Proving so Controversial?," Woman and Home Magazine, para. 2, accessed December 1, 2020, <https://www.womanandhome.com/life/tradwife-definition-alena-pettitt-346861/>.

Attitudes surrounding the meaning of the term vary greatly among those that claim it, with some using it as a hashtag on their instagram post of homemade bread, and others denouncing modernity to embrace a domestic, “christ-like” way of life. While still acknowledging these variations, we can confidently depict a #tradwife as a woman in the twenty-first century, who has decided not to work in the outside economy, but instead subscribes to strict and classical gender roles and spends her time taking care of her home, family and husband.

You may be thinking, ‘okay, but there are many women who choose to stay at home and be housewives, what makes tradwives different?’. The answer to this question is not initially apparent and cannot be clearly observed through a difference in their approach to chores or what they cook for dinner, but instead can be identified in the shift of ideals that justify *why* they are in this role. Whereas most modern women whose full-time job is taking care of their house and family do this out of consideration for the families specific situation, the typical tradwife has other motivations. What really sets the broadest definition of tradwives apart from other ‘housewives’ is that the movement is seen as revolving around modesty and ‘submission’ or ‘service’ to one’s husband, all the while sharing the lifestyle via social media. Within the understanding of some who identify as tradwives, a woman not only stays at home because she wants to be domestically focused, but because *she*, as a woman, *must* cater to and take care of her husband in these ways. This difference can be demonstrated by juxtaposing possible male roles within both of these family units. Stay-at-home dads are typically considered to complete the same tasks and, essentially, be interchangeable with a stay-at-home mom, which demonstrates that this ‘role’ is not reliant on, or dictated by, gender. However, this parallelism does not exist with the #tradwife understanding, as a #tradhusband would still inhabit the role of

the “head of the household” and would not be found completing the same tasks that his wife does.

### **Biblical Substantiation**

These ideals are often fueled by what is seen as a “biblical” understanding of gender and marriage roles. Helen Andelin, the author of classical ‘advice’ books on “wifely submission”, clearly centers her “biblical justifications” for the roles she is promoting within her writing.<sup>2</sup> These ideologies are founded upon Bible verses like Ephesians 5:22 which states “Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord.” and others which imply the creation of ‘woman’ was to provide assistance to ‘man’. Conservative Christian author Leslie Ludy extends the scope beyond just these specific verses and writes that “the entire Bible is a picture of marriage- the love of the Bridegroom toward His bride.”<sup>3</sup> This imagery of Jesus as Bridegroom, present in Matthew 25:1-3, Revelations 21:2 and a multitude of other instances in the New Testament, has become a key theological symbol amongst many protestant evangelicals promoting marriage roles. The image of Jesus in the position of the husband is used to justify an idea that the man in a relationship takes up a christlike position in the family. ‘10 Things Every Wife Needs To Do For Her Husband,’ a youtube video by Christian lifestyle vlogger Sarah Therese, features her stating concisely “Wives, respect your husbands, it’s biblical, it’s in the Bible.”<sup>4</sup> There are numerous verses, like 1 Corinthians 11:3 and Genesis 3:16 which we will

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<sup>2</sup> Hadely Freedmen, “‘Tradwives’: The New Trend for Submissive Women Has a Dark Heart and History,” *The Guardian*, January 27, 2020, <http://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2020/jan/27/tradwives-new-trend-submissive-women-dark-heart-history>.

<sup>3</sup> Leslie Ludy, *SET-APART FEMININITY* (Harvest House Publishers), 177–78, accessed December 1, 2020, <https://setapartgirl.shop/set-apart-femininity/>.

<sup>4</sup>See, Sarah Therese, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eFA7GYiArt0&t=720s> (4:25-4:29)

delve into in chapter two, which reiterate that subordination to one's husband is 'God's will.' With so much evidence of God's Mandate' on your marriage, how can one disagree?

### **Origins and Inspirations**

Almost by definition, Alena Petitt is not the first woman to live her life in this way and by these “traditional” ideals. So, what has kept this lifestyle alive and thriving through multiple ideological feminist waves, economic strain on single-income families, and shifting social norms? With “more than two million copies in print”, Helen Andelin’s book *Fascinating Womanhood: How the Ideal Woman Awakens a Man’s Deepest Love and Tenderness* has been promoting the traditional roles since 1965. The book contains chapters such as “The Ideal Woman, From a Man’s Point of View,” “Make Him Number One,” and “The Domestic Goddess.”<sup>5</sup> Without delving into the actual content of the book, it is clear to see that Andelin’s writing is focused on fostering strict, conventional gender roles. *Fascinating Womanhood* is one of the titles featured on Petitt’s reading list of #tradwife books, showing that even fifty-five years later, there are still women being shepherded into this form of “traditional” lifestyle.

So why this sudden resurfacing of texts like these, and emergence of women proudly touting the ‘traditional’ life? Part of this question can be answered by looking back to the circumstances which surrounded the initial publishing of *Fascinating Womanhood*. Andelin’s text, which proudly reasserts the conventional gender roles of the time, was published in 1964, only one year after the publication of *The Feminine Mystique*, which is credited as initiating the second-wave feminist movement. This contiguity is not merely a coincidence, but instead can be

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<sup>5</sup> *Fascinating Womanhood: How the Ideal Woman Awakens a Man’s Deepest Love and Tenderness*, accessed December 1, 2020, <https://www.christianbook.com/fascinating-womanhood-woman-awakens-deepest-tenderness/helen-andelin/9780553292206/pd/292206>.

seen as a direct response to the shifting social climate of the time. We can apply this same understanding onto the current resurgence of traditional ideals, which is running concurrently to the ongoing #metoo movement, fourth-wave feminism and the gradual leftward shifting social norm. We can explain this ‘traditional revival’ as an attempt to recall perceived societal degradation and gain some sense of control during this time of evolving “normative gender roles and dominant notions of sexuality.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Interpretations and Implications of Submission**

“Submission” has been a very hot-button issue between the leaders of the movement and the outside media and feminist critics. Typically the term can be associated with an unequal power dynamic where the “submissive” person complies to the will of the “dominant” figure, relinquishing their own choice. This has come under scrutiny as a key idea of the movement due to the implication that the wife should be obedient to the wishes of her husband. Some tradwives, like Pettit, have tried to challenge this understanding and claim ‘submission’ refers to a trust in their husbands to make the right decisions for the whole family. Pettit even states “...and he submits to me as well...it’s about allowing the other person to flourish in the area they have talents.”<sup>7</sup> Within this understanding, there does not seem to be a stark difference between a tradwife and housewife aside from the language used.

Even within this more ‘liberal’ interpretation, there is still the possibility of an unbalanced power dynamic. For example, running the budget and having monetary control involves greater executive decision-making for the household than managing the furniture

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<sup>6</sup> Catherine Rottenberg and Shani Orgad, “Tradwives: The Women Looking for a Simpler Past but Grounded in the Neoliberal Present,” *The Conversation*, accessed December 1, 2020, <http://theconversation.com/tradwives-the-women-looking-for-a-simpler-past-but-grounded-in-the-neoliberal-present-130968>.

<sup>7</sup> #TRADWIVES: *Rethinking Feminism?*, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CjTjMrBnXJY>.

organization or dinner menu. Pettitt mentions “He oversees major finances. If I want to spend money and change on a sofa he says ‘no,’ as he’s aware of what’s going in and out. He gives me an allowance.”<sup>8</sup> Additionally, the decisions that a tradwife holds are entrusted and delegated to her and funded by her husband. So even though she’s in “in charge” of elements of the home, those specifics are dictated by her husband. This balance of power is uneven because even though the number of tasks she is responsible for is equal to her husband, the weight of his decisions affect the whole family disproportionate to hers. In a similar vein, Pettitt mentions her “allowance” that she is given to use at her own discretion as a way to show that she has some individual monetary power. If we engage with this critically, we may be led to ask: how autonomous can someone truly be, if the “freedom” they experience is being permitted by another? Cases like Pettitt’s, however, are just some of the more liberally interpretive readings of the term. There are tradwives who still do apply the term in a literal way, additionally claiming subservience toward their husbands. This spectrum of thought has been acknowledged by women within the movement well, and one tradwife, named Danielle, references her conservative counterparts, saying “Instead of viewing their relationship with their spouse as a partnership, they view the husband as a king and live only to attend to his every beck and call”<sup>9</sup>.

### **Interaction with Feminism**

Many would consider the social implications of the #tradwife movement a feminist issue, but there is a delicate balance at play which has deterred a lot of feminist activists from commenting on the issue. Given that the modern feminist’s movement has been fueled by the

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<sup>8</sup> January 24 and 2020, “What Is a ‘tradwife’ - and Why Is the Idea Proving so Controversial?”

<sup>9</sup> Bridget Judd, “Tradwives Have Been Labelled ‘Subservient’, but These Women Reject Suggestions They’re Oppressed,” February 23, 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-02-24/tradwives-women-say-the-movement-is-empowering-not-oppressive/11960910>.

promotion of a women's right to 'choose'. This makes it difficult to critique a woman who seems to be eagerly adopting this role as a tradwife because, after all, it *is* her choice. Here lies a feminist paradox; is criticizing a woman for her choice to exist in subservience to her husband anti-feminist? This same question has been asked about the critical look at modern housewives, but it is now largely understood that a woman choosing to take care of her home is, after all, feminist. Then why can we not say the same thing for the #tradwives? It all comes back down to "submission" and "subservience". Essentially, is a feminist able to condone another woman who states "I choose to act on, and believe, the idea that my husband holds innate power over me which I should yield to, without question"? Clearly this is a very complex issue, and not one that the women leading the movement are unfamiliar with. Pettit states that participating in this lifestyle is a choice she's "happy to make"<sup>10</sup>.

Within a significant amount of the media coverage of the movement 'traditional wives' and feminism are placed on two opposite ends of the spectrum of women's autonomy. This kind of thinking not only pits women against each other, but painfully tries to simplify both ideologies into something that is easily consumable and lacks depth. These comparisons fit into the trope of 'cat-fighting', where women with different views are placed as polar ends of an argument, even when they are not truly diametrically opposed. Many activists and feminist scholars have spoken in regard to this movement and some have even shown support. In a youtube video of the British chat-show *Roundtable* entitled '#tradwives: Rethinking Feminism?' Women's Rights Activist, Shola Mos-Shogbamimu says, "My kind of feminism embraces all brands of feminism...women have the right to choose whatever kinds of lifestyle they want"<sup>11</sup>. Again, this calls us to return to this idea of choice and ask: Is every 'choice' that we make completely autonomous?

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<sup>10</sup> January 24 and 2020, "What Is a 'tradwife' - and Why Is the Idea Proving so Controversial?"

<sup>11</sup> #TRADWIVES, sec. 6:02-6:14.



Catherine Rottenberg and Shani Orgad address this question and recognize the myriad of factors which may influence one's behavior in their article "Tradwives: the women looking for a simpler past but grounded in the neoliberal present." They state "The choices made by women who identify as tradwives may be presented as entirely personal. However, they are inseparable from the profound crisis of both work and care under neoliberal capitalism."<sup>12</sup> This understanding allows for us to see the phenomenon of #tradwives as being a symptom of a work-centric culture, where the burden of household care still disproportionately falls upon women.<sup>13</sup> Difficulties achieving the work/life balance that is so culturally venerated may drive some women to leave the workforce entirely. Alternatively, some women may have been raised with, or consistently exposed to, these understandings of 'traditional family' and never moved to work in the outside economy at all due to their learned beliefs about a woman's 'place'. It should be addressed that while we should not admonish specific women's decisions, we can analyze and reprimand the system which facilitated the proliferation and normalization of these patriarchal gender roles.

### **Whose Tradition?**

We have previously defined the way that 'wife' is often interpreted within this lifestyle. What we have not yet addressed is the essential qualifier: traditional. This word, 'tradition', can manifest in countless ways depending on the religion, race, nationality, time period, gender or ethnicity to which is being referred. With innumerable possible manifestations, what 'tradition' are #tradwives aligning themselves with anyway? One answer to this question has been made

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<sup>12</sup> Rottenberg and Orgad, "Tradwives."

<sup>13</sup> Sarah Thébaud, Sabino Kornrich, Leah Ruppner, 'Good Housekeeping, Great Expectations: Gender and Housework Norms', 2019

quite clear. Alena Pettit, who we can, arguably, call a primary spokesperson for the movement, has, quite specifically stated that she aims to “[spoil] her husband like it’s 1959.”<sup>14</sup> She presents an idealized, ahistorical, version of this era and shares that her lifestyle is “harnessing the best about what made Britain great during that time.”<sup>15</sup> While the narrowing of timeframe certainly does reduce the number of possible options for ‘tradition’ in consideration, there are still many factors which remain unspecified. What many critics believe goes unsaid is that the life that is being romanticized is certainly not universal, but a white, Christian, upper-middle class, suburban, privileged and homogenous one. Attachment to this fictitious past allows for the racism, sexism, segregation, political tensions, and economic recession, not to mention the yet-to-occur feminist and lgbtq rights movements, that characterize this era to be disregarded in favor of visions of Ford Thunderbirds and ‘I Love Lucy’. Pettit goes on to clarify the appealing elements of this era by saying “you could leave your front door open and know that you were safe, and you knew your neighbors in the street.”<sup>16</sup> This kind of language may sound familiar to promises made to ‘protect the suburbs’ by politicians of past and present. We know, however, that this statement is not truly about defending ‘the suburbs’ themselves, but instead about guarding the idea of normative whiteness that they represent. This understanding of ‘coded language’ can similarly be employed to explain the latent connotation that can be embedded within ‘tradition’.

