



PALGRAVE STUDIES IN EUROPEAN POLITICAL SOCIOLOGY

Anti-Gender Mobilizations in Europe and the Feminist Response

Productive Resistance

Edited by
Rok Smrdelj · Roman Kuhar



OPEN ACCESS

palgrave
macmillan

Palgrave Studies in European Political Sociology

Series Editors

Carlo Ruzza

School of International Studies

University of Trento

Trento, Italy

Hans-Jörg Trezz

Faculty of Political and Social Sciences

Scuola Normale Superiore

Pisa, Italy

Palgrave Studies in European Political Sociology addresses contemporary themes in the field of Political Sociology. Over recent years, attention has turned increasingly to processes of Europeanization and globalization and the social and political spaces that are opened by them. These processes comprise both institutional-constitutional change and new dynamics of social transnationalism. Europeanization and globalization are also about changing power relations as they affect people's lives, social networks and forms of mobility.

The Palgrave Studies in European Political Sociology series addresses linkages between regulation, institution building and the full range of societal repercussions at local, regional, national, European and global level, and will sharpen understanding of changing patterns of attitudes and behaviours of individuals and groups, the political use of new rights and opportunities by citizens, new conflict lines and coalitions, societal interactions and networking, and shifting loyalties and solidarity within and across the European space.

We welcome proposals from across the spectrum of Political Sociology and Political Science, on dimensions of citizenship; political attitudes and values; political communication and public spheres; states, communities, governance structure and political institutions; forms of political participation; populism and the radical right; and democracy and democratization.

Rok Smrdelj • Roman Kuhar
Editors

Anti-Gender Mobilizations in Europe and the Feminist Response

Productive Resistance

palgrave
macmillan

Editors

Rok Smrdelj
Department of Sociology,
Faculty of Arts
University of Ljubljana
Ljubljana, Slovenia

Roman Kuhar
Department of Sociology,
Faculty of Arts
University of Ljubljana
Ljubljana, Slovenia



ISSN 2946-6016

ISSN 2946-6024 (electronic)

Palgrave Studies in European Political Sociology

ISBN 978-3-031-87692-9

ISBN 978-3-031-87693-6 (eBook)

<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-87693-6>

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2025. This book is an open access publication.

Open Access This book is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if you modified the licensed material. You do not have permission under this license to share adapted material derived from this book or parts of it.

The images or other third party material in this book are included in the book's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the book's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

This work is subject to copyright. All commercial rights are reserved by the author(s), whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed. Regarding these commercial rights a non-exclusive license has been granted to the publisher. The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use. The publisher, the authors and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG.

The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

If disposing of this product, please recycle the paper.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

DECLARATION

This publication has been conducted in the context of the FIERCE project. FIERCE has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe Research and Innovation programme under Grant Agreement No 101061748. Views and opinions expressed are, however, those of the author only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or European Research Executive Agency (REA). Neither the European Union nor European Research Executive Agency can be held responsible for them.

Praise for *Anti-Gender Mobilizations in Europe and the Feminist Response*

“This book brings a new innovative and democratically important twist to the discussions about anti-gender mobilization. The contributions do not only state the consequences of this culture war that are damaging to democracy, but also show how feminist and LGBT movements actively mobilize against it and thus make an important contribution to saving democracy, indeed to democratizing liberal democracies.”

—Professor Dr. Birgit Sauer, *Institute of Political Science,
University of Vienna, Universitätsring, Austria*

“This is an important and timely book analyzing the cultural and political battle fields across Europe and the EU premised on eight national case-studies. The book convincingly demonstrates that one of the crucial elements in productive feminist resistance to anti-gender mobilizations across Europe would be to engage knowledge-based activism premised on alliances between scholars and activists.”

—Birte Siim, *Professor Emerita, Aalborg University, Denmark*

CONTENTS

The Rise of Anti-Gender Mobilizations	1
Roman Kuhar and Rok Smrdelj	
Contentious Gender Politics in Italy: Feminist Responses to Anti-Gender Mobilizations	25
Anna Lavizzari, Anastasia Barone, and Giada Bonu Rosenkranz	
Navigating Antagonism: Feminist and LGBT+ Responses to Slovenian Anti-Gender Mobilizations	53
Rok Smrdelj	
The Battle of Concepts: French Feminist Mobilizations Against the Far Right's Appropriation of the Feminist Legacy	81
Ségolène Pruvot	
From Confrontation to Avoidance: Feminist Responses to Anti-Gender Mobilization in Spain	107
Inés Campillo, Eduardo Romanos, Igor Sádaba, and Guillermo Fernández-Vázquez	
Anti-Feminist and Anti-Gender Coalitions and Feminist Resilience in Turkey	137
Ayşe Alnıaçık and Özlem Altan-Olcay	

<i>Not Just Ranting in the Streets, but Also Concrete Actions: Polish Feminist and LGBT+ Responses to Anti-Gender Politics</i>	167
Magdalena Muszel	
Patriarchal Backlash and Feminist Responses in Greece Today	197
Alexandros Kioupiolis	
“So Common to Score Cheap Points on Being an Antifeminist”: The Rise of Antifeminist and Anti-Gender Mobilizations in Denmark and the Feminist Response	229
Andreas Beyer Gregersen, Susi Meret, and Lise Rolandsen Agustín	
Productive Resistance	255
Rok Smerdelj and Roman Kuhar	
Index	279

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Ayşe Alnaçık is a postdoctoral researcher at the Center for Gender Studies at Koç University. She completed her PhD in Sociology at the University of Pittsburgh, where her research focused on politics of gender-based violence and feminist mobilization. During her PhD, Alnaçık volunteered as a researcher at the Labor Studies Group in Turkey by compiling data and writing reports on workers' mobilizations. She also worked as a local consultant to the International Center for Research on Women, based in Washington, by conducting fieldwork on care policies and workplace practices in Turkey. During her graduate studies at Boğaziçi University, Alnaçık worked as a research assistant at the Social Policy Center at Koç University where she contributed to research projects on politics of social policy, women's employment, vocational education, and household livelihood strategies.

Özlem Altan-Olcay has a PhD from New York University, Department of Politics. She is a professor of Political Science in the Department of International Relations at Koç University in Istanbul, Turkey. Her primary research interests include gender and development, transnational networks, and citizenship studies. Her research has been supported by the New York University International Center for Advanced Studies, the UN Population Council, the Middle East Research Competition, the Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey, the Turkish Science Academy, and the EU Marie