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'EDL Angels stand beside their men… not behind them': the politics of gender and sexuality in an anti-Islam(ist) movement

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Abstract

This article revisits the view that women are absent or insignificant across the extreme right spectrum. It draws on ethnographic research with grassroots activists in the English Defence League to explore whether a new generation of populist radical right movements offers a gender politics and practice capable of appealing to women and LGBT constituencies. It critically interrogates claims that the movement has made real shifts in the openness to, and roles played by, women and LGBT activists and asks whether the adoption of gender equality and gay rights rhetoric reflects such change or is an essentially instrumental move. Finally it considers how gender and sexual politics are played out in everyday practice in the movement. It concludes that while openness to women and LGBT supporters and activists is more than the top-down imposition of a strategically useful ideology, attitudes and behaviours among activists remain highly diverse, ambivalent and often conflicted.

Introduction

Women are significantly underrepresented across the extreme right spectrum, from relatively moderate radical right political parties to the most extreme, violent neo-Nazi groups (Mudde, 2014: 10). This article suggests there are compelling reasons to revisit this conclusion and to do so from a 'close-up' perspective. The first is that the rise across Europe of populist radical right (PRR)[1] parties and movements, whose ideologies are not 'a "normal pathology" unconnected to the mainstream' but a 'radicalized version of mainstream ideas' (Mudde, 2007: 297), will extend the constituency of support at this end of the political spectrum beyond the characteristic 'twenty five-year-old unemployed man' (Bakić, 2009: 201). Indeed, in some countries where the PRR has established itself in party systems, the gender gap may be disappearing (Spierings and Zaslove, 2015a: 139-40). Secondly, PRR parties and movements offer a different 'supply' than the classic extreme right. Many have moved away from neo-Nazi roots, symbolism and unashamedly racist positions, which women have largely rejected (Blee and Linden, 2012: 105), and some have incorporated gender equality and gay rights platforms into an anti-Islam or anti-multiculturalist ideology that extends their potential appeal to women and LGBT communities (Akkerman and Hagelund, 2007: 199). Thirdly, as such parties become 'mainstreamed', so stigmatisation – a documented barrier to women's participation (Blee and Linden, 2012: 105) – decreases and women become increasingly visible including in leadership positions. Moreover, as a new generation of movements embraces digital media, women can engage in online activism that is more anonymous and more compatible with childcare and other home-based responsibilities. Fourthly, as these shifts render movements less closed in nature, so 'close-up' social research becomes more feasible, offering a potentially more nuanced picture than one of women in extreme right movements simply 'standing behind their men'.

This article draws on an ethnographic study of the anti-Islam(ist)[2] English Defence League (EDL) to ask whether the movement embodies a gender politics and practice different, and more appealing, to women and LGBT constituencies, than the traditional extreme right. First, it critically interrogates whether there are real shifts in the openness to, and roles played by, women, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. Secondly, it assesses whether the movement's appeal to a human rights and equality based agenda to underpin its anti-

Islam(ist) ideology is purely instrumental by analysing organisational ideologies and individual activists' views on gender roles and LGBT rights. Finally, it considers how gender and sexual politics are played out in practice among grassroots activists and asks whether, despite ideological shifts, the affective[3] dimension of the movement remains heterosexist and masculinist.

Mapping the field

The field of study on gender and the extreme right is sparsely populated. This reflects the assumption that extreme right ideology - rooted in a broader rejection of human equality and an emphasis on traditional values – renders its parties and movements an inhospitable environment for women and sexual minorities.

The evidence for this is that women have been significantly less likely to support, or become active in, extreme right parties and movements (Kitschelt, 2007: 1199). Indeed, this tendency is broadly confirmed for the new family of PRR parties in Europe too. Findings from the European Social Survey (2010) shows 11.6 per cent of men compared to 8.2 per cent of women had voted for PRR parties (Spierings and Zaslove, 2015a: 136) while an online study (Facebook survey, n=10,667) of support for PRR parties in 12 European countries found 75 per cent of supporters to be male (Bartlett et al., 2011: 18). The literature on women's activism in the extreme right echoes that of voter preference studies in suggesting women's absence or insignificance. What is observed is 'a men's movement' where women, if present at all, are 'the girlfriends or wives of members' performing 'traditional supportive roles' (Ezekiel, 2002: 54) or act 'primarily as helpmates' to male activists (Blee and Linden, 2012:107). Where women do take on prominent positions, moreover, this is because they are 'personally related to a prominent male in the same organisation' (Mudde, 2014: 10). Recent scholarship, however, warns that right wing women may not be so much absent as 'overlooked' (Blee and Deutsch, 2012: 1) and a number of close up studies provide examples of women participating even in the violent dimensions of activism (Blee and Linden, 2012: 110; Pilkington, 2014).

The apparent absence of women is explained in the literature to date as a result of the ideological lack of appeal of such movements to women. Extreme right ideologies understand inequalities as 'natural' (de Lange and Mügge, 2015:63), emphasise a return to traditional values (Goodwin, 2011: 13) and express profound homophobia (Ezekiel, 2002: 55). Detailed analyses of voter preference suggest women are consistently less likely than men to vote for extreme right and PRR parties either for economic reasons or because their nativist[4] and authoritarian ideologies (see footnote 1) repel them. The greater appeal of nativist ideology to men may be determined by the higher frequency of negative outgroup attitudes among men (Dekker and van der Noll, 2012: 114) while there is also evidence that negative attitudes towards Islam and Muslims are disproportionately concentrated among men (Field, 2012: 159).