As is being made clear to us, the term ‘tradition’ often encompasses more than just picket fences and ‘proper’ etiquette. The idea of ‘tradition’ seems to be embraced because of a rejection of modernity. There are specific elements of these past eras that are desired, but many women

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<sup>14</sup> January 24 and 2020, “What Is a ‘tradwife’ - and Why Is the Idea Proving so Controversial?”

<sup>15</sup> Miranda Christou, “#TradWives: Sexism as Gateway to White Supremacy,” openDemocracy, accessed December 1, 2020,

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/countering-radical-right/tradwives-sexism-gateway-white-supremacy/>.

<sup>16</sup> Christou.

seem to adopt traditional living because it negates the ‘present’. The central nature of ‘trad’ in tradwife reveals this revival of a glorified, and whitewashed, past as a primary aspiration. These same ideals are shared with many other, more controversial and divisive, movements, like the Alt-Right, white supremacist groups and nationalist organizations, who have come to align themselves with, and promote, the traditional wife movement. The branch of the Alt-Right chiefly present in Sweden, ‘The Golden One’, has referred to the growing wave of traditional wives as a solution to the ‘woman problem’, i.e., the vastly unequal ratio of female to male members in far right organizations. When we look through the characteristics of what some interpretations of what characterize a ‘tradwife’, we can see how this figure encompasses many of the components of the alt-right’s essentialized ‘dream woman’: someone who will act unquestioningly and increase the white supremacist population through childbearing. Freeman, in “Tradwives’: the new trend for submissive women has a dark heart and history’, refers to this phenomenon as the push to make “as many white babies as possible”<sup>17</sup>. While *most* followers of this campaign are not adamant supporters of the alt-rights politics, the desire for a specific tradition is intrinsically preferential and exclusive, and subtly supports these white supremacist agendas.

In chapter one, we will examine the historical engagement between homemaking women and feminism. We will address the effects of work culture and how the work/home balance affects women disproportionately. Also we will seek to further explain the character of the tradwife movement and the social implications of tradition.

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<sup>17</sup> Hadely Freeman, ‘Tradwives’: The New Trend for Submissive Women Has a Dark Heart and History, The Guardian, January 27, 2020, <http://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2020/jan/27/tradwives-new-trend-submissive-women-dark-heart-history>.

In chapter two, we will highlight the Biblical verses about women and wives that many within the movement accredit with fueling their ideologies. Additionally, we will examine the impact the adoption of these interpretations can have. Also, we will discuss the effect of the perceived gender of God and how women historically interacted with the Church.

Chapter three focuses on the intersection between the tradwives and far-right groups and how the influence of these organizations can be seen manifesting in social media content. We will look at real examples of tradwife influencers and highlight the content which may signal the presence of ulterior forces. By examining social media posts, we will be able to discern latent ideologies which some tradwives hold.

What still remains, is the questions regarding how much of an impact that the #tradwife movement has had, and will continue to have, upon our greater community. This social change will look dissimilar to the protests and civic engagement of previous campaigns since the crux of the ideology centers around being 'at home'. Social media and online communities connect supporters and participants, which allows for faceless, more polarizing, ideologies to emerge. This non-assertive brand of conservatism is attractive and approachable to wider audiences while still rooting itself deeply in white supremacist, patriarchal ideals, all the while hiding itself behind an apron and a Bible.

## Chapter 1- Unpacking the tradwives

There are as many ways to define ‘tradwife’ as there are women who call themselves one. The fact that this term is an identity creates a prismatic understanding in which each angle offers a different picture. When we factor in a family dynamic, socioeconomic status, political beliefs, hobbies, age, religion, nationality, and other personalizing points, we are presented with a deeply individualized idea. But how have these many unique lifestyles rallied under one banner of ‘tradwife’? This holistic presentation is an attempt to gather the most centralizing elements of the movement and create an identity out of which a community can form. With this in mind, it is also important to note that there is a spectrum upon which any tradwife may identify herself. Stepping back from these specificities, a sweeping understanding must be identified in order to establish the core determinants of what it means to be a ‘tradwife’. Who is in control of this definition? What happens when these ideas do not align? And... *what really makes someone a tradwife?*

An additional question arises once we have established our criterion for defining ‘tradwife’; Upon what metric are we able to determine who is part of the ‘tradwife’ community? Must someone self-identify or are we able to apply this label to women who meet our criteria? In order to get a holistic view of the movement we must also include women on the periphery who either influenced the movement, or were influenced, but do not explicitly state their belonging as part of the ‘tradwife’ movement. The nature of this movement, born on the internet and spread among multiple social media platforms, is unable to be located centrally. There is no formal organization, elected or appointed leaders, or singular creed. ‘Tradwife’ is a boundless

term to which we can only hope to mark a horizon. In order to classify the scope of the movement we also need to include women who exemplify the principles and lifestyle promoted by the movement even if they have not explicitly associated themselves with the term. This will allow us to include the communities who may have impacted, or been impacted by, the movement. Inclusion of these women is important in order to track the full range of the tradwife ideology.

Returning now to our attempts at defining the term. Many have tried to capture the heart of the ‘tradwives’ in words. Being such a controversial topic, it is difficult to find a party that is not biased in one direction or the other. There are extensive numbers of articles which aim at presenting the tradwives as controlled, racist, and backward and, in response, there are many articles about the ‘true’ tradwife. Disparaging wording in articles written about the movement reveals prejudice and judgement that the author holds toward the group. This condemnation, in turn, influences consumers who are exposed to this content and have their impression shaped by an article placing the women in a negative light in one broad stroke. The description of tradwives from The Guardian demonstrates the polarizing way in which tradwives are often depicted. The description, under the heading “Meet the 'TradWives' who hate feminism and adore Trump,” states that “ They abhor feminism, hate anyone LGBT, decry the disintegration of gender binaries and rail against anyone non-white. The Stepford Wives go bitterly political.”<sup>18</sup> This language clearly is attempting to send a message and create a generalizing image of the tradwives, but this is an incomplete view. It is true that there are facets of the movement which operate in far-right circles, which we will explore in chapter three, but this is an incomplete understanding. By choosing to exhibit the tradwives in this light, and only this light, the author has consciously decided to label the entirety of the group as irrational, radical and regressive. Another article, this time from British tabloid DailyMail, is titled ‘Darling, I'll do anything to

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<sup>18</sup> Allen, “TV Tonight: Meet the ‘TradWives’ Who Hate Feminism and Adore Trump.”

make you happy! How the Tradwives sacrifice their own careers to satisfy their husbands' every whim... and insist it's the secret of marital bliss.”<sup>19</sup> Where this article does not explicitly imply that the tradwives are a socially-intolerant political threat, it does carry a condescending tone and depicts them as thoughtlessly subservient.

Conversely, there are articles and blog posts which paint the tradwives in an unquestioningly good light. Many of these are written by tradwives themselves and act as a response to the more accusatory articles like those listed above. There is a common theme of placing the group into a position of victimhood. This can be seen demonstrated in a blog post by Alena Kate Petitt titled ‘Why does the media hate Traditional Housewives?’. Within this post Alena talks about her relationship with the media and states that “Other traditional women who are speaking out about our invisibility in the media, experience constant belittlement, and get reduced to nothing more than racist wives under the control of our men.”<sup>20</sup> Language like this creates an idea that tradwives are a persecuted minority, who are attacked only for wanting to care for their family. This presentation is also an inaccurate portrayal of the tradwife movement as it sees any criticism as an attack and does not completely seek to engage with the points of concern being raised.

What we can see from the dilemma listed above is that no one article is able to fully capture the scale and spectrum of the tradwife movement. Within this paper, I hope to approach a more holistic understanding of the movement, but it is inevitable that even this deep-dive into the movement will fall short. Instead, I suggest that we focus on identifying central principles that define the movement, while also acknowledging the multiplicity of ways it has manifested itself.

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<sup>19</sup> Nicholas, “How Tradwives Sacrifice Their Own Careers to Satisfy Their Husbands.”

<sup>20</sup> Petitt, “How the Media Are Destroying Traditional Family Values and Housewives.”

Let us begin with the most ground level understanding of what the tradwife movement consists of. In its most basic form, the tradwife lifestyle is about embracing a family structure which embodies their interpretation of ‘traditional’ living. Within this structure, gender roles centered in ‘tradition’ are employed, ‘tradition’ being based on an idealized 1950s era breadwinning husband and housewife family unit. Additionally, submission is a foundational element of the tradwife identity. The exact interpretation of ‘submission’ varies as much as that of ‘tradwife’. The reading can range from a mutual submission between husband and wife, where each party holds authority in their respective roles, to a complete submission where the will of the husband totally supersedes that of the wife. Some women say that within this structure they are ‘taken care of’ but some critics claim that that is “a euphemism for subordination.”<sup>21</sup>

### **Rise of the Tradwives**

According to GoogleTrends<sup>22</sup>, the first search for ‘tradwife’ was in September of 2016, but the interest in the topic did not have a significant spike until January 2020. This rapid increase in interest coincides with the release of the BBC talkback interview with tradwife Alena Pettitt on January, 17th, 2020. This interview marks the beginning of widespread debate about the movement and an exponential growth of interest and conversation regarding the community. Before this time, only limited mentions of the tradwives existed, and as of March 2021 virtually no scholarship on the women exists. While academic evaluations of the phenomenon are few and far between, personal testimonies, videos, and blog posts by the tradwives, and articles from online news sources and magazines are plentiful. Additionally, while there may not be academic

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<sup>21</sup> Golden one, “Lipstick Fascism.”

<sup>22</sup> Google Trends tracks the activity surrounding any search term and presents it as a graph.



perspectives which explicitly analyze the tradwives, brief mentionings of the women, in connection with other topics, do exist within some academic works.

There are multiple interpretations as to what has made the tradwife movement enticing to so many. Many, if not all, of these reasons are reactions to some sign of the times. Social movements like feminism and the broader diversification of family structures, capitalistic work culture, religious motivations, and perceived cultural threat all drive the growth of the movement. Social media is also an invaluable force behind the movement's growth and arguably the crux behind the whole trend. We will continue to explore all of these influences further in chapters two and three.

One of the most contested causes behind the growth of the movement is the complicated relationship between traditional wives and feminism. Feminist scholar bell hooks defines feminism as “a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression.”<sup>23</sup> If you were to ask a tradwife to define feminism, it would be unlikely that you would receive such an egalitarian definition. One tradwife named Melinda claims that “nothing of what I do is feminist, I certainly don't share their views of wanting to destroy white male created society.”<sup>24</sup> This statement reveals to us a negative view of feminism, but also represents a common misinterpretation held by some that feminism's central focus is rooted in the desire to destroy men and establish a hegemonic system with women at the top. Additionally, the explicit insinuation that modern society has been created by white men nods to a deeper belief rooted in white supremacy which we will address in chapter three. Other misinformed understandings of

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<sup>23</sup> hooks, *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, xii.

<sup>24</sup> Unreported World, *Trump's Housewives* | *Unreported World*.

the objective of feminism include the insinuation that feminist desire “to be like men”<sup>25</sup> and that modern feminism is a “false consciousness”<sup>26</sup>.

Tension between ‘the feminist’ and ‘the housewife’ has been a conflict dating back to the 1960’s. This tension rests upon the philosophy that housewives are in a position antithetical to feminist, or that the two identities cannot be compatible. This idea has, of course, been addressed by many feminists thinkers who assure, “no matter what a woman’s politics...she too [can] fit into feminism in her existing lifestyle.”<sup>27</sup> and being a homemaker does not exclude someone from the movement. This inclusion has not always been understood, as Lesley Johnson explains in ‘Revolutions are not made by downtrodden housewives: Feminism and the Housewife’. Johnson states that “housewife is frequently constituted as some form of ‘other’ by feminism in both personal and institutional histories of this movement. The housewife in this context is one who needs to be rescued, liberated or left behind.”<sup>28</sup> Johnson’s statement shows one explanation regarding why some feminist have historically distanced themselves from the housewife, is that that domesticity is the exact path they are attempting to escape. She also describes the tension from the opposite perspective stating that the “fantasy of the feminist subject sets up ordinary women... for failure” and that “women feel they are not ‘good enough’ because they cannot conform to its ideal.”<sup>29</sup> We can see clear signs of this difficult relationship emerging in the present day as well and the addition of the internet allows for even greater polarization. In their article ‘Disentangling Anti-Feminist Paradoxes’ authors Caitlyn Jarvis and Sean Eddington use the online Reddit community r/RedPillWomen, which we will further address in chapter three, as an example of this phenomenon currently playing out. Essentially, RPW is a group of women

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<sup>25</sup> Faith in Home, *Feminism Is DESTROYING the Value of Womanhood | TRADITIONAL WOMEN HAVE VALUE.*

<sup>26</sup> Ashley Mattheis, “Shieldmaidens of Whiteness.”

<sup>27</sup> hooks, 6.

<sup>28</sup> Johnson, “Revolutions Are Not Made by down-Trodden Housewives.” 237.

