

How did female members of the Ku Klux Klan think about gender in the United States?

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Abstract:

This paper focuses on the members' perspective toward gender issues inside the Women's KKK party, mainly about their attitude toward gender equality. This paper will analyze two secondary and two primary sources to join the debate of whether women in the KKK want to be empowered or stay traditional. The analysis of the primary sources interrupts this debate by stating women in the KKK believe there is no distinction between the two sexes. The idea of doing this specific research is to show that women are fighting for equality and rights in different kinds of conditions, including in extremist groups.

Keywords: equality, women, rights, gender

1. Introduction

The Ku Klux Klan is one of the most famous far-right groups in United States history. The classical image of masked men riding on horses through Southern towns has been memorialized in countless books and movies. But what about women?

The makeup of women's KKK organizations is based on the key idea that 'Only Native-Born Are Eligible', unlike the traditional KKK, which was founded in 1865, the women's KKK was established in the 1920s and received relatively little attention compared with KKK. Nonetheless, it made a great contribution to assist the male KKK party's activities and spreading the idea of white supremacy, giving more attention to social influence and activities rather than violence and extremism tactics. However, how do female members of the KKK think about gender issues in this extreme organization? In this paper, I will examine various secondary and primary sources to show that women in the KKK want to overthrow a traditional women's family role and want to be empowered and achieve equality as men in society.

The Ku Klux Klan was formed after the American Civil War by the Southern Confederate soldiers. The original goal was to resist the reconstruction plan in the southern states of the United States due to their heavy belief in their identity as white people. The KKK is a famous extremism and hate group that spreads the idea of racism, anti-immigrant, and anti-semitism, holding the essential point of view of white supremacy. Members of the group

used various violent strategies to attack every citizen except white protestants, using terror to maintain the idea of nativism and reject other groups of people in society. The KKK experienced several declines and recover starting from its establishment, and it still exists now. "Although women did not participate openly in the actions of the first KKK, the idea of "white womanhood" was a crucial rallying point for postbellum Klan voice." [1] This marks the potential of forming women's own KKK party. The women's KKK organization was established during the second wave of the growing process of the KKK and was technically independent from the KKK itself. The main difference between the KKK and women's KKK is their work. Members of women's KKK spread their ideologies in communities, schools, and social hubs to help expand the party's social influence and recruit more followers. However, female members of the KKK did not use violence to attack other groups of people. "Women played a significant role in the second Klan's vicious campaigns of rumor, boycotts, and intimidation of African Americans, Catholics, Jews, and other minorities." [2] Women's strong influence in society makes them seem to be more patriotic by using any means to protect white supremacy.

2. Secondary sources analysis

The women in the KKK had the goal of increasing equity between white women and men, and this goal attracted women to join the organization. Kathleen M. Blee states this point of view in her book *Women in the 1920's Ku Klux Klan Movement*. This book focuses on the women's

KKK party in Indiana and talks about the women's movement, recruitment, and activities they operate. After women had voting rights in 1920, they hoped to extend their power in the political field and initiate reforms. Although women did not directly join any violent movement, they do have great contributions to attacking minorities by being intolerant and influencing society by intervening in politics. 'It is clear that women's participation in the 1920's Klan movement was not trivial or insignificant in its consequences', as addressed by Blee, women indeed played an essential role for the KKK. [3]

This point of view is well known, and the article called "How The Women Of The KKK Helped Architect A Hate Movement" by Elizabeth Kiefer supports this idea. The article suggests that women members in the KKK help to organize activities among children and even recruit them as members of the KKK. The members hold a very traditional point of view of women's role in the family, they highly value the importance of having a complete family. Also, other factors like raising children, and being a good wife, are ultimately significant too. As women's power get stronger when women's KKK extended its influence, female members have more desire to ask for equality in society and challenge a male dominant society. [4]

3. Method

My paper will intervene the idea that women consider themselves should be equal to men in society, but also maintain a traditional social role in society by using a different set of primary sources. Indeed, women do want to be freed and do not want to keep an old tradition. Kathleen M. Blee only focuses on women's KKK in Indiana, so her analysis cannot represent the whole picture of women's KKK organizations in the entire United States. I will draw on a border sample of sources, including one primary source from New Jersey: an account of a 1929 women's KKK rally at a camp called Zarephath. This primary source will be supplemented with a pamphlet from the women's KKK in the 1920s, which was likely printed in Arkansas. Together, these two sources will provide a wider range of analysis than Blee used, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of gender issues among women in the KKK in the 1920s.

4. Primary sources analysis

In the book *The Good Citizen*, at the chapter "Patriotic Day at Zarephath Camp-Meeting", the women's contributions to the KKK are greatly praised. 'The two services were conducted largely by the women of the Ku Klux Klan.' The two services here represent patriotic services, including conducting right-wing activities, expressing

white supremacy, and isolating other groups of people. This approach shows members' loyalty and love for their country. As the core idea of the KKK, devotion to the United States is ultimately important, and women's positive response allows the influence of the KKK to extend in the country. Furthermore, the concept of 'In any organization, there is need of unity, of working together for the common good,' shows women's effort in enlarging KKK's power and their spirit of cooperation with other members, enabling women in the organization to have more rights, since they made a great contribution in enforcing organization's power. In addition, the idea of anti-immigrant and racial segregation also appears. 'What will be its quota under the immigration law?' shows the concern of members of the KKK about the influx of non-white protestant into the United States, their hate toward other races makes them strongly refuse immigration from other countries, as they consider incoming population will destroy the purity of the United States' society because they are not white protestant. In the end, when the writer talks about 'Asia being given to Shem, Africa to Ham, and Europe to Japheth,' the idea that different races should stay in different locations deeply stays in KKK members' minds, and they believe the United States is only for white protestant to stay. They want to express the idea that the United States is destined for them to reside, so only white protestants stand at the top of society. [5]

In the pamphlet from Women's KKK in the 1920s, there is clear evidence about women hoping to have equal rights with men in society. 'WE BELIEVE in the mission of emancipated womanhood, freed from the shackles of old-world traditions, and standing unafraid in the full effulgence of equality and enlightenment.' This strongly suggests that women do not want to live under old traditions, they are tired of old rules. Women believe that they should have the same social status and rights as men, and they equality between women and men should be granted. The idea of fighting for gender equality in society also kept in members' minds for a long time, as 'WE BELIEVE in the equality between men and women in political, religious, fraternal, civic and social affairs wherein there should be no distinction between sex.' When talking about no distinction between sexes, it suggests that women and men should be treated equally, and they should have the same rights in all fields of society. This pamphlet clearly states the point that women want to throw away old traditions, and by joining women's KKK, they will be empowered and given rights that allow them to have the same social status as men. [6]

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, women in the KKK highly value gender equality, they believe there should not be a distinction between sexes. Even in an extreme hate group, women are still fighting for equality and are concerned about human rights. This indicates that there are always proponents of human rights in any form of group, presenting people's idea of advocating equality.

References

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