The role of ideology and policy on gender and sexuality in encouraging or deterring women and LGBT support for extreme right or PRR parties has become a matter of increasing interest following a shift, since the mid-1990s, towards the inclusion of women's and LGBT rights in party programmes where they are presented as 'core civilisational values of the West' under threat from migrant, especially Muslim, communities (de Lange and Mügge, 2015: 62). The premise here is that, while a highly conservative understanding of gender roles and concern with the reproduction of the 'native' population, typical of classic extreme right parties, might alienate women, the framing of anti-Islam ideology as the protection of

western traditions of gender equality and LGBT rights might extend the appeal of the European PRR to women and LGBT communities (Spierings and Zaslove, 2015a: 142-3).[5] Amidst a wider public and political backlash to 'multiculturalism' across Europe, multicultural policies have been criticised for protecting cultural or religious groups perceived to suppress the rights of women and children (Akkerman and Hagelund, 2007:199). The Norwegian Progress Party and the List Pim Fortuyn (LPF) have used media debate on cultural practices such as honour killings, arranged marriages and genital mutilation to shift discourse on cultural diversity, immigration and citizenship away from multiculturalism and towards social cohesion (ibid.). These cultural practices are presented within a broader human rights and gender equality framework to portray 'Islamic values' as at odds with core liberal democratic values of democracy, individual autonomy, gender equality and freedom of expression (de Lange and Mügge, 2015: 63). However, while such an instrumental adoption of 'pseudo-emancipatory gender policies' (Wodak and KhosraviNik 2013: 12, 28) is a cause for concern, its reach remains limited; the combination of anti-Islamic and pro-LGBT rhetoric is confined to date to PRR parties in northern Europe (Spierings and Zaslove, 2015b: 168).

Finally, the existing literature has suggested that the low propensity of women to become active in extreme right movements is determined not only by the lack of appeal of its ideological message, but also by the inhospitable nature of its environment at the affective level. Evidence from a number of qualitative studies suggests extreme right movements forge 'an only-masculine world' (Ezekiel, 2002: 57) governed by a complex ethics and aesthetics of homosocial friendship, loyalty, mutual support and intimacy (Pilkington et al., 2010: 158) as part of an 'implied or explicit restoration of masculinity' (Kimmel, 2007: 207). On the basis of their respective studies of extreme right activism in the USA and the Netherlands, Blee and Linden (2012: 103-5) argue that most women never experience the sense of belonging and comradeship that men gain from activism and are frustrated by how they are treated by men in their organisations.

Drawing on an empirical study of the English Defence League (EDL),[6] this article explores the evidence for the three main contentions set out in this brief overview of the current literature, namely: that women are largely absent or insignificant in support for, or activism in, extreme right movements; that such absence is a result of the ideological lack of appeal of such movements to women; and that the mobilisation of gender equality and LGBT rights as part of a wider anti-Islam agenda might extend their appeal to women and LGBT communities.

Introducing the English Defence League

The EDL is a 'feet on the street' movement founded in 2009 to protest against 'militant Islam' and in support of the British military. It has no formal membership but there are 25-30,000 active supporters (Bartlett and Littler, 2011) of whom between 200 and 3,000 might attend a particular demonstration. Its mission statements distance the movement from classic far right organisations but its strong anti-Islam(ist) agenda has led it to be characterised as a social movement with a 'new far right' ideology (Jackson, 2011a: 7), an 'Islamophobic new social movement' (Copsey, 2010: 11) or an 'anti-Muslim protest movement' (Busher, 2016: 20). In the media it is widely represented as part of the extreme right and 74 per cent of those surveyed in a national poll by Extremis/YouGov (2012) considered it to be a 'racist organisation'.[7]

The published literature to date on the EDL is limited and attention to gender issues is rare. Copsey's (2010) study, based on secondary sources, captures the movement's origins and early activity (2009-10). Bartlett and Littler's Facebook survey measures and characterises support for the movement but its sample is compromised by an over-representation of those sections of the population using digital media and by the inability to determine whether respondents were genuine supporters or 'trolls' (Bartlett and Littler, 2011: 35). Jackson's (2011a; 2011b) analyses of the EDL focus on the role of social media in resource mobilisation rather than what motivates and sustains the movement and how this is gendered. Garland and Treadwell (2011) do consider the role of masculinity in the movement but draw on a limited empirical base (three interviews and covert observation at EDL demonstrations). The most comprehensive study to date is Busher's (2016) exploration of grassroots activism in the EDL in the London and Essex regions; 4 of his 18 interviewees were women although the gendered experience of activism is not addressed specifically.