<sup>29</sup> Johnson, 247.

online who believe that there is something inherently wrong with women that they must overcome. There are a significant number of traditional wives who are open about subscribing to redpill ideology. Also, there seems to be a correlation between the two groups and most redpill women could be considered tradwives, but not all tradwives agree with redpill thought. As the redpill view is not in-line with feminist thought, Jarvis and Eddington state that “The women of RPW feel abandoned by a feminist ideology which has demonized traditional gender role choices.”<sup>30</sup> Through this, we are able to see how the divergence from feminist ideologies creates a self-sustaining polarization of the two groups and how this could inform the tradwives’ relationship to feminism as well.

There seems to be a significant portion of the women involved in the tradwife movement who deem feminism to be against femininity and disparaging of their lifestyle choices. This is mentioned in the article ‘#Tradwives: sexism as a gateway drug to white supremacy’ by Miranda Christou where she writes “neoliberal, post-feminist, culture defines mainstream feminism as hostile to femininity.”<sup>31</sup> It is no wonder then, that women who understand themselves to be ultra-feminine feel a sense of disenchantment with a movement they regard as against that very quality. The question that emerges from this begs us to ask if feminism can actually support the tradwives, or if the subservience defining the movement is entirely incompatible with the feminist teachings.

The complex question of the feminist status of the tradwives can be captured in this section from the previously referenced article ‘Darling, I’ll do anything to make you happy!’ by Sadie Nicholas. She expresses that “critics have denounced the Tradwife trend as the ultimate betrayal of feminism, claiming it panders to misogyny and the Stepford Wife stereotype...Others

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<sup>30</sup> Jarvis and Eddington, “Disentangling Antifeminist Paradoxes,” 105.

<sup>31</sup> Christou, “#TradWives.”

believe that choosing to leave a career to be a housewife who's reliant on her husband's income is feminism in action."<sup>32</sup> In line with our ongoing trend of unspecificity suggests, there is not one clear answer about the feminist nature of the traditional wife movement. Some tradwomen believe themselves to be living out the epitome of feminism, while others reject it as an attack on femininity and their family values.

### **'I'm not like other girls'**

Another factor which supports the growth of the tradwife movement is the separation between tradwives and 'the average 21st century woman', as perceived by many women within the movement. This separation is seen to include views on sex, marriage, modesty and presentation, religion, and other moral and lifestyle values. This contrast is thoroughly presented in an internet meme from Reddit, clearly showing preference to tradwives, focused on marking the divergences between the two groups. The image shows two different cartoon women, one labeled "The 'liberated' Feminist", who is shown in illfitting shorts and a croptop, dark eyemakeup, dyed blue hair, and a stand-offish demeanor. The other woman pictured is "The Tradwife" who is wearing a modest below-the-knees dress, is holding a baby and is softly smiling. This caricature perfectly exemplifies the historic right-wing view of feminists. To expand upon this, we can look to 'Women at War: Feminist and Anitfeminist Christians in the 1970s' where author Leigh Ann Wheeler addresses how opponents of feminism "mobilized to recast feminist demands as anti-family, anti-male, anti-child, and even anti-life."<sup>33</sup> This trend of portraying feminists as diametrically opposed to the values of the traditional family further alienates the two groups from each other.

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<sup>32</sup> Nicholas, "How Tradwives Sacrifice Their Own Careers to Satisfy Their Husbands."

<sup>33</sup> Wheeler, "Women at War," 8.



Reddit u/NsaneATheist Screenshot from Reddit

Now that we have established a precedent for this kind of thinking, let us return to the modern example of this trend. Within the image, each figure is surrounded by phrases meant to describe the lifestyles they uphold. Around "The 'Liberated' Feminist" are phrases such as "sleeps around to improve self esteem but only feels worse", "has disdain for men and 'male patriarchy' but complains that she cant find a decent man", "thinks god is gender-fluid" and "aborted her own child, has 3 cats"<sup>34</sup>. The tone and overall wording of the way the feminist charater is portrayed within this dichotomy is essentially completely negative and shames this (theoretical) woman for her appearance, sexuality, and religious beliefs, as well as many other components of "her" identity. Conversely, the character meant to represent the tradwife has largely positive attributes listed. Some of these include "Loves and follows husband as the Church follows Christ," "Homeschools children so they aren't taught progress liberal bs" and "In

<sup>34</sup> "Trad Wife Meme (Page 1) - Line.17QQ.Com."

20's but already married with beautiful children.” Clearly, one of these women's lives is meant to be presented as desirable while the other is unsavory. This kind of meme is common and allows the tradwives to build their community on not only what they are, but additionally what they are *not*. The us-and-them mentality which results from this kind of self differentiation uniquely binds people together, therefore strengthening the group. We will discuss the psychological motives behind this phenomenon in chapter three.

Subtle nods toward the self-imposed separation between tradwives and modern women are prevalent throughout their content. In a youtube video posted on the Fascinating Womanhood channel, Alena Pettitt speaks with pioneering traditional life advocate Dixie Andelin Forsyth addresses the subject of ‘choice’. Pettitt says “I do think that women should feel free to make their own choices, but it doesn’t mean the only choice therefore is to go out and work... or be promiscuous and not care about the feelings of their men.”<sup>35</sup> We can see from this conversation that Pettitt believes that a natural result of choice for women is to be promiscuous and insensitive toward men. Her wording insinuates that she thinks society’s, and modern women’s, interpretation of the feminist call for ‘choice’ is to act in the ways she has listed. In another youtube video, this time posted by the account ‘Unreported World’, tradwife Melinda Mayson shares that she views progressivism as being a plot to destroy family values. This illuminates that while some in the tradwife movement distance themselves from ‘progressivism’ and ‘modernity’ there are others who place themselves in opposition and consider it a threat unto themselves and their way of life<sup>36</sup>. In a post recommending ‘Encouraging books on femininity’, Pettitt recommends *Set-Apart Femininity: God's Sacred Intent for Every Young Woman* by Leslie Ludy. We will expound upon this text in chapter two but will currently focus on one section of

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<sup>35</sup> Fascinating Womanhood - Dixie Andelin Forsyth, *My Chat with Alena Kate Pettitt || Femininity & Etiquette*.

<sup>36</sup> Unreported World, *Trump's Housewives | Unreported World*.

the book. This text is religiously driven but Ludy often mentions her view of the disparity between the ‘modern woman’ and the true ‘christian woman’. She refers to her text as a “rousing call to arms” against the “typical mediocrity of modern day womanhood.”<sup>37</sup> She often juxtaposes the idealized christian woman she is describing with the modern day woman in ways which reveal her contempt for them. Using terminology such as “lily amongst the thorns”<sup>38</sup> builds up the women that Ludy is idealizing by putting down women who do not meet this standard. She paints the secular world as one intolerant of modesty and purity and calls her movement of set-apart women “counter-cultural christianity.”<sup>39</sup> By labeling oneself or one's movement as counter-cultural, they are effectively placing themselves apart from the larger world, which cyclically reinforces their ingroup mindset. We will examine the psychological explanations and implication of ingroup mindset within chapter three.

### **Working 9 to 5**

Women's equality in the workplace is arguably one of the most recognizable tenants of the feminist movement. Being a part of the workforce in a capitalistic system, unfortunately, can be characterized by commodification of workers, impersonal environment, and exploitation. This 9-5 work structure is not universally desirable and some people find themselves, and their needs, left out. Scholars Rottenberg and Orgad see the tradwife movement as a response to ‘failed’ feminist promises and that their emergence can be accredited to “the feminist overpromise of work-life balance has miserably failed in the age of late capitalism.”<sup>40</sup> We can understand this as the feminist ideal not effectively taking shape due to prevailing remnants of gender biases, an inequality of the household division of labor or various alternative attitudes. Additionally, there

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<sup>37</sup> Ludy, *Set-Apart Femininity*.

<sup>38</sup> Ludy, 59.

<sup>39</sup> Ludy, 20.

<sup>40</sup> Christou, “#TradWives.”

are a myriad of factors that need to be balanced in a household with two working parents like additional childcare. This combined with the conventional understanding of a mother raising her children may lead some to question if “mom is working, how are the kids?”<sup>41</sup> These expectations and challenges can be driving forces behind many traditional wives ideology and position as homemakers.

The unequal division of labor between a husband and wife has been widely researched and examined. Despite women entering the workforce and sharing equal financial obligation, women are still found to perform more housework in heterosexual relationships. These same trends even persist when the wife is the predominant income earner.<sup>42</sup> In a 1993 study, researchers interviewed 287 primarily white, middle class, married women and asked questions regarding their “satisfaction with help and support from (their) husband.”<sup>43</sup> Their results expressed that full-time working mothers do not perceive the imbalance of household work as legitimate. This is not the case amongst traditional wives, where it was shown that wives who did not participate in the labor force did not perceive the inequality as unjust. In addition, the amount of support a wife attributed to her husband had a direct impact on happiness, with traditional women showing the highest levels of household satisfaction. With this in mind, it is understandable that some women may be disenchanted or overwhelmed by the perceived expectation to work when this disparity of housework has not been addressed between them and their partner.

The ability to join the workforce is not an equilateral aim, either. Even still, when the opportunity to work in the wider economy presents itself, some women show a preference for staying at home. Petitt shares that she never felt comfortable within the workforce and that

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<sup>41</sup> Hochschild, “So How’s the Family?,” 47.

<sup>42</sup> Tichenor, *Earning More and Getting Less*.

<sup>43</sup> Piña and Bengtson, “The Division of Household Labor and Wives’ Happiness.”



believed becoming a “housewife was her calling.”<sup>44</sup> She also thinks that many women also have a “sense of belonging and home and quaintness.”<sup>45</sup> Another tradwife, Sarah Dunkley describes herself in the workforce as “overweight, exhausted and resentful” and as having “barely any time” for her husband. She shares that during this time she “longed to be a housewife and do things ‘properly.’” As we continue to learn about the tradwives and their motives, we'll notice that this is a common characteristic: women who feel out of place in the modern workplace and want to live the life of a traditional homemaker.

Women who choose to live the life of a homemaker are included within the realm of feminism but this sentiment is not always felt by tradwives, many of whom express a feeling of ostracization by feminist or liberal society in general. One conservative commentator, speaking about the tradwives in a video entitled ‘Tradwives make Feminist JEALOUS,’ claims that “the most vicious critics of women who make traditional choices are feminist, despite insisting constantly that women should have a choice over everything in their lives.”<sup>46</sup> We can look to this understanding to illuminate the disenchantment or disconnection to the feminist movement that many tradwives have voiced. Many tradwives’ ideologies could be considered a type of neofeminism, which primarily refers to the empowerment of women by praising and valuing ‘essentially feminine’ characteristics and acknowledgment of a difference from men. Another alternative form that may help to explain some traditional wives ideology is post-feminism. The paper ‘Disentangling Anti-Feminist Paradoxes’ by Jarvis and Eddington defines this term in relation another online community of conservative women, redpillwomen. They state “Post

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<sup>44</sup> Hunt and 2020, “What Is a ‘tradwife’ - and Why Is the Idea Proving so Controversial?”

<sup>45</sup> Rottenberg and Orgad, “Tradwives.”

<sup>46</sup> Daisy Cousens, *Tradwives Make Feminists JEALOUS*.

feminism borrows feminist language of ‘choice’ and ‘empowerment’ yet is grounded in traditional understandings of gendered and raced boundaries.”<sup>47</sup>

We've already discovered that many traditional wives feel alienated or excluded from the feminist movement. This is not an experience that can be used to exhaustively describe the whole movement. Paying homage to the feminist movement is not something completely foreign to some participants of the traditional wife community. Within her blogpost entitled ‘The New Stepford: I'm proud to be a traditional housewife’, Pettit defends both herself and other tradwives, while also acknowledging the feminist movement and its contributions to women's rights. She writes “I am forever grateful for feminism and the courageous women who went before me, to win the vote for me, to win choices for me.”<sup>48</sup> This statement is followed by Alena clarifying that, while she is grateful, she still does not believe that a disrespect toward women wanting to stay at home is excusable. She later, speaking as a tradwife, emphasizes that “there might not be many of us, but our feelings and ‘ambitions’ to be wives and mothers are valid too.”<sup>49</sup>

## **Job Description**

A popular complaint among traditional wives is that their position as a homemaker is not considered "true work" in the eyes of some audiences. This is one of the greatest points that tradwives have collectively tried to dispel essentially every tradwife influencer has a blog post, video, or podcast episode devoted to speaking about the work required of a traditional housewife and ‘day-in-the-life’ videos are exceedingly popular. Pettit, clearly confronting this assumption, writes “The art of being a housewife is actually hard work and requires much skill. We balance

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<sup>47</sup> Jarvis and Eddington, “Disentangling Antifeminist Paradoxes.”

<sup>48</sup> “The New Stepford: I'm Proud to Be a Traditional Housewife.”

<sup>49</sup> “The New Stepford: I'm Proud to Be a Traditional Housewife.”

budgets, we multitask, we crisis manage, we support people emotionally, we have time to volunteer and reach out to our communities. **We make sacrifices that count.**<sup>50</sup>

This highlights that, in addition to the tasks that Petitt lays out, the character of the work performed by traditional wives and homemakers is broad and requires a wide range of skills. There are some responsibilities that are familiar to most: cleaning, cooking, laundry, grocery shopping and other errands. What may not be so obvious, however, is the personal element that characterized this job. Emotional intelligence is central to each task carried out in a way which is not typically found within the workforce. Empathy, understanding and comfort are all traits highlighted by traditional wives as essential. It can also be said that, while most participants within the workforce have regulated hours, the tradwives' hours differ from that of a typical 9-5 and homemakers are always 'on the clock.'