Research to date on gender and the EDL suggests it is a classic movement of the extreme right in which women are insignificant. Both quantitative (Bartlett and Littler, 2011: 5) and qualitative (Busher, 2016: 17) studies suggest that no more than 20 per cent of supporters and activists are women. Its affective environment, moreover, is steeped in male working class solidarity (Blake, 2011: 1) not least because of its close links with the football casual subculture (Copsey, 2010: 9). EDL activism has been described thus as a form of 'protest masculinity' in which marginalised white working-class men articulate resentment and anger through the expression of hostility towards an Islamic 'other' (Garland and Treadwell, 2011: 626).

Methodological reflections

This article draws on an ethnographic study conducted over three years (April 2012-July 2015) with activists in the EDL.[8] The primary site of observation was more than 20 EDL demonstrations including travel to and from them, usually by hired coach. This afforded the opportunity to observe (gendered) social interactions and cultural practices (around alcohol, drugs, food and money) and compare these observations with the narratives of interviewees. Other sites of observation included EDL divisional meetings, 'Meet and Greets', police liaison meetings, the Crown Court trial of two respondents and social occasions and informal gatherings. Online spaces were incorporated into the study as another site of everyday practice, communication, self-presentation and bonding of respondents (Hallet and Barber, 2014: 309) but used primarily for communication and observation purposes.

Individuals were approached for interview either after meeting them at demonstrations or through a key informant. Thirty five interviews were conducted, eight of which were with women. However, interactions and conversations with many more women are recorded through field notes and two women - Dee and Suzy – are cited here although no formal interview took place. Three respondents (two men and one woman) were open about being gay or lesbian. All respondents are referred to by assigned pseudonyms, citations are verbatim (and thus retain regional speech patterns or grammatical mistakes) and explicit agreement has been given to reproduce the photos[9] included in this article. Data were analysed using Nvivo 9.2 software.

How research relationships were formed and developed over time is discussed in detail elsewhere (see: Pilkington, 2016: 13-36). Being a woman did not prohibit access to the movement but shaped research relations. For example, I found myself subject to the same kind of rumour and assumptions about relationships with men in the movement endured by

female EDL members (see below) and was drawn into some of the 'emotion work' (Duncombe and Jessop, 2002: 107) performed by women in the group (such as 'talking down' men from potentially violent exchanges). While in some ways constraining, being positioned in this way also allowed insight into the gendered experience of EDL activism.

Of the multiple subject positions I took into the field, the most threatening to the management of relations with respondents was political standpoint. While other researchers have chosen not to disclose their own views (Crowley, 2007: 619), I encouraged respondents to ask questions and answered as honestly as possible. I opened a Facebook account with a genuine profile and, when inviting people to be interviewed, suggested they talk to their divisional organisers or common Facebook friends before consenting. While openness about my own political position and interest in the movement made me subject to some unnerving exchanges and challenges, as relationships with respondents developed, I found that disclosure of difference could provide space for discussing issues and feelings that respondents might not share with those on the 'inside' (Bucerius, 2013: 715). In practice, most respondents had a straightforward understanding of my position; I was there to 'report' what I saw. If I did that honestly, fairly and without prior prejudice, the fact that I had different views was not an issue.

Men's parties or 'open to all'?

The EDL considers itself to have made a distinct break from traditional 'far right' parties not least through its policy of being 'open to all' regardless of ethnicity, faith, gender or sexuality. Nonetheless, men still significantly outnumber women among EDL activists and less than a quarter (eight) of respondents in this study were female. To interpret this as evidence of the movement's failure to live up to its claims, would be too simple, however. To understand what is a complex picture, we need to account for respondents' ownnarratives, which express their experiences of feeling comfortable, accepted and equal, *and* the constraints on this equality in practice observed during field research.

'Angels': standing beside their men?

Organisationally, openness to women is institutionalised through the women's division known as EDL Angels. The region in which this ethnography was conducted formed its own Angels group and Facebook page in 2014; its public page has over 17,000 'likes' (January 2016) and the closed group has 80 members. The regional group was initiated by Suzy and urges women to 'Stand up and be heard. It's not all about the fellas'. The page carries news and information similar to that shared in other EDL groups with a focus on violence and towards children and women. However, there are no women's only events or actions and, thus, the Angels division has more symbolic than organisational significance; it is identified as a place for women to 'stand beside their men not behind them' (see Plate 1[10]).

Plate 1: EDL Angels stand beside their men… Not behind them

As this image conveys, the iconography that accompanies the 'Angels' is not one of 'angelic' virtues of purity and innocence. As a rule EDL Angels are represented as active rather than passive and sexually assertive. Where this iconography is appropriated by women themselves (see Plate 2) it is not in the form of an 'angelic' figure but through attaching angel wings (a popular tattoo image symbolising aspiration, speed and elevation) to the EDL logo. In the symbolic space of the EDL therefore 'Angel' does not connote conservative femininity.

Plate 2: Rachel's EDL tattoo

The significance of the Angels division should not be overestimated, however. While some activists went by Facebook names such as 'Angel Rachel', many women were unaware of, or ambivalent towards, the women's division. Rachel, a 48 year old with three grandchildren, supported the regional Angels group but viewed it rather cynically as part of Suzy's 'empire building' strategy (Field diary, 4 October 2014). Michelle, who was 29 and single at the time (although later formed a relationship, and had a child with, a male EDL member), sought to distance herself from any reputation of the Angels as sexually promiscuous: 'I wouldn't class myself as an EDL Angel in any way shape or form. I think they should rename themselves the Sticky Knicker Brigade to be fair [laughs].'

Although standing 'beside not behind their men' is intended as a statement of the equality and comradeship of women, the very placing of women in relationship to 'their men' ostensibly confirms studies of the extreme right that suggest women's activism is predicated on their ties to others in the movement (Blee and Linden, 2012: 101). Such trajectories are termed 'compliant' (Linden and Klandermans, 2007: 185) and in Linden and Klandermans' study of the Dutch extreme right, four of the five female activists interviewed are categorised as such (Blee and Linden, 2012: 101). However, only two women activists in this study might be said to be 'compliants' who drift into movements. One was 29 year old Casey who saw her role primarily as to 'support' and 'help' her partner, who was a local EDL organiser. Most female respondents made conscious choices to become active, for example, after they recognised a need to vent their growing anger and frustration. In Michelle's case, this realisation was followed by a period of extensive social media communication with other members (via Facebook) before becoming active herself. For Lisa, a 39 year old with mixed race heritage, in contrast, active membership began after she was approached by Rachel - who had noticed her 'British jobs for British people' sweatshirt - whilst out shopping in town. For Rachel herself, activism had been kick-started by an invitation by a (male) friend to attend a demonstration after which she took over running the local division as 'there was nobody else to do it'. Moreover, far from the stereotype of 'following a man into racism' (Blee, 2002: 10), a number of female respondents in this study had not only entered the movement on their own initiative but had brought new recruits to it.

Women's roles: high viz?
Blee and Linden (2012: 107) conclude from their respective studies that 'the needs and ambitions of women activists never fit into right-wing extremist parties and organizations dominated by men'. Such frustration of aspiration was not articulated in this study of EDL activism. Women were visible both online and physically in various 'admin' and organisational roles and as speakers at demonstrations (see Plate 3). Some expressed a desire to 'work my way up and, you know, put my ideas forward' (Lisa) and take on leadership of the movement since they could 'do a better job' (Michelle). The example of Suzy's establishment of the regional Angels' group is indicative of the avenues open to those who sought formal roles (see also: Busher, 2016: 17).

Plate 3: Rachel and Lisa sporting their high viz stewards' vests

The higher visibility of women in the EDL – in comparison to Ezekiel's (2002: 54-5) study for example – may be a product of the relatively flat organisational structure of the movement (Pilkington, 2016: 42). At the time of research, women were included among the inner circle of Regional Organisers (Gail Speight) and the management team (Helen Gower)[11] and at least one woman was always among speakers at demonstrations.

This is not to suggest that women are not sometimes assigned, or assign themselves, a 'relegated status' (Kimmel, 2007: 207). Women are often described as 'girlfriends' of male members (Rachel) or, like Casey, describe themselves as 'on the side line' despite frequently attending demonstrations and social events and often being central to their organisation.

> I help him [her partner who is a local EDL organiser] out, send all his letters off to the police and everything else, he's shit at things like, he just says it how it is and I'm like 'well you can't put that, you can't put this'. So, yeah […] I do, running round the streets at half ten of a night getting things printed off […] (Casey)

There is also some frustration with the laddish culture of the movement. Kylie, a 23 year old mother of two whose dad and partner were EDL activists, described the EDL as 'coked up bald headed blokes running round the streets' while Michelle complained a Regional Organiser 'couldn't fucking organise a piss-up in a brewery'. Lisa became increasingly frustrated with the poor organisation of divisional meetings, which were called without agendas and often appeared to be an after-thought to the main event of 'getting pissed', and she subsequently left the movement. However, others left or became less active for family and relationship reasons either because their partners disapproved of their participation or because they had small children.

'Tret with open arms': LGBT members
The creation of an active LGBT division within the EDL structure marks a definitive line in the sand from classic far right movements (Allen, 2011: 288). Established in 2010, it declares itself to be 'a division of the English Defence League especially for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender people who support and identify with the aims and ideals of the EDL'[12]. The division is more than a smokescreen; its Facebook page – which has 3,500 'likes' (January

2016) - carries news and information specifically related to LGBT issues and its rainbow flag was visible at demonstrations (see Plate 4). The flag was usually carried by Declan, the 19 year old leader of the EDL LGBT division. At the EDL national demonstration in Newcastle in May 2013, Declan gave a speech, to much applause, challenging representations of the movement as comprising 'homophobic fascists' and criticising what he called the 'far left' for failing to consistently oppose homophobia (Field diary, 25 May 2013). Declan rejects suggestions of tokenism in EDL policy on LGBT rights and narrativises his own trajectory into the EDL (from the BNP, which he had joined at the age of 13) as a conscious search for a movement that was 'open to all':

> I was starting to realise that I was gay and I came to realise that I couldn't be gay and in the BNP and just before I left I thought to myself 'is there any organisations out there with the same views as me that accept people of all backgrounds?' And that's when I found English Defence League. (Declan)

Plate 4: Declan holding a rainbow flag

A lesbian respondent felt equally comfortable in the movement and chose to be open that, as she put it, she 'bats for the other side' (Field diary, 2 March 2013). A transsexual speaker at the Bristol demonstration was treated with respect and applauded for a speech in which she talked about being proud to be a transsexual EDL member and of the support she had received from the movement (Field diary, 14 July 2012). Indeed, the Bristol Gay Pride march was staged simultaneously with the EDL march in the city that day and a number of individuals chose to wave their rainbow flags alongside EDL demonstrators. On the basis of his own experience, Declan stated, 'I'm gay. I was tret [treated] with open arms since I first joined. It does not matter who you are or where you come from.' Thus, at first glance, the EDL seems to have fashioned itself into a relatively hospitable place for LGBT members.