Additionally, In the households of many women that exist within this community, there is also an understanding that they and their husband are two parts of a whole which operate together. Traditional wife Sophia Martinson shares that "My husband, for instance, has always referred to his work not as 'my career' but as 'our career.' To him, the sole purpose of his profession is to give me and our children a happy life, and he works hard to excel at his job for that purpose."<sup>51</sup> Thinking of the tradwives in this way can combat some of the criticism of the movement which presents these women as dominated and controlled.

## **Tradition**

The concept of tradition, as it is seen by many feminists and leftists, is a central point of contention. We've already briefly developed the sense of tradition as identified by women in the

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<sup>50</sup> "The New Stepford: I'm Proud to Be a Traditional Housewife."

<sup>51</sup> "The Tradwife Movement Reminds Us of the Virtue of Service in Marriage."

movement, but we'll now focus on how that understanding has been received. One such reception is explained by historian Stephanie Spencer during an episode discussing the tradwives on the BBC program *Roundtable*. According to Spencer, looking at bygone ages as a paradigm for living can be dangerous, and it is important to note the problems of these days. She states “talk about moving forward, build on what we’ve got, we don’t want to go back to when most women left school at 15 and all they could do was clean the house.”<sup>52</sup> The accusation that ‘tradition’ is synonymous with ‘backwards’ is a common claim. We will later explore, in chapter three, how ‘tradition’ has manifested in these ways, and has developed a radically implicit connotation. Other women, some within the movement, also mirror this claim and acknowledge that this ‘traditional past’ is not all Julia Childs’ recipes and kitten heels.

Sophia Martinson explains why she believes a negative view of tradwives exist and in what she considers this attitude is grounded. Martinson writes “By and large, full-time female homemaking is interpreted as servitude, even when it is freely chosen. In part, that is because it is associated with a time in which women were restricted legally, professionally, financially, and socially.”<sup>53</sup> Martinson is highlighting that, while there may be aesthetically pleasing or other desirable elements from the 1950’s, the full image of that era cannot be forgotten. Additionally, the tradition being romanticized is exclusionary and an incomplete view of what these times were like for many women. Another guest on the BBC program *Roundtable*, Shola Mos-Shogbamimu, draws attention to the specific setting ‘traditional’ is being placed in by referencing alternate traditions. Mos-Shogbamimu says “I am a tradwife, women that work predate women staying at home.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> #TRADWIVES: *Rethinking Feminism?* - YouTube.

<sup>53</sup> “The Tradwife Movement Reminds Us of the Virtue of Service in Marriage.”

<sup>54</sup> #TRADWIVES: *Rethinking Feminism?* - YouTube.

As we examine what, or more specifically *who*, is being included in this usage ‘tradition’ it becomes increasingly clear that this usage is hyper-focused on white, middle class individuals. This ‘tradition’ idealizes a time before women had a choice of whether or not to stay at home. We should also remember that not all women have had the means or option to stay at home, and this employment of tradition excludes disadvantaged women, single mothers, farmers, and women who needed to work for other reasons. While beyond the bounds of this paper, there is far more that could be said about the socioeconomic factors that influence the traditional wife movement. As we continue to investigate this phenomenon, it is crucial to recognize how economic constraints disadvantage historically underprivileged communities. This cyclically recreates the foundation for the picture of a tradwife and continues to exclude women who do not fit into this prescribed mold.

### **In conclusion**

Attempting to find a singular definition of ‘tradwife’ is an impossible task. Many articles, videos or blog posts will refer to women within the movement as ‘*The Tradwives*’ but this title is deceptively central. There is no central operation behind the traditional wives, and along with that means there is no regulation for the use of the term. Many different women, as well as individuals unattached to the movement, have offered varying definitions. Critics have criticized the tradwives, claiming this lifestyle is coercive and oppressive of women, while supporters have stated that it is the epitome of "choice."

We have outlined the complicated history between homemakers and feminist, and have shown how these trends have manifested in modern day. Stereotypes attributed to feminist in conservative thought have prevailed, like the accusation they are man-hating or unattractive.

These same conceptions can be seen on the internet on social media pages and in memes. There is also a significant belief from some tradwives that they are living in a counter-cultural way, as we have heard Pettit and Ludy. Furthermore, since one's position as a "countercultural" person positions them outside of mainstream society, there is a widespread perception that their traditional way of life is under threat.

One of these threats is the perceived work-centric mentality of women, and the suggestion that the feminist movement is anti-homemaker. These are both assumptions made about the movement which add to the complicated relationship between feminist and traditional wives. Some tradwives do see feminism as influential and worthy of praise, but still agree that their lifestyles should be respected. We also looked at studies that showed that women are more likely to complete a widely disproportionate amount of housework, even when they are the primary earner or working full-time. This inequity motivates women to enter campaigns like the tradwives, as disproportionate at-home duties coupled with a career create an unstable lifestyle for many. Aside from any negative motivation, many women have shared that they felt a calling, or have always had the dream of becoming a housewife. Some women find the duties of a homemaker appealing, and the care and services they provide for their families outweigh any desire to pursue a career.

Where many liberally-minded individuals find pause with the tradwives because of the significance of their usage of 'traditional.' Their accusation is that the 'tradition' romanticized here consists of economically stable, white, Christian, heterosexual couples. Perhaps more important to note is that the era and aesthetic being idealized was also a time before the women's rights and queer rights movements and the Civil Rights Act. The homes with white picket fences that are glamorized were part of segregated neighborhoods and suburbs that were products of

white flight. The controversy surrounding this concept stems from the fact that it applies only to a small group of people and perpetuates the negative practices and mindsets that characterized that period. We will address how these attitudes are currently expressed and the dog-whistle terminology used to imply these same ideas in chapter three.

As we have reiterated many times within this chapter, not all women within the tradwife community share these same mindsets and there are many who acknowledge and appreciate, and associate with feminism. There are also those that openly disavow the accusation of any racial undertones in the meaning of tradition. Overall, however, the decentralized nature of this “movement” makes it impossible to contain or present a singular ordained idea. In future chapters, we will examine different ‘sects’ that all fall under the umbrella of the ‘traditional wives’ and their interpretation and lived expression of the term. We will continue to build our understanding of the tradwife movement and how the varying ideologies upheld by these women affect not only themselves but the society as a whole.

## **Chapter 2- It's Between Me and God (... and my thousands of followers)**

When asked where the concept of womens' submission comes from, the vast majority of traditional wives point to the Bible. There are dozens of verses that seem to almost copy-paste the same rhetoric of wifely submission present in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. These same verses are then seen in blog posts, youtube videos, Instagram captions, and throughout other social media of many tradwives. While ideologically, many claim this to be the inspiration for their way of life, 'Christian' identities seem to emerge primarily when conversations of relationships, family, or gender roles are being explained. This is not to say that there are no women within the movement who truly center themselves around Christianity and have solely 'religious' content, as there are many. Let us instead focus on women who market themselves as faith-based influencers but have material that appears to stray from this foundation and how Biblical material has tangible impacts on the lives of women.

Religion, specifically protestant Christianity, is one of the central connecting factors of the movement. If you look through almost any traditional wife influencer's content, you will find references to their religiosity and how this informs their lifestyle. Bible verses, like those we will discuss, are the primary point of reference for justifying their way of life.

### **The Historical Christian Woman**

There are many different ways that scholars, exegesis and lay-people have interpreted gender as depicted in the Bible. These different understandings of the texts may be culturally or historically bound and existed within a different context than our twenty-first century world. In Biblical times women were considered a form of property in some cultures, and seen as subservient to men in most others, and that these attitudes could have influenced the writing of



the biblical texts.<sup>55</sup> The ideal wife, as pictured in Proverbs 31, is also significantly referenced in *Set Apart Femininity: God's Sacred Intent for Every Young Woman* by Leslie Ludy. In Ludy's text, she interprets the woman as virtuous and strong, living a "poured-out" life for God.<sup>56</sup> Another examination shows that the Proverbs 31 woman is portrayed as living to benefit her husband and household, and is not granted a sense of personal concern.<sup>57</sup> There is also no mention of her spirituality. Phyllis Bird, notes that "her personhood gets lost; in this way, she 'does her husband good.'"<sup>58</sup> While still acknowledging that this flattening of identity is problematic, they also note that the Proverbs 31 woman is radical by propelling women beyond a sexual object. Also, she is given an important control over her family's livelihood that can either "make or break" a man, making her an essential part of his success. This is a powerful understanding that grants women an essential role as a pillar that upholds a family, despite this, her self-concept and personal intricacies continue to be absent. These same inconsistencies also translate to the later treatment of women in Christianity. Religion can act as both a "liberating" and a "repressive force,"<sup>59</sup> just as the example of the Proverbs 31 woman exemplifies.

Christian women have not only been defined as subservient and conservative. Luise Schottroff, a protestant feminist scholar states that "Christian women shook up the established order and exposed women's oppression. These liberators refused to stay in their assigned places of domestic baby makers...they took a verbal stand in public."<sup>60</sup> These elements of the Bible that idealize female subordination were supported and canonized due to their alignment with the surrounding Greco-Roman community. This adoption came to be when "the patriarchal

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<sup>55</sup> Kirk-Duggan and Torjesen, *Women and Christianity*.

<sup>56</sup> Ludy, *Set-Apart Femininity*, 37.

<sup>57</sup> Kirk-Duggan and Torjesen, *Women and Christianity*.

<sup>58</sup> Kirk-Duggan and Torjesen, 6.

<sup>59</sup> James, "Women in American Religious History," 2.

<sup>60</sup> Kirk-Duggan and Torjesen, *Women and Christianity*, 9.

household [was] restored and validated as the Christian household.”<sup>61</sup> All of these ideas work to complicate the seemingly straightforward idea of gender as presented within popular scripture and expand the possibilities of what it means to be a Christian woman.

### Key Verses

One does not need to search too far in the Bible to find verses promoting wifely submission. Many of these explicitly state the importance of a woman’s, or wife’s, subordination to man. In an article focused on tradwives and equality law, authors Garcia-Oliva and Hall note that “If as a matter of doctrine, gender roles are fixed and men and women are fundamentally different by divine design, then it makes sense to encourage people to do what they were born to do.”<sup>62</sup> There is no shortage of verses to support the idea of mandated gender roles and they can be seen consistently reiterated throughout the text in different forms like:

“Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord.” -Ephesians 5:22

“Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.” -Colossians 3:18

"In the same way, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands so that even if any of them are disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives.” -1 Peter 3:1

“For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to adorn themselves. They submitted themselves to their own husbands, like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her lord.” -1 Peter 3:5-6

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<sup>61</sup> Kirk-Duggan and Torjesen, 8.

<sup>62</sup> “Tradwives and the Importance of Equality Law.”

Here, Sarah is used as a model for the ideal Christian wife, who other Christian women should look up to and emulate. These examples are only a small sampling of the passages looked to when defining women's roles. With this plethora of verses espousing women's position relative to men, it is understandable how this idea has prevailed.

Outside of explicit references to women's roles, there are also many metaphorical allusions of this same theme. A recurring image that we see within the Bible is Jesus as the 'Bridegroom.' This metaphor is present in all four Gospels, the Hebrew Bible, and additional New Testament books. One of the most well known of these references is within the Book of Revelation, which states "Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready."<sup>63</sup> Within this context, Jesus' bride is the city of Jerusalem, representing humanity. By situating Jesus as "Bridegroom" in this metaphor, and throughout the text, the "bride" is naturally placed in a position under God. Applying this understanding, we can notice how the bridegroom could be seen as above the bride, as God is 'above people,' and how this could translate into an unequal power dynamic within an earthly marriage.



Instagram @feminine\_not\_feminist. Screenshot from instagram.

<sup>63</sup> Revelation 19:7

Many of the verses previously mentioned also follow this same structure by calling wives to “be subject” to their husbands as they are to the lord. This suggested idolization of men only reiterates the unbalanced power dynamic. This language is not only contained within the Biblical texts but is also widely used in contemporary writings on faith and devotional materials. Within her book *Set-Apart Femininity: God’s Sacred Intent for Every Young Woman*, Leslie Ludy employs the metaphor of the Bridegroom dozens of times. There is one instance in which Ludy is describing the wedding of her sister-in-law, and the moment she saw her walk down the aisle. Ludy depicts by writing “I could almost see Christ standing there applauding, His eyes beaming with love, and tears of joy glistening on His face as He watched His precious princess walk down the aisle as a sparkingly pure bride.”<sup>64</sup> The entirety of *Set-Apart Femininity* promotes this same narrative and Ludy even goes on to label the entire Bible as a “picture of marriage.”<sup>65</sup> By using a contemporary style of writing to present these ideas, Ludy is able to reach a large audience and promote her exegetical understanding of the Bible to her young, female, audience. This increase in accessibility also succeeds in proliferating these ideas among young readers.

Verses presenting gender roles can be found at the very beginning of the Bible: Genesis. Adam and Eve are, perhaps, the most recognizable couple within the Hebrew Bible and their story has historically been used by the Church to justify the subordination of women.<sup>66</sup> The concept of original sin places the blame and burden of punishment disproportionately upon Eve, and this story has widely been used to claim womens’ proclivity to sin. In addition to Eve being referred to as a ‘helper’, or being created after Adam, Eve is also shown as the one to initially go against the rules outlined by God. These verses have been used to not only present womens’

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<sup>64</sup> Ludy, *Set-Apart Femininity*, 64.