Gender and sexuality: Organisational ideologies and personal views

The EDL might be seen as a classic example of the trend among PRR movements noted above towards the instrumental inclusion of women's and LGBT rights in party programmes; gender oppression and homophobia is referenced only in relation to the critique of 'Islamic cultures'. Among grassroots activists, gender equality was assumed and rarely discussed, except by three young men – Andrew (a 23 year old graduate and Breivik sympathiser), Ollie (an 18 year old college student) and Nick (a 16 year old recently excluded from school) - who attended EDL demonstrations but identified as national socialists and were primarily affiliated with a regional organisation of the Infidels. Mirroring the critique of multiculturalism, these young men understood femin*ism* as a negative (and imposed) force that had distorted 'real' gender equality and infringed the rights of men. They called for the return to a world where:

> women respected men as men, as leaders, as people to be looked up to […] And men respected women as like a precious creation which God has made who they will show respect to, that they'll always love and care for. (Andrew)

Men and women are understood as having different but equal roles in society (Ollie) and transgression of this - women choosing a career over children - was considered 'wrong' (Nick). For this small group of fringe activists, gender - like ethnic and 'racial' - differences are biologically rooted; 'not everyone *is* equal' (Ollie). This distinction between the Infidels and mainstream EDL supporters appears to reflect the existence of distinct modern-traditional and neo-traditional gender positions among PRR parties identified by de Lange and Mügge (2015).

Women […] have to walk behind their husbands': Gender, sexuality and anti-Islam(ism)

In contrast to the deafening silence on gender and sexuality, gender *in*equality and the abuse of women (and children) is a consistent feature of official and grassroots activists' characterisations of Islam. In its Mission Statement[13], the EDL presents the movement as raising awareness of the perceived threat of Islam to British culture and society. It sets out the EDL's mission as promoting human rights against 'religiously-inspired intolerance and barbarity that are thriving amongst certain sections of the Muslim population in Britain'. Included, *inter alia*, in the list of acts of intolerance are 'the denigration and oppression of women, the molestation of young children, the committing of so-called honour killings, homophobia'. The movement aligns itself to the cause of protecting the rights of Muslim women stating that 'Muslims themselves are frequently the main victims of some Islamic traditions and practices' and argues that the government should ensure the protection of individual human rights 'including equal rights for Muslim women' (ibid.).

Gender and sexuality feature strongly in grassroots activists' associations of Islam with oppression and intolerance. In a telling contrast to the representation of EDL women standing 'beside their men not behind them' (see Plate 1), 47 year old Jack suggests that in Islam 'Women are second-class citizens; they have to walk behind their husband'. The burqa is widely deployed as a symbol of gender oppression imposed by fathers or husbands as a means of control over women or to conceal violence towards women. Seventeen year old Kane, who as a child had suffered sustained abuse from his mother, reflected that 'It makes me think as well, why does Muslims wear burqas? Do they get beat up underneath there and they are hiding bruises?'.

Respondents perceive Islam to be the root cause of systemic violence towards women implemented through Sharia law and signifying the 'backwardness' or 'barbarity' of Islam. For 15 year old Connor, it is associated with the brutal punishment of women for adultery or

disobedience to their husbands while for his 18 year old friend Chris, women are seen to lack equal rights before the law: 'If they dress provocatively, in their law, they can rape them. It's their own fault for dressing like it' (Chris). Linking the tropes of women's inequality and *hudud* (fixed in the Quran) punishments, Declan argues that rape victims rather than perpetrators are punished:

> I seen in the You Tube video she is buried chest high 'cause she is raped by another Muslim man. When she got taken to a Sharia court, her case is half of a man's so they buried her up to her chest and they stoned her to death which I think is barbaric. (Declan)

The single most frequent association with Islam by respondents in this study, however, was 'paedophilia' and 'grooming gangs'. The centrality of this issue in respondent narratives reflects the fact that it was a key campaigning issue for the EDL due to a number of high profile court cases in the UK concerning the organised sexual exploitation of girls. This culminated in an independent inquiry into child sexual exploitation in the town of Rotherham (1997-2013) which concluded that at least 1,400 children had been sexually exploited - raped by multiple perpetrators, abducted, beaten and trafficked to other towns and cities - over that period (Jay, 2014: 1). The majority of known perpetrators in Rotherham, including five men convicted in 2010, were of Pakistani heritage (ibid.: 92). A key issue for the EDL was the claim that the police and other social welfare agencies failed to act in the interests of the children for fear of highlighting 'the ethnic issue'. The EDL set up a 'protest camp' outside the town's police headquarters over the summer of 2014 (see Plate 5) and in a speech at the national demonstration in the town (September 2014), Ian Crossland[14] attacked both the police and the social services for being 'too scared to offend Muslims' (Field diary, 13 September 2014).