<sup>65</sup> Ludy, 177.

<sup>66</sup> Stopler, “A Rank Usurpation of Power’ - the Role of Patriarchal Religion and Culture in the Subordination of Women.”

natural subordinate status, but also offer a justification as to why this is the case. Cheryl Kirk-Duggan and Karen Torjesen address this in their book *Women in Christianity* in which they frame that stories like Eve's "provide religious justification for the political and economic domination of wives by their husbands, as well as cultural norms that reinforce this domination."<sup>67</sup> This larger cultural application allows for the hegemonic system of gender in play to remain, as well as fueling the consistent dissemination of the beliefs by which it is upheld.

The gender and language used to describe God are also a factor in the treatment of women. Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam* perfectly captures the image of God as imagined by the majority of the Christian world. A long white beard, flowing robe, white skin and male presentation all characterize this image. The depiction of God as an old, white, man, impacts the way that gender is experienced on Earth. With an internal image of God as defined in these ways, we begin to treat those who share these characteristics as if they were God. This gendering of the Divine is continuously weaved into religious content and church services from the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, to 'The Lord's Prayer' being called the 'Our Father'. Historically, the Church has downplayed aspects of God that are 'feminine', or glossed over versus which reference the Lord with feminine pronouns. Sophia, wisdom, in Proverbs shows us an example of the feminine divine and challenges this white, male-centric vision. Sophia is present in the New Testament as well, and is used to characterize the divinity of Jesus.<sup>68</sup>

### **Male and Female He Created Them**

Biblical gender roles, as they are understood by conservative religious commentators, operate through a rigid binary structure. The principle of wifely submission that we have

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<sup>67</sup> Kirk-Duggan and Torjesen, *Women and Christianity*, 3–4.

<sup>68</sup>

outlined through the traditional wife movement can be traced back to biblical origins. Verses like those listed earlier within this chapter reiterate the idea of an intrinsic difference between men and women, as well as positing that there are specific roles that should be fulfilled by each, respectively. Ludy includes this idea in her book, as well as adding that these roles also deepen one's connection with God and their spouse. Ludy claims “we can only experience the absolute beauty, sacredness, and perfection of God’s perfect pattern for romance when we fulfill the masculine and the feminine roles He created for us.”<sup>69</sup> She also later highlights that God “puts a high value”<sup>70</sup> on women raising their children. Christian leaders and authors like Ludy proliferate these principles amongst their audiences, in Ludy’s case, that is primarily teenagers and young women.

Many tradwives espouse similar language around gender roles, as this is essentially what is presented as the base of the movement. One traditional wife influencer whose content is explicitly religious is Amanda Fritz, whose youtube account is aptly named FaithinHome. Her videos include titles like ‘How Wives Can be Praying for their Husband,’ ‘Why I Dropped Out of College and Became a Homemaker,’ and ‘Do Wives Have to Submit to Their Husband?’. Fritz references Christianity and scripture to support her traditional lifestyle and makes statements such as “I don’t think women should be desiring things outside the home” and “God’s word tells us that women’s role is to be at home.” She cites Titus 1:3-5 which calls for older women to encourage younger women to “love their husbands, to love their children, to be self-controlled, chaste, good managers of the household, kind, being submissive to their husbands, so that the word of God may not be discredited.” Fritz makes her ideologies and interpretations of the text clear for anyone who may encounter her content. Despite this

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<sup>69</sup> Ludy, *Set-Apart Femininity*, 117.

<sup>70</sup> Ludy, 205.

seemingly fixed nature of the scripture, there are still pieces of evidence that point toward different factors supporting her ideology. One such point can be found in the description of her video ‘Feminism is DESTROYING the Value of Womanhood,’ in which she includes the hashtag “redpillwomen.” We will further address the implications of this term in the following chapter, but for now, it is important to understand that it denotes far-right conservative political ideology and the intersection between radical conservative thought and religion. By openly claiming this term Fritz is making clear that her ideals are not purely derived from scripture.

FaithinHome is not unique in that she substantiates her belief in gender roles through Biblical sources. In reality, Helen Andelin, one of the first women to advocate for a return to conventional lifestyles, bases her entire book on Biblical justification. Throughout *Fascinating Womanhood: How the Ideal Woman Awakens A Man’s Deepest Love and Tenderness*, Andelin employs Biblical allusions and embeds scriptural quotes to support her claims. She references biblical figures such as Rachel and Hannah and uses their stories when outlining a woman’s instinct toward childbearing. She explicitly highlights the Apostle Paul’s comparison of a man’s leadership over his wife to Christ’s leadership over the church. Andelin states “The father is the head, president, or spokesman of the family. He was appointed by God to this position, as clearly stated in the Holy Scriptures.”<sup>71</sup> Andelin does not market her books as religious guides or commentaries despite the consistent Biblical references, which may work to expand her reach.

Another pioneer of the movement, controversial as she may be, is Alya Stewart who ran the blog ‘Wife with a Purpose’. Stewart is a Mormon convert and centrally situated her faith in her blog. ‘Wife with a Purpose’ has been inactive since September of 2019 after what she calls a liberal “smear campaign.”<sup>72</sup> Stewart truly represents an intersection between politics and

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<sup>71</sup> Andelin, *Fascinating Womanhood*, 135.

<sup>72</sup> Stewart, “Wife with a Purpose- About Us.”

religion, as the following description of her values from her website makes clear: “Faith, family, freedom. God, guns, guts. Borders, Bibles, babies.” Steward was de-platformed in 2019 due to her controversial and provocative political commentary, which we will further explore in chapter three. What is noteworthy about Steward is how she blends religion and politics using them both to support the other.

### **In conclusion**

Faith is complicated, personal, and impossible to reify. For this reason, it is a delicate task to interpret scripture and critique others’ interpretations. I am hesitant to make any claims on the correctness of any one understanding of the scriptures. What can be noted, however, is the effect that these understandings can have on the society by which they are surrounded. Men’s violence has been excused and fueled by “conservative and evangelical Christian narratives about men’s God-given responsibility to discipline women and children to protect their souls.”<sup>73</sup> These religious understandings act as excuses for the perpetration of violence against women to be perpetrated against women in the name of piety. These actions are counter to Jesus’s central message of non-violence and love. Jesus also never espoused any commandments regarding the position or role of wives. Violence against women is an epidemic in modern society, and “nearly one-third of women report being physically or sexually abused” by a male partner at some point in their lives.<sup>74</sup> These kinds of trends will continue as long as men feel like their domination of women is ordained by God. Many traditional wives use their platforms to proliferate this kind of ideology amongst their audiences. Critically looking to the conditions in which the scriptures

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<sup>73</sup> Ashley Mattheis, “Shieldmaidens of Whiteness.”, 150-151.

<sup>74</sup> Kirk-Duggan and Torjesen, *Women and Christianity*, 20.



were written, the actions and opinions of those who wrote them, and the traditions which may have distorted the meaning, is essential to stop this cyclical violence.

As broad as the traditional wife movement is, the thread that links all of these women together is religion. Every woman who is referenced as a tradwife within this paper has explicitly shared their Christian views openly on their platforms. Some women, like Alena Petitt and Sophia Martinson, feature limited references to religion within their content, choosing to reference a broad concept or verses in every other post. On the other hand, women like Amanda Frittz, Sarah Therese and Lillian of Post Modern Mom, center themselves completely in Christianity and consistently weave it throughout their content. While this faith may be referenced as the primary motivator behind their identities as traditional wives, we have seen that these beliefs may be motivated by more than piety alone. Despite the centrality of Christianity within their posts, there are nods to other sources, such as political or internet groups, that could be seen as contributing to these ideals.

### Chapter 3- Signs of Far Right Influence

If you were to search the term #tradwife right now, the articles which would greet you would undoubtedly showcase the most provocative, controversial, and newsworthy takes on the movement that there are to offer. Writings on white supremacy, conservative political groups, anti-feminism, and the alt-right appear prosperously among the results. You may be led to see this in one of two ways: that all #tradwives belong to the most conservative factions of society, or that the news media is conflating this story out of proportion. Both, arguably, would be incorrect. While this section of the tradwife movement does exist, by no means is it the all-encompassing heart of the movement as it often is presented. Conversely, this conservative sub-set of the tradwife population is in no way diminutive or insignificant. This group, the political tradwives, may be a minority of the population, but they are some of the most out-spoken and evangelizing members of the community. Their influence can be seen in far-reaching corners of the internet, where the causes they promote are slipped into content in covert coded phrases.

The full influence of this group is difficult to track, as a key element of their movement relies on not directly or clearly tying themselves back to the political extremist groups to which they belong. This form of non-descript strategic presentation allows for more radical ideas to be presented amongst conventional content which enables these extreme beliefs to seem more normative. Some members, however, do proudly proclaim their conservative status. Melinda Mayson, subject of the mini-documentary *Trumps Housewives* on Youtube, shows interviewer Karishma Vyas around her house which is liberally decorated with Trump memorabilia, American flags, signs touting conservative political phrases and symbols of patriotism.<sup>75</sup> At one

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<sup>75</sup> Unreported World, *Trump's Housewives* | *Unreported World*, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WpYZ65YaJxo>.

point, the camera pans to an image of Jesus stoically holding up the constitution with the founding fathers and a crowd of other (white) Americans standing behind him, hands over hearts. This is one of the most explicit pieces of Christian Nationalism displayed within her home, or most other pieces of content by tradwives. Melinda is able to freely express her conservative ideologies because she surrounds herself with already like-minded people. Other political #tradwives, specifically those with an internet presence, do not share this open approach, and instead, circuitously present ideas to unknowing audiences.



'Trump's Housewives | Unreported World' Screenshot from Youtube.



'Trump's Housewives | Unreported World' Screenshot from Youtube.

### Adoption into the Alt-Right

Traditional wives can be found in conservative circles farther to the right than even staunch Trump supporters like Melinda. The Alt-Right, white supremacist, and other extremist groups, became interested in the tradwives soon after the emergence of the movement. They considered them a solution to “the woman problem”<sup>76</sup> which is the disproportionate ratio of men to women in their membership. Typically, women are not as drawn to these conservative groups due to the blatantly misogynistic rhetoric that is commonplace. That is where the #tradwives fit in, as they also subscribe to a significant amount of the ideologies these organizations hold. A

<sup>76</sup> Miranda Christou, “#TradWives: Sexism as Gateway to White Supremacy,” openDemocracy, accessed December 1, 2020, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/countering-radical-right/tradwives-sexism-gateway-white-supremacy/>.

woman's role as the 'traditional wife' is precisely one of the messages that the Alt-Right promotes, and so the two groups' union was seemingly inevitable. We can see examples of such support on Youtube and other social media sites where recognizable (male) members of such political factions create videos like 'The Golden One and How to Find Your Trad Wife' and 'How to Get Your Passive Husband to Discipline You as a Tradwife'.

Many media representations of women in extremist movements paint them as passive and "wombs for the cause or caretakers of men."<sup>77</sup> This is a limited understanding, and dangerously underplays the impact that women are able to have within the community. In her article regarding women in the far/Alt-Right, *Shieldmaidens of Whiteness*<sup>78</sup> Ashley Mattheis addresses this inadequate view, stating that women are "active proponents of the ideologies and practices of white supremacy and racial hatred."<sup>79</sup> Mattheis supports this claim by examining the influence of one prominent face of the alt-right, Lana Lokteff. While Lokteff herself does not directly identify as being part of the #tradwife movement, she does act as a conductor through which those that do enter into far-right circles. She interacts with them often and even has labeled the tradwives as "a prime source for potential recruitment into the far/alt-right extremist ideology."<sup>80</sup> This acknowledgment of the relationship between a high-status member of the alt-right and the tradwives clearly reveals that, at the most basic level of involvement, some women who are part of the tradwife community are interlocutors of far-right extremism and white supremacy.

The role of women in the alt-right is twofold. On one level, despite the contrary public perception, women are active participants that contribute content and numbers, and are strong

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<sup>77</sup> Ashley Mattheis, "Shieldmaidens of Whiteness: (Alt) Maternalism and Women Recruiting for the Far/Alt-Right," *Journal for Deradicalization* (Daniel Koehler, December 1, 2018), <https://doaj.org>.

<sup>78</sup> 'Shieldmaidens' is a reference to the mythological female scandinavian warriors. Lokteff mentions them within the speech covered in Mattheis' article and presents them as a defensive figure that alt-right women should emulate.

<sup>79</sup> Mattheis, 130.

<sup>80</sup> Mattheis, 137.

proponents of the cause. Elizabeth Gillespie McRae, author of texts focused on women and white supremacy, describes women as a “crucial workforce of massive resistance and white supremacy.”<sup>81</sup> Gillespie argues that women are not only active, but in fact essential to the movement. Journalist Seyward Darby notes that while women may not have the frontmost facing roles they are “helping build the infrastructure of these movements.”<sup>82</sup>

Figures like Lokteff show that it is possible for women to inhabit a station of high regard in these communities. Ironically, however, this leadership position is awarded to those who oxymoronicly preach the organization's view: women should take up traditional roles and let the men lead. On another level, the alt-right and similar groups *need* women to soften the image of their organization. This more subdued presentation can attract more women, which groups need to fulfill their goal of the rebirth of the traditional (white) family. Mattheis outlines these two roles as the “participant” and the “propaganda.”<sup>83</sup> Participants alludes to women’s active role and what they can accomplish for the group, whereas propaganda references what the image of female membership can offer them.

### **A Difficult Balance**

Female leadership and an organization which builds itself upon unapologetic misogynistic, patriarchal, principles do not seem like a natural match. This relationship, contradictory as it may seem, is able to be accomplished through a precarious rhetorical give-and-take. The paradox that female leaders must endure involves being pulled between two diametrically opposed roles: the brainwashed housewife that the media portrays, or the over-involved “loud” woman, whose existence contradicts the image of the movement itself. This is clearly a difficult balance, and yet some women, like Lokteff, have perfected it.

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<sup>81</sup> Mattheis, “Shieldmaidens of Whiteness.”

<sup>82</sup> Chapin, “How White Nationalists Weaponize Motherhood.”

<sup>83</sup> Mattheis, 134.

Those who speak must present themselves, and the role of women in general, as in line with the ideology that the group portrays. This is a delicate task and involves the inclusion of carefully worded clarifications used to justify her position. Even from this elevated platform, where she is literally speaking down to a crowd of (mostly) men, she must rhetorically lower herself to a place of submission. Lokteff has found ways to accomplish this by referring to the situation, our current cultural climate, present as an emergency. This allows for her to call women into almost a ‘war-time’-esque role of being engaged and fulfilling roles which were previously exclusive to men. Speaking about Muslim immigrants, she states, “These people risk their lives trying to come to the countries that men built for us. We must be ready to go to battle.”<sup>84</sup> Lokteff uses claims like this and “our countries are being destroyed by leftists and anti-whites”<sup>85</sup> to act as a call to action and instill urgency. Imbuing the audience with a feeling of fear and immediacy allows for women occupying leadership positions to be temporarily excused in light of this larger goal.

To further prove that women are not using this ‘emergency’ scenario to furtively insert themselves into alt-right leadership, an aura of reluctance, along with the overarching message of “we’ve nowhere else to turn!”, is adopted. This is exemplified in Lokteff’s speech at the 2017 Identitarian Ideas conference in Stockholm, Sweden, where international alt-right groups gathered, exchanged ideas and spoke on topics of mutual concern. After calling the current social situation an “emergency” and telling women to “pick up a sword and fight”, she closes with a statement which ensures those in attendance that this is not a desired status but a necessary one. She says “like today, women of the right would love to simply tend the home and make their

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<sup>84</sup> Miller, “Lipstick Fascism.”

<sup>85</sup> Ashley Mattheis, “Shieldmaidens of Whiteness: (Alt) Maternalism and Women Recruiting for the Far/Alt-Right,” *Journal for Deradicalization* (Daniel Koehler, December 1, 2018), <https://doaj.org>.

surroundings beautiful and I wish that's all we have to do.”<sup>86</sup> Mattheis explains this very intentional use of language by noting “she is careful to embed within her framing very traditional stereotypes about women and femininity.”<sup>87</sup> By supplementing her evident position of leadership with these counterbalancing statements, which reestablish her commitment to gender norms, she attempts to retain an equilibrium between passivity and power.

Another tactic that noticeably reinforces these ideas is the ratio of male to female speakers, panelists or presentors at alt-right conferences. The leadership is aware that a female face being present amongst the majority male line-up will encourage more women to become involved in the cause. While women *are* present in roles one would normally consider positions of “leadership”, this title does not translate to the ‘rank’ that women are granted and they are considered “involved” but not “in charge”. Additionally, while it is possible for women to inhabit this spot in the public eye, the number is extremely low.

### **A Ladies’ Touch**

The radical ideologies of the alt-right require a certain acclimation period before a possible member will become responsive. Certain members of the alt-right, and similar white supremacist organizations, are aware of this fact and act as intermediaries and primers for these ideas. A study conducted by researchers at Rice University suggests “attractive people may be more successful in acquiring social capital because they are trusted in the initial exchange.”<sup>88</sup> In essence, we trust attractive people more. This makes sense considering we often see that conventionally attractive women are the ones to take on these front-facing recruitment roles. The population of female members of the alt-right is significantly lower than their male counterparts,

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<sup>86</sup> Ashley Mattheis, “Shieldmaidens of Whiteness.”

<sup>87</sup> Ashley Mattheis.

<sup>88</sup> Dorsey, “Rice Study Suggests People Are More Trusting of Attractive Strangers.”

this community is a sought-after ‘commodity’. It is also true that the principles being presented are less enticing to the average woman as they clearly promote a message of secondary status to one's husband. Putting this into consideration, certain conservative voices intentionally ditch the inflammatory language and intense presentations in favor of a more soft-handed and subtle approach. Enter: the tradwives. Women, and social media savvy ones at that, were the perfect candidates to both: 1) enlist more women into the ranks of the conservative movement; and 2) delicately introduce conservative ideals while embodying the ultra-feminine character that they promote. One large area of interest amongst the tradwife influencers is the cultivation of beauty. An up-kept appearance is a central part of the tradwife ideology and many content creators share their makeup tips, hair care, and style guides online. This plays into an overarching idea that is also present within the alt-right, that a woman's value is significantly based on her attractiveness which we will detail more later in this chapter.

Speaking about her interactions with women of the alt-right, journalist Seyward Darby tells NPR's Lulu Garcia-Navarro that “They were candid. But I also think it's in their interest to promote a message of normalcy.”<sup>89</sup> Presenting an approachable facade allows for women to be baited in by what seems to be a typical group. Only then, when they have already established a relationship, can they allow for seeds of their conservative agenda to be carefully planted. In a different interview on the youtube channel ‘Virtue of the West’, Lokteff explicitly states that because a “female speaker ‘doesn't want to dominate anyone physically,’ she can get away with ‘a lot more verbally.’”<sup>90</sup> Here she is implying that womens' unassuming presentation gives them the opportunity to speak about radical concepts while still being perceived as non-threatening.

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<sup>89</sup> Darby, “The Women Behind The ‘Alt-Right.’”

<sup>90</sup> Miller, “Lipstick Fascism.”



One tactic noted as an element of the “propaganda” was how the women involved tried “to appear like a friendly sorority.”<sup>91</sup> Positioning themselves as a welcoming sisterhood in which the new ‘pledge’ can find belonging and community, incentivises women to join. If we take this idea further, we can also note that sororities have established hierarchies and require a commitment to their rules and ideologies. Essentially by joining this group of women, the prospective members are signing on to a creed they may not be entirely aware of, as well as inserting themselves into a hierarchy in which they reside at the bottom.

### **Come for the soup recipe stay for the supremacy**

The softening of extremist ideology may be subtly woven into other content and discussions, but once you are aware of this tactic, you may begin to notice its use by creators previously considered apolitical. These social media influencers are able to draw women into a community with tips about hair care and homemaking all the while gently exposing them to conservative mindsets and introducing them to extremist thinkers. This initial trust building with their audience allows for the content creators to present information to increasingly receptive listeners, who begin to see the influencer as a self-authenticating source. While some social media personalities may be presenting crumbs of their political beliefs without a greater goal behind it, many tradwife influencers are completely aware of their actions and have expressed that their use of language is intentional. One such woman is Caitlin Huber, whose internet persona is more commonly known as Mrs. Midwest.

Mrs. Midwest is a blogger and youtuber, with over 180k subscribers, who in her own words aims to “help women blossom into their natural femininity through discussions on style,

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<sup>91</sup> Darby, “The Women Behind The ‘Alt-Right.’”

mindset, and relationships.”<sup>92</sup> Initially reading through the topics that she uses to outline her content, nothing stands out as being implicated in promoting a conservative agenda. This is precisely the image that Caitlin, and other tradwives promoting a political cause, want to put forward. At first glance, her blog and youtube channel seem to follow this ‘how to be a better homemaker and wife’ format strictly, with videos and blog posts titled ‘Ladylike Beauty and Grooming Tips,’ and ‘7 Ways I Thrive at Home,’ but a deeper ideology lies behind these titles.

Visually, not only are her videos and website very aesthetically pleasing and neat, but she is also very conventionally attractive. A constant bright white smile, perfect makeup and long, blonde, curly hair all make her an accredited life and beauty blogger in the eyes of her followers, and a perfect representation of the ideal alt-right woman. The visual attractiveness is not the only pull of her channel as her presentation of the material and poise all work together to form an idealized vision of homemaking. It is true that the vast majority of her content is about the categories that she advertises for her channel, but every other video or post contains some covertly conservative content. This may seem like a benign and insignificant slippage of opinion that undoubtedly occurs to any social media personality, but in the case of Mrs. Midwest, we can see that this is not some inadvertent action. In a rare interview appearance, Caitlin speaks with fellow youtuber YogiOabs, an antifeminist who is a well-known proponent of male supremacy. This interview reveals to us that Caitlin’s conservative content is deliberate and she consciously offsets her controversial values with light-hearted ones. She clearly describes this by saying, “Because my message can be kind of intense for people, like things I believe, I like to pad it with skincare and, like, how I clean my house.”<sup>93</sup> Caitlin’s skill in the tactical use of language

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<sup>92</sup> Huber, “BLOG | .Mrs. Midwest.”

<sup>93</sup> CC Marie, *We Need to Talk about Mrs. Midwest*.

becomes especially highlighted when one takes into account her Bachelor’s degree in Strategic Communication.<sup>94</sup>

With this admission in mind, many words and phrases that were previously unimportant can be understood in a new light. We can do this by examining the language surrounding a recurring sentiment across her platforms: the reinforcement and defense of gender norms. One way in which she does this is through promoting “traditional” and “feminine” hobbies and characteristics to her predominantly young, female audience. While the majority of her content does center around cultivating these traits in her audience, or as she refers to them #feminewomen, there is also a significant amount of content which is devoted to reinforcing mens’ masculinity as well. These posts can range from ‘How to Attract a Masculine Man,’ to ‘Men are Not Trash | In defence of Masculinity.’ Additionally she not only vehemently supports masculinity and encourages the pursuit of a masculine husband but also speaks about how one can intentionally foster this trait in their own husband. In her recent blog post “4 Ways In Which I Help My Husband Lead Me” she concludes that “the simple answer for how to get your husband to lead more is really **just to refuse to be the leader yourself.**”<sup>95</sup> Statements like this help to make clear the true ideal that is being endorsed: a woman's role is to be subservient to her husband.

If we step back for a moment to recall the overall #tradwife movement, we notice that Caitlin’s language and phrasing resembles that of other women within the community. In her aforementioned article, Caitlin emphasizes that relinquishing her own leadership and giving her husband final say has improved her marriage and benefited her. She claims that she has “actually gotten MORE of what I've wanted throughout the years than when I would ‘*fight for myself.*’ ...

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<sup>94</sup> Huber, “BLOG | .Mrs. Midwest.”

<sup>95</sup> Huber, “4 Ways I Help My Husband Lead Me| .Mrs. Midwest.”

By giving him the final say, he feels very loved and respected and in turn desires to bless me and take me into consideration.”<sup>96</sup> This language is strikingly similar to that of another well known advocate of the traditional lifestyle, Helen Andelin, author of *Fascinating Womanhood*. A primary aspect of her book is detailing “how to obtain the things you need and deserve without causing a marital stir.”<sup>97</sup> Additionally stating that following her advice will compel “Your husband... to do things for you and will love you more because of it.”<sup>98</sup> We can see here how Mrs. Midwest's writing is clearly derivative of Andeline's.

Additionally, both women share that following these instructions has improved their marriages, and imply that these actions will improve their readers' too. This idea is attractive to women who feel dissatisfied or underappreciated in their marriages, while also placing the blame and the burden of responsibility upon them to fix it. The ‘solutions’ they offer are not reliant upon the cooperation or consultation of the husband in initiation and his response and receptiveness is completely reliant upon the woman's change in action or attitude. Andeline, more explicitly than Huber, insinuated that a woman is responsible when her husband's love for her has been “cooled” or “his rejection of you.”<sup>99</sup> A theme between both women is that they imply that a positive relationship, a term which implies *two-way* relation, is determined by the woman, which makes it seem as if a negative experience is due to a wife's attitude or actions versus the irresponsibility or aggression of the man. Both of these accounts lay coterminous with the quintessential element of tradwife ideology: that a wife should submit to, and is responsible for, her husband, and care for her children.

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<sup>96</sup> Huber.

<sup>97</sup> Andelin, *Fascinating Womanhood*, 5.

<sup>98</sup> Andelin, 5.

<sup>99</sup> Andelin, *Fascinating Womanhood*, 50.

## **Pulling Back the Veil**

So far we have examined one tradwife, Caitlin, also known as Mrs. Midwest, and the discreet way that her conservative ideologies find themselves into her lifestyle blog posts and youtube videos. But how can these subtle slippages of belief truly affect her viewers? The answer to this question lies in the way that she presents her ideas and her place in society. There are numerous mentions across her platforms that her way of life is counter-cultural. One of the first items that viewers are exposed to when visiting her website is her self-described goal of “creating a haven for traditionally feminine women trying to find their place in this modern world.”<sup>100</sup> By using ‘haven’ and ‘find their place’ she is suggesting to her readers that she, along with others who share her lifestyle, is ostracized and disassociated with mainstream society. There are also less subtle cues that she presents to strengthen this claim. Her video ‘13 ways I live counter-culturally’ clearly illustrates this belief. Within the video, however, the points that she offers are not particularly deviant. She claims that practices such as dressing femininely, eating red meat, and taking her dog on hikes, all set her apart from the majority of the population. In another video ‘10 Tips for Traditional Women’, she suggests “society celebrates women who pursue masculinity and insults that nurturing femininity,” only further convincing women that relate to her feel distanced from mainstream society. By making her viewers see themselves as a persecuted minority, she reifies a group bond and situates herself in a position of near martyrdom. This sense is reinforced when one factors in her heavily featured religious content.