Plate 5: EDL posters and flags at the Rotherham protest camp

A number of respondents emphasised that paedophiles are found among people of all ethnicities and religions but a direct link between Islam and the current phenomenon of grooming was also frequently asserted. It was argued that the veneration of the prophet Mohammed in the knowledge of his marriage to Aisha effectively sanctifies sexual activity with under-age girls and the logic of this argument is extended to the claim that white girls are the primary target of such grooming activity because attitudes within Islam to non-Muslims make them an object to be treated without respect (Field diary, 13 September 2014).

Homosexuality and homophobia

EDL activists in this study described Islam as intolerant of sexual minorities. Connor associates Islam with 'the executing of gays' while Declan states Islam preaches that gays should be 'thrown off the top of a mountain'. One placard carried at the Bristol demonstration bore the hand written slogan 'Protect gays, children, females from Sharia law'[15]. In his speech at the national demonstration in Newcastle (May 2013), Declan denounced 'violent homophobia' among Muslims in Britain as a direct threat to gays and lesbians and claimed that among 'honour crimes' committed in the UK were cases of Muslim parents 'killing their gay children'. Earlier, in interview, Declan recounted that he had been 'attacked by Muslims for being gay' and that the police had failed to follow up his complaint for 'lack of evidence' despite his evident injuries.

Assessing the degree to which the pro-LGBT rights stance of the EDL is instrumental is difficult. Certainly the LGBT community is viewed as a potential ally against Islam(ism) and Connor concedes that homophobes are tolerated as long as they do not disrupt 'the cause' by making their views known. The pro-LGBT rights stance is used strategically to criticise 'the left' for failing to speak out against homophobia within the Muslim community and to equate 'Islamism' with Nazism. Moreover, according to Helen Gower, an influential member of EDL management team until 2014, the committee of Regional Organisers who led the EDL from October 2013 (following the resignation of co-leaders Robinson and Carroll), took a collective decision not to support LGBT rights.[16] On the other hand there is also a genuine sense of community with the marginalised; when asked what they thought about the Pride March taking place simultaneously with the EDL demonstration in Bristol, Connor said, he was '100 per cent with them' while his brother Ray expressed 'respect' for the marchers who were, like the EDL, on the streets to get their voices heard.

Gender and sexual politics in practice: the affective dimension of EDL activism

If organisationally and ideologically the EDL is 'open to all', why does the movement continue to attract relatively few women and LGBT activists? A possible explanation is that they remain excluded from the affective dimension of activism - the 'affective solidarity' (Juris, 2008: 66) forged through the 'reciprocal emotions' (Goodwin et al., 2001:20) passing between participants in the course of activism. Indeed, studies of extreme right movements in the USA and the Netherlands suggest women participants tend not to develop strong ties with their organisation and become socially isolated (Blee and Linden, 2012: 103-5). In contrast, in the EDL, the emotional dimension of activism appears as important as ideology. Affective bonds – friendship, loyalty, togetherness, belonging - are the most frequently cited meanings of activism in this study (Pilkington, 2016) and 'affective practices' (Wetherell, 2012: 4), such as demonstrating, are central to their formation. Women are not excluded from these practices; on the contrary, an online study found that female EDL supporters were more likely to participate in demonstrations while supporters who demonstrate are significantly more likely to consider themselves 'members' of the movement (Bartlett and Littler 2011: 28). However, this close up analysis reveals that the solidarities forged remain circumscribed by non-reflexive masculinist and heteronormative preconceptions and practices.

Women activists were observed participating in demonstrations and other events and experiencing the excitement that enhanced the pleasure of activism and the 'togetherness' that bound the movement. Michelle enjoyed the build up to demonstrations: 'you kind of psyche yourself up over the week before and then it comes to demo eve and that's it, nobody can sleep, so yeah it's proper exciting'. Tina, a 31 year old mother of four who had recently begun studying Politics at university, enjoyed the 'banter' on the coach. Women participate

in the drinking, smoking and other substance use as demonstrators 'get in the mood' and they experience the physical rush or 'buzz' of feeling part of a mass of bodies stretching 'as far as the eye can see' (Rachel). What distinguishes women's narratives from those of their male counterparts is the lack of reference to (or rejection of) the 'buzz' of violence; in demonstrating women sought 'a good day out' rather than a 'kick off'. In informal conversation, it also emerged that participation was sometimes a struggle; individual respondents said responsibility for children meant they had 'no time' to go on demonstrations or that they were 'not allowed to go' by male partners (Field diary, 29 September 2012).