The claims that Caitlin brings forward suggest that the community she is a part of, and actively building, is mistreated and even threatened by broader society. These reactions are reminiscent of past conservative movements perception of progress as a threat. We can see this

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<sup>100</sup> Huber, “BLOG | .Mrs. Midwest.”

demonstrated, albeit in an extreme way, by the Ku Klux Klan who “saw Southern whites as victimized by Reconstruction and... opposed any who destabilized their worldview.”<sup>101</sup>

Additionally, the Klan took up a Christian Nationalist position and positioned itself as carrying out a ‘sacred’ or ‘just’ campaign.<sup>102</sup> This justification of action is mirrored by some traditional wives who use religion and tradition as a tool to support their social or political agendas.

Despite her endeavor, there is not actually evidence of these anti-feminine attitudes in a mainstream social movement. Asserting that anti-traditional rhetoric is a social norm and that these kinds of lifestyles are unwelcomed justifies a retreat from the world. Using hyperbolic language and claiming victimhood allows for the justification of any contempt for, or rejection of, those who are seen as opposing them. These anti-traditionalist ideals, however, are not a central part of the public consciousness and often stem from the misconstrued understanding of the motivations behind movements like women’s rights or LGBTQ+ rights.

For an explanation of why this community is effective in recruitment measures we can look to social psychology. The understanding of ingroup and outgroup bias brings texture to this phenomenon. An ingroup is a social group to which one considers themselves a member and identifies as part of the whole. By distinction, an outgroup is any group with which one does not associate themselves. Essentially, fellow members of ingroups have been found to receive heightened favor and the mere act of identifying in a similar group bonds individuals.<sup>103</sup> Notably, a member of the ingroup can have significant influence over another member and individuals typically find their own beliefs becoming increasingly inline with those of their fellow adherents. Adding an even deeper level to this, researchers found, through a series of four experiments, that

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<sup>101</sup> Baker, *Gospel According to the Klan: The KKK’s Appeal to Protestant America*, 7.

<sup>102</sup> Baker, 67–69.

<sup>103</sup> Hamley et al., “Ingroup Love or Outgroup Hate (or Both)? Mapping Distinct Bias Profiles in the Population.”

“womens’ automatic in-group bias is remarkably stronger than men’s.”<sup>104</sup> One of the most important aspects is how the ingroup treats members of the outgroup. As a result of the categorization and favoritism shown to ingroup allies, individuals in the outgroup may be regarded as a threat and regarded as an adversary.

If we translate this information to the relationship between tradwife influencers and their followers, we can clearly see how this kind of bond benefits the influencer. By creating a dichotomy of us-and-them, us being the traditionalist and them being the “modern world”, they are able to generate a stronger following. Through this phenomenon of human socialization, tradwife influencers like Caitlin are able to build a larger, more committed base through presenting a reality in which their way of life is shunned and the group is the only refuge. This creation of a demand cyclically strengthens their own movement.

### **The good ol’ days... but with Instagram-**

What we have explored so far may seem like an over exaggeration of relatively benign actions. This ruling can be quickly overturned when we examine some of the irrevocable indications of far-right political views and white-supremacist ideologies. By the intentionally subliminal nature of these political nods, evidence of this is not blatantly obvious and requires careful examination of the social media content of the personalities involved. To do this we must closely read the posts they put forth, to who they follow, whose content they promote and even what posts they ‘like’.

Since we have primarily been examining the case of Mrs. Midwest, let us begin with her. As we have previously established, the idyllic, domestic, image which Caitlin leads with is an intentional facade used to soften the presentation of controversial beliefs. One way that Caitlin

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<sup>104</sup> Rudman and Goodwin, “Gender Differences in Automatic In-Group Bias.”

embeds her ideas in her content is through well-crafted lists. Deep within compilations of advice about ‘tips to improve your decorating’ or ‘podcasts worth listening to,’ lay nudges toward radicalizing content. One such example is found in her blog post from July 2019: ‘20 “Things” I Recommend.’ The list is truly a hodgepodge of suggestions including her favorite laundry detergent, skirt style, and dog food brand. This unassuming collection lulls readers into a false sense of domesticity before she presents “15. This Presentation: Stefan Molyneux, The Fall of Rome”<sup>105</sup> as an intellectual presentation. Since the time of her posting this article, Molyneux has been entirely banned from youtube and twitter, and has had all of his content blocked on both platforms. This comes in light of Molyneux’s outspoken support for white nationalism, white supremacy, scientific racism, eugenics and other violations of ‘hate speech’ policies. While this recommended video is not one of his most controversial presentations, it does equate America to Rome and suggest a kind of cultural attack on “Western Values.” This is a strategic choice of video to lead with because, while it is not the most polarizing of topics, it sets viewers on a path to consumption of increasingly radical material.

We can see that Caitlin’s interest in Molyneux does not exist independently of his most contentious ideas as she has expressed overall approval of his ideologies. On this same blog post, underneath her recommendation, she reinforces her endorsement of him by stating “I’m a big fan of this man and his philosophy: it’s brash, offensive, and my favorite type of YouTube content. I love his presentations in particular because they combine culture, history, and philosophy into one amazing learning session.”<sup>106</sup> We can only assume which elements of Molyneux’s philosophy she is claiming fondness for here, but whether it is the anti-feminism, scientific racism, or his theories of white genocide, this endorsement elucidates her previously latent

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<sup>105</sup> Huber, “20 ‘Things’ I Recommend.”

<sup>106</sup> Huber.



ideological beliefs. These positions are reinforced when we widen our scope to not only the content which Caitlin puts out but what she consumes as well.

If you were to scroll through Caitlin's Instagram as of March 2021, you would be witness to a multitude of various accounts she follows that underline the assertion that Mrs. Midwest holds white supremacist and alt-right beliefs. [@worth\\_fighting\\_for](#), an Instagram page self-described to be 'traditional aesthetics', is one such page. The content on this account is broad, including text posts for male self-improvement, physical fitness, and the rejection of modern culture. Most prominently featured are paintings and photographs of white people and families, along with pastoral landscapes and European architecture. The name of the account begs many questions; Fighting for what? Against who? What kind of fight?



Instagram [@european\\_folk](#). Screenshot from Instagram



Instagram [@western\\_aesthetics](#). Screenshot from Instagram.

If this page was promoting a singular heritage, like a Swedish or German background, it would not carry the same connotation. What we see happening here is the vast amalgamation of 'European Heritage' which, reading between the lines, means 'white heritage'. Images of

blonde-haired, blue-eyed women in idyllic landscapes with the text “Norway is worth fighting for” exemplify this through the image they choose to represent Norway, and what about it is worth fighting for; i.e. white women. The understanding that this account's underlying message is referencing race, and not a precise *European* cultural heritage, becomes even more clear when you notice posts like “Australia is worth fighting for,”<sup>107</sup> again, using images of white women. This addition only sheds more light on the idea that what is “worth fighting for” in this one-sided battle is whiteness.

We can see that Mrs. Midwest is an active follower of this page by the posts that she is liking. She is not only present in her virtual sign of approval, but there is even a post that features her and her newborn son. Promotion of family and motherhood as the ideal for women is another theme of the page which also happens to be the same kind of alt-maternalism that is promoted by people such as Lana Lokteff and the alt-right. One user commented “Caitlin has been a huge inspiration to so many women including myself... so grateful for her.”<sup>108</sup> Clearly, Mrs. Midwest has a fanbase, and by her being tagged in a post on an account such as this, some of those fans are undoubtedly going to end up engaging with this page and its blatant white supremacist ideologies. @worth\_fighting\_for is not an aberration of the content she consumes either. @western.traditionalist, @european.people, @unapologetic\_masculinity, and @heritage\_artwork are all other accounts in her ‘following’ list that signal her true values. Most of these accounts also follow her back, signaling and acknowledgment and relationship. Mrs. The bio title of an account she follows reads ‘Feminine, not Feminist’ and another offers to mentor men to become “more alpha.” This language is derivative of alt-right and white-supremacy propaganda. Mrs. Midwest also has mutual followings with some fellow tradwife influencers like Alena Petitt and

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<sup>107</sup> “Traditional Aesthetics (@worth\_\_fighting\_\_for) • Instagram Photos and Videos.”

<sup>108</sup> “Traditional Aesthetics (@worth\_\_fighting\_\_for) • Instagram Photos and Videos.”

Amanda Fritz, which helps to place Caitlin at the intersection of the traditional and white supremacist movement.



Instagram @worth\_fighting\_for ft. @mrs.midwest. Screenshot from Instagram.

Language and references associated with the alt-right are not a rarely seen event amongst women who call themselves tradwives. One woman, Amanda Fritz, whose youtube account and blog are both under the name FaithinHome, is a perfect example of the intersection between alt-right and tradwife ideology. Her presentation is very similar to that of Mrs. Midwest but, as her account name suggests, faith and religion hold a more visible role in her content and she has a much smaller following of 3.92k subscribers. Her blog and youtube page are very aesthetically pleasing and it is easy to see how a young traditional Christian woman would look up to her. Similarly to Mrs. Midwest, upon first glance, all of the material which she is presenting seems to be innocuous but she too can be seen expressing radical ideology on her platforms. Unlike Caitlin, Amanda does not attempt to conceal her true alignment strictly, and these conservative ideals are clearly displayed as long as you are familiar with the terminology she is deploying. In

the description of one video, ‘Feminism is DESTROYING the Value of Womanhood | TRADITIONAL WOMEN HAVE VALUE’, the hashtags at the bottom are #traditionalwomen #redpillwomen and #tradwife. This undisguised alt-right term sandwiched between ‘traditionalwomen’ and ‘tradwife’ exemplifies the ways in which white supremacist ideology has become almost inseparably embedded within much of the #tradwife community. #redpillwomen is referring to the feminized counterpart of a famous subreddit ‘RedPill’, which is a men's rights group that has metaphorically taken the ‘red pill’, a reference to *The Matrix*, which implies accepting harsh ‘realities’ about the world. Essentially, those ‘red pillers’ claim to know the “truth about feminism. Namely that it shouldn't exist.”<sup>109</sup> In her previously mentioned interview with Yogi Oabs, Caitlin Huber also describes herself as having been ‘redpilled’<sup>110</sup> after encountering the blog ‘Return of Kings’, which is self described on its “about” page as “a blog for heterosexual, masculine men. It’s meant for a small but vocal collection of men in America today who believe men should be masculine and women should be feminine.”<sup>111</sup> The blog has been on indefinite hiatus since October 2018 due to loss of sponsorship and decreasing revenue. The creator of Return of Kings, Daryush Valizadeh who is known as Roosh V, has also had a number of his books pulled from Amazon and his Youtube account sanctioned for community guideline violations including misogyny and promoting sexual assault.<sup>112</sup> Caitlin crediting this man and his content with shaping her ideology makes it clear that there is more to her than pillow arranging tips and hair care routines.

Women like Caitlin and Amanda are not anomalies of the movement, and seem to be part of a growing portion expanding the meaning of being a #tradwife. We can see hints of far-right

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<sup>109</sup> “Who Are the Women of Red Pill?”

<sup>110</sup> “The Art of Femininity, With Feminine Homemaker Caitlin Ann Huber | MSGA #7.”

<sup>111</sup> “About – Return Of Kings.”

<sup>112</sup> Murdock and Cook, “Rape Apologist ‘Roosh’ Shutting Down Misogynist Website After Running Out Of Money.”

conservatism consistently throughout tradwife content, whether it is references to controversial conservative speakers, like Jordan Peterson<sup>113</sup> or John MacAurthur,<sup>114</sup> or the assertion that their ‘traditional’ way of life is under threat. The politically/socially conservative branch of the tradwives have a significant population base, which benefits from its association with the more domestic and neutral core of the community.

### **Alt-Maternalism and the #tradwives**

Re-centering ourselves in the sphere of the alt and far right, we notice yet another point upon which both these conservatively-aligned political groups and the tradwives converge. Both groups hold motherhood and childbearing in a place of paramount importance. Alt-right communities espouse that women’s way of supporting the movement is through motherhood. Within these mindsets, the importance of motherhood extends beyond the typical reasons that one may decide to have a child, and additionally becomes an act of defence and preservation.

Mattheis explains this concept using the term ‘alt-maternalism’, which she describes as “women’s roles as homemakers and ‘life givers’ of the Euro/white future.”<sup>115</sup> This differs from the original understanding of Maternalism which is considered to be a type of “empowered motherhood or public expression of those domestic values associated in some way with motherhood.”<sup>116</sup> What sets alt-maternalism apart from its original form is that it specifically stresses white parents reproducing to maintain, or increase, the white population. This is in retaliation to the “white genocide” that white-supremacist’s insist upon. Within this narrative, women's primary value is their position as ‘life givers’ for the ‘white future.’ Additionally,

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<sup>113</sup> Postmodern Mom, *The Pros of Being a #Tradwife | Makeup Monologue #6*.

<sup>114</sup> Mrs.MidwestCait, “Discerning False Religion.”

<sup>115</sup> Ashley Mattheis, “Shieldmaidens of Whiteness,” 138.

<sup>116</sup> Ashley Mattheis, 143.

homeschooling becomes an essential aspect of raising ones children as the public education system is seen as “compromised”<sup>117</sup> and spreading liberal propaganda.

As we have established, procreation is an important facet within both the alt-right and tradwife communities, and social media has been essential in propelling both movements. Alya Stewart, an outspoken conservative political commentator and social media influencer who has been de-platformed since 2019, is credited with creating the “white baby challenge.” This involves the mother of six calls for audiences to “have as many white babies as I have contributed.”<sup>118</sup> This pro-natal mindset is not only about increasing the white population, but also can be used as a shielding mechanism against criticism. Instagram images of children playing in the garden and baking with mom create a publicity barrier and an image of normalcy that exonerates these families from accusations of radicalism. Commenting on this in an interview, Seyward Darby, author of ‘Sisters in Hate’, notes that “I think they’re daring critics of white nationalism to say something critical so they can retort: ‘Are you saying that my children are dangerous little Hitlers in the making?’<sup>119</sup> Essentially, children allow for a diffusion of tension around controversial topics. It is more difficult to criticize a family when they come across as truly having the best intentions for their children.

This gamification of procreation has a history within white supremacist movements, notably Nazi German’s ‘Cross of Honour of the German Mother’ which was awarded in various ranks depending on number of children born and raised.<sup>120</sup> This is not the only attitude that has been co opted from the 1930’s Germany’s radical ideology. The phrase “Kinder, Küche, Kirche (children, kitchen, church)”<sup>121</sup> mirrors the gender roles advocated by the modern alt-right.

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<sup>117</sup> Miller, “Lipstick Fascism.”

<sup>118</sup> Brostoff, “Perspective | How White Nationalists Aligned Themselves with the Antiabortion Movement.”

<sup>119</sup> Chapin, “How White Nationalists Weaponize Motherhood.”

<sup>120</sup> “From Nurturing the Nation to Purifying the Volk | Twentieth Century European History.”

<sup>121</sup> Miller, “Lipstick Fascism.”

Alt-right leaders have also not shied away from using Nazi references, such as Lokteff stating “it was women that got Trump elected and, I guess to be really edgy, it was also women that got Hitler elected.”<sup>122</sup> In a video from an alt-right conference in Washington D.C. members of the audience are seen doing the Nazi salute as speaker Richard Spencer yells “Hail Trump!”<sup>123</sup> Additionally, while ‘alt-right’ is typically considered to be an abbreviated form of ‘alternative right’, alt can be translated to ‘old’ in German.<sup>124</sup> With this in mind, the title can sound similar to *Alt Reich*, which references the name of the Nazi regime in 1930’s Germany.

The hyperfascination with reproduction has also been taken up by the men in alt-right, white supremacist and nationalist movements as well. Within these groups, there is a much more frantic, or even violent, tone that emerges. The perceived ownership and objectification of women is evident through the language employed by these men. The reduction of women to their reproductive organs, or physical appearance, is a common rhetorical trope. Author of neo-nazi, alt-right, website ‘The Daily Stormer’ Andrew Anglin writes that the wombs of white women “belong to the males of society.”<sup>125</sup> Another youtube video’s description reads “The golden one is coming for your eggs,” the ‘golden one’ being a reference to the Swedish Alt-Right.<sup>126</sup> One of the ‘community beliefs’ which is detailed on the Return of Kings website is that “a woman’s value significantly depends on her fertility and beauty.”<sup>127</sup> These two credentials, beauty and fertility, are continuously emphasized by both men and women of the alt-right and traditional movement’s. Procreation and attractiveness is “even obsessed over — as the primary force propelling a woman to live her best life.”<sup>128</sup> This fixation with beauty is fueled by the desire to

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<sup>122</sup> Ashley Mattheis, “Shieldmaidens of Whiteness,” 129.

<sup>123</sup> The Atlantic, “*Hail Trump!*”

<sup>124</sup> Miller, “Lipstick Fascism.”

<sup>125</sup> Darby, “The Women Behind The ‘Alt-Right.’”

<sup>126</sup> The Serf Times, *The Golden One and How to Find Your Tradwife.*

<sup>127</sup> “About – Return Of Kings.”

<sup>128</sup> Miller, “Lipstick Fascism.”

find a mate who will be able to provide for her, and “the surest way to accomplish this is by appearing as physically attractive to men as possible.”<sup>129</sup> CEO of alright.com, Daniel Friberg, advises women to “realize that your feminine qualities are your greatest assets. Nurture and develop them. They are also your main weapon in the rather brutal competition which constitutes natural selection, and it is your primary strength in your interactions with men.”<sup>130</sup> The incessant nature of this reductionist view of women proliferates the understanding that women’s value is based on the sum of their sexual appeal and reproductive ability.

## **In Conclusion**

To summarize what we have been exploring in this chapter, we can condense these ideas into three main sections: image, recruitment, and reproduction. Image and presentation are important components of a woman's role within the alt-right, the tradwife movement and the intersection of the two. Women are considered to be able to soften the harsh and controversial far-right ideologies that the alt-right espouses. Having a more approachable public image is very desirable for far-right groups as it allows for a more presentable exterior that will not deter interest to the same degree. We looked at the figure of Lana Lokteff and noted that, while her views are equally as radical as her male counterparts, she is perceived as more palatable and is able to spread the same messages without sparking as much controversy.

This softer image lends itself to farther reaching audiences and aids the process of recruitment. Women like Caitlin Huber, Lillian, and Amanda Frittz, share their idyllic, domestic, advice and romanticize their traditional way of life online for their thousands of followers. But beyond their domestic bliss, we have examined the ways in which they both interact with and

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<sup>129</sup> Miller.

<sup>130</sup> Miller.



promote far-right conservative ideologies while still remaining ‘on brand.’ These influencers act as gateways to the conservative worldview and imbed their content with dog-whistle terminology and nudges toward radicalizing content.

This interaction culminates in the pro-natal facet of the movement, where reproduction is the ultimate goal. Expanding the white population is seen as a way to combat the perceived attack upon western, i.e. white, culture. Family is a central tenant within the tradwife community so this element of reproduction perfectly coincides with, and lends itself to, the alt-right agenda. Reproductive abilities and physical appearance are two of the principle measures of a woman's worth in far-right circles, and these same points are pillars of the traditional movement as well, where charm and child-bearing are seen as a woman’s ordained role.

## **Conclusion**

While in our initial investigation we may not have been able to secure a concise definition of what, or who, the tradwife movement encompasses, we *have* been able to examine, and critically engage with, several difference manifests of the term. We have established that there are three primary categories that comprise the movement: post/neofeminism, Christianity, and social/political conservatism. The rapid growth of the movement in recent years represents a backlash against an increasingly liberal social environment. Many conservative groups, including the tradwives, see this cultural transition as a challenge to their way of life, leading them to become ever more devoted to, and protective of, the ideology. Figureheads like Caitlin Huber, Dixie Andelin, and Alena Pettitt, represent the movement's diffusion and give traditional women figure's with whom they can relate and rally behind without leaving their home. These influencers are able to represent a community which often sees itself as an invisible minority. With some leaders presenting their lifestyle as counter cultural, followers are led to support the movement with an ingroup mindset which further bolsters camaraderie. The traditional wife movement is able to bridge the gap between the internet's divisive conservative communities and the palatable aesthetic of the lifestyle blogger.

## **Socio-Political Involvement**

The traditional wife movement encompasses more than the promotion of the nuclear family. We can see that some women fold far-right political ideology into their content and present it as one with the domestic living they advertise. These political ties are explicitly displayed when tradwife influencers label themselves as 'redpillwomen' or endorse the ideas of known white-supremacists or members of the alt-right. Lana Lokteff, who we have outlined as a

primary figure in the alt-right movement, has noted that the tradwife population is a prime community of recruitment and is susceptible to radicalization. The term which defines the movement: traditional, also holds its own socio-political significance. This is not an open ended usage of the word, but holds a specific lifestyle, time period, and image in mind. By looking at the social media posts that are consumed, posted and ‘liked’ by tradwives, we are able to identify the ‘type’ of tradition that they are supporting. Images of blonde, white women, and blue-eyed children, captions like “Protect our Children,” “Protect Europa,” or “Remember what you are fighting for,”<sup>131</sup> make it clear that traditionalism means more than a home-cooked meal each night or a well-kempt home. This tradition is *white, heteronormative, and middle-class* and romanticizes a time before integration, mass immigration or women’s rights. When used in this context, ‘tradition’ is an exclusive term which is not universally acceptable, and by featuring ‘tradition’ so prominently within the movement, it is clear that some women may see this world as desirable.

### **Christianity**

A primary source used to support the gender dynamic of the traditional wife movement is the Bible. Numerous scripture passages from both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament include language which clearly subordinates a woman to her husband. There are also many verses which declare that a woman should treat her husband as she treats the Lord, or some iteration of that metaphor. We outlined how this understanding and power dynamic can have harmful implications. Additionally, we can look to the way that God is often depicted to further complicate the gender dynamic. Portraying God as a white male has measurable effects on social interaction and one's perception of others. In an article entitled ‘Who people believe rules in

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<sup>131</sup> “Traditional Aesthetics (@worth\_\_fighting\_\_for) • Instagram Photos and Videos.”

heaven influences their beliefs about who rules on Earth’, Stanford researchers found that an individual's view of God's race and gender cause them to see people of those demographics as an authority.<sup>132</sup> More concisely, when we see God as a white man, white men become God.

Applying this to an already uneven power dynamic can result in an even more unequal balance of power. There are many women, however, who share that their faith empowers them. Still, the psychological effects of viewing God as a white man subliminally impacts the individuals who hold those beliefs.

### **The Internet**

The tradwife movement does not confine itself to one corner of the internet or remain relevant to only those who directly participate in the community. This trend is one of many that is pushing the needle of conservatism increasingly farther to the right. The social and political climate of our world has become increasingly polar. With the election of conservative populous leaders, like Bolsonaro of Brazil, Modi of India, or Trump of the United States, becoming an ever more regular occurrence, it is clear to see that “charismatic” leaders, are in demand. On a smaller scale, we can see this same kind of charisma being employed by the tradwife influencers. By appealing to an audience who feels unheard, left behind, or like their lifestyle is under threat, the traditional wife content creators quickly gain influence over their followers. The faction of the tradwives that seek to spread messages of conservatism and white supremacy are contributing to a political climate characterized by increasing radicalization. The palatable nature of many tradwife content creators allows them to reach audiences previously inaccessible to ultra-conservative movements. In this way, this brand of the tradwife ideology acts as a gateway to increasingly radical communities like far right and white supremacist groups. Recent events

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<sup>132</sup> University, “Consequences of Perceiving God as a White Man.”

have highlighted how online communities and social media can have tangible, real-world, impacts. The events at the United States Capitol on January 6th, which was coordinated through these online spaces, demonstrates this organizational ability. The so-called “America First Caucus,” which was proposed and rescinded in congress, was introduced by far-right representatives who claimed it would “champion anglo-saxon political traditions.”<sup>133</sup> These ideas were born and cultivated online, and groups like the tradwives nurture and gently expose their followers to them.

Not all tradwives support this political agenda. As we have come to understand, there is no ‘*all tradwives*.’ It is important that we acknowledge these contours, or we may fall into the same generalizing language of which we ourselves are critical, simply replacing ‘all women’ with ‘all tradwives.’ Some women root their understanding in Biblical passages from which they interpret gender roles. Others assert religion is their grounding but merge those understandings with conservative political thought. Some women have felt left behind by society through extensive cultural shifts. Others still, may see the subordination of women as a necessary act due to philosophical beliefs that women have harmful inherent tendencies. Instead, we have found that ‘tradwife’ is an umbrella term that encompasses many communities; political tradwives, neofeminism tradwives, Christian tradwives, etc. While some may challenge this entire movement stating that those who participate in it cannot be acting autonomously, it is important to acknowledge that there are many ways to express agency, and freedom is not only defined by the absence of control.

The tradwives are crucial for us to comprehend because they show the complexity that resides behind one's initial judgments. As first glance these women may seem to be charming, or

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<sup>133</sup> Fisher, “The America First Caucus Is Another Step toward Mainstreaming White Ethno-Nationalism in the GOP.”

harmless, or lacking autonomy, etc. These labels are only surface level perceptions and do not account for the influence these women hold and the individuality they possess. Behind the cultivated makeup routine and coordinated outfit there is an individual who possesses an enormous amount of sway over their followers. Having taken the time to explore some of the latent ideologies present within their content, we can see that the real impact of these women may be far greater than we initially thought. The traditional wives are emerging within an era of protest for racial justice, economic reforms, and vast social change, and are acting as a response to these changing times. Just as *Fascinating Womanhood* emerged in response to the feminist movement of the 1960's, the tradwife movement is a sign of our rapidly changing times as well. Radical conservative ideologies and domestic hate groups are becoming increasingly commonplace, and while those at 'the front lines' of these movements are typically men, women are an essential backbone holding up these organizations. We must acknowledge the real harm that women can enact and avoid the common mistake of downplaying their role in the history of bigotry. Many women are overlooked as players within these conservative movements and are able to share their ideologies openly without as much backlash as a man may receive. This allows for the dissemination of information to multiply exponentially and the addition of the internet only bolsters this. The tradwives not only have sway over thousands in their corners of the internet, but also play a central role in informing the attitudes of their household and husband. Women are often seen as non-actors within far right groups and are considered inherently benevolent, but while a wife may be 'the heart of a home,' they may be the heart of hate as well.



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