The 'togetherness' experienced on 'a good day out' generates affective bonds of, on the one hand, friendship and loyalty and, on the other, belonging and family. Bonds of friendship and loyalty are articulated more frequently in male respondents' narratives stressing the importance of 'having each others' backs' especially at demonstrations. Through physically standing by one another, male respondents develop meaningful relationships in the movement:

> These are my real mates. I class these as family now. The EDL are my family.
> […] My mates what I knew before the EDL they ran off and left me. But the EDL
> they stay by each other's side. (Kane)

Enduring friendships and bonds were forged and sustained by women also but past negative experiences meant they were articulated more cautiously. Rachel's trust and friendship had been betrayed by a member of her division who disappeared owing her money after she had supported him through the break-up of his marriage and an escalating drug habit (Field diary, 2 March 2013 and 20 July 2013). Suzy had been beaten up after she recognised from CCTV footage that a young EDL member - whom she had taken in as a lodger and acted 'like a second mother' to - had been responsible for a burglary at her place of work. While the wrong done to Suzy was 'sorted' by a group of EDL men (Field diary, 4 October 2014), such incidents demonstrate that, in practice, affective bonds are characterised by frustration, anger and hurt as well as solidarity, loyalty and security.

The sense of belonging and family is underpinned by a more diffuse affective solidarity rooted in feelings of care and concern. Lisa notes 'one of the best things about EDL is that I've felt welcome and I've felt part of like family' (Lisa). However, while male respondents' narratives suggest they find a profound ontological security – often missing from their childhood or adolescence - through feeling part of the EDL 'family', female respondents' narratives are less lyrical. This is partially because, the EDL 'family', like other families, is a site of material and emotional labour that is disproportionately borne by women (Reay, 2004: 59). It is also because while the affection and emotion rooted in interpersonal relationships can fuel activism, they can also undermine it (Brown and Pickerill, 2009: 32-3). In this study, bitter arguments often started with accusations of 'shagging around' and led to individuals being removed from Facebook pages, stripped of admin positions and made to feel as if they were no longer welcome at demonstrations (Field diary, 4 October 2014). Rachel, who found herself falsely accused of having a relationship with a local organiser, expressed frustration at 'the way everybody is interested in who's sleeping with whom rather than the cause' (Field diary, 29-30 April 2013). The emotional labour involved is not exclusively performed by women; one male division leader complained that he spent a lot of time resolving problems caused by relationships between activists. However, in the context of generally unreconstructed masculinities within the movement, these experiences are not gender-neutral. Female respondents were particularly vulnerable to the rumour mill and were more likely to be condemned for engaging in relationships. Notwithstanding the active roles women take in the movement, therefore, the integrity of their participation is undermined by assumptions

that it is motivated by the desire to find a partner and the continued existence of sexual double standards for men and women (Crawford and Popp, 2003). As Connor put it, 'Most of the EDL lasses are in it for cock. […] I do think some of them are slags'. At the same time, women could be criticised for *not* engaging in such relationships; a regional organiser did not trust one female activist, he said, because she flirts with blokes with 'no intention of giving them anything' (Field diary, 2 March 2013). Thus affective solidarity is prescribed as masculine even when it includes women; travelling back late at night from a particularly gruelling demonstration, Jack expressed the bonding effect of the experience by giving me a hug and announcing 'you're one of the *boys* [my emphasis] now' (Field diary, 1 September 2012).

While traditional notions of femininity are challenged or transgressed to some degree by women in the movement, traditional masculinity goes unquestioned. Female respondents mocked EDL merchandise being produced in pink for women, playfully associated themselves with being 'a tomboy' and found creative ways to combine identities such as establishing an 'EDL baby division'. Such acts, however, take place amidst a barrage of masculinist sexual 'banter' - language, jokes, comments on women's physical attributes and bottom pinching - which was routine to the point of being invisible to women activists. EDL images and iconography also perpetuate the sexual objectification of women; the same regional Angels division Facebook page that carried the image recreated in Plate 1 also displayed a photo of Daily and Sunday Sport glamour model, Kelly Bell, barely clad in a St George's cross bikini. Of course men are also targets of such 'banter'. Male respondents subjected each other to insults about their appearance, sexual prowess or their wives and mothers (Field diary, 2 March 2013) while a metrosexual man passing on the street provoked a football style chant of 'What the fucking hell is that?' to be struck up by the men on the coach (Field diary, 7 September 2013).

The battle against homophobia within the EDL is also far from won. Declan had left his original EDL division because individuals in it had 'called me an embarrassment' and 'said that the EDL should not allow gays'. He had also been 'punched in the face' by an 'anti-gay' EDL supporter at a demonstration in 2011. At the fringe of the movement, Nick was strongly against the gay marriage bill because 'it says in the bible that homosexuality is wrong' while Andrew called for the recriminalisation of homosexuality because 'it spreads disease and it spreads immorality within communities, and it destroys families'. Individuals within the mainstream movement are often conflicted and uncertain about their views. With regard to the Bristol demonstration discussed above, one respondent commented that, on that day, he had held the 'gay flag' for some people marching with the EDL until they started kissing next to him: 'nothing against 'em', he said, 'but within limits' (Field diary, 7 October, 2013).

Conclusion

This article argues that while support for, and activism in, the extreme right remains numerically dominated by men, it is no longer a closed or ideologically inhospitable environment for women or LGBT activists. The 'gender gap' among voters for PRR parties is smaller than often suggested, the masculinity of such parties overemphasised and their ideological direction of travel likely to attract more women in the future (Spierings and Zaslove, 2015a: 159-60). In the EDL, while women remain a minority, the movement is not a 'men's party'. Women are visible within the inner circle of power and are active as 'admins', local organisers and stewards. There are significant obstacles to women's greater participation, including childcare and other family responsibilities, but women in this study experienced neither thwarted ambition nor isolation within the movement. For the most part

they had joined on their own initiative and enjoyed, alongside male activists, the 'buzz' of demonstrations and the affective bonds generated.

The EDL is one of a new generation of PRR movements and parties to adopt gender equality and LGBT rights platforms to 'expose' what is envisaged as an oppressive and intolerant Islamist ideology. The instrumental nature of this position is evident in the fact that the EDL does not promote gender equality and LGBT rights in and of themselves; rather, they are 'defended' against a perceived threat from 'Islamic culture'. However, the movement falls short of capitalising on the potential for new tactical alliances around gender and LGBT rights; reflecting perhaps that ideology and policy on gender and sexuality remain relatively unimportant among reasons for the support of extreme and PRR movements and parties (Spierings and Zaslove, 2015a: 150). Findings therefore reveal a contradictory picture. They expose the limits to progressive views on gender and sexuality within the movement whilst also providing observational evidence that declarations of greater openness to women and LGBT supporters constitute more than lip-service to the top-down imposition of a strategically beneficial ideology. In practice, attitudes and behaviours among activists are diverse, ambivalent and conflicted; as such they constitute a more radical variant of mainstream population attitudes rather than a highly ideologised, pathological fringe.

Blee and Linden (2012: 98) argue that the experience of participation by men and women in the extreme right is highly gendered. This article has sought to flesh out the substance of these gendered experiences particularly in relation to the affective dimensions of activism. Differences in experience, it is concluded, stem from the wider gendered environment of the movement which, while 'open to all' and accepting of 'transgression' in terms of femininities and the rights of LGBT people to fight for their rights, still leaves in place a largely unreconstructed masculinity that governs everyday interactions. In this context, women's integrity is undermined by men's claims they are 'in it for the cock' but also by women's protection of their own reputation through criticism of other women. This confirms the real constraints on female solidarity in male-dominated movements and subcultures (Pilkington et al., 2010: 70-71; Leblanc, 2006: 8). Thus, while the evidence from this 'close-up' research suggests that PRR movements may no longer be wholly inhospitable environments for women and LGBT people, their inclusion into the affective dimension of activism remains constrained; women may stand 'beside' rather than 'behind their men' in the EDL but as yet they do not stand beside each other.

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Endnotes

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[1] 'Populist radical right' characterises parties and movements which, unlike inherently antidemocratic movements of the 'extreme right', are nominally democratic whilst upholding a core ideology combining nativism, authoritarianism and populism (Mudde, 2007: 25-31).

[2] The characterisation of the EDL is contentious (see: Pilkington, 2016: 3-4). The term 'anti-Islam(ist)' is adopted here to indicate the claim to be against Islam*ist* ideology (as opposed to Islam as a religion) alongside routine slippage into anti-Islam or anti-Muslim prejudice.

[3] 'Affective dimension' is used as shorthand for the roles played in social movements by feeling (as a personal sensation), emotion (as the social display of feelings) and affect (as the non-conscious movement from one experiential state to another) (Massumi, 2004: xvii; Shouse, 2005).

[4] Nativism is understood here as the resistance to groups and forces perceived as threatening nationhood, national identity or culture and calls to preserve the state exclusively, or primarily, for members of the native group.

[5] The evidence to date, however, suggests that gender ideology plays a relatively small role in voter preference; the most important predictor of voting for such parties remains nativist and anti-immigrant attitudes (Spierings and Zaslove, 2015a: 150).

[6] For a more detailed outline of the origins, development and current organisational structure of the movement see: Pilkington, 2016: 37-59.

[7] This proportion is of those who had heard of the EDL. See: http://extremisproject.org/2012/10/the-english-defence-league-edl-what-do-people-think/.

[8] The study was undertaken as part of the MYPLACE (Memory, Youth, Political Legacy and Civic Engagement) project funded under the European Union Seventh Framework Programme (FP7-266831). See: https://myplaceresearch.wordpress.com/

[9] All images in this article are photos taken by the author except Plate 1 which is reproduced with permission of EDL.

[10] This image is recreated from a similar one, with unknown authorship, in the gallery on the regional Angels' Facebook page.

[11] Both have since left the movement acrimoniously.

[12] See: https://www.facebook.com/EDL.LGBT.Division/info/?tab=page_info

[13] See: http://englishdefenceleague.org/about-us/mission-statement/.

[14] Crossland subsequently (December 2015) became leader of the EDL.

[15] See: http://www.thisisbristol.co.uk/pictures/Bristol-EDL-march-anti-EDL-protests/pictures-16536026-detail/pictures.html)

[16] In a post (24 May 2014), reproduced by Hope not Hate, Gower claims this was central to her departure from the movement. See: http://www.hopenothate.org.uk/blog/insider/edl-on-the-brink-3840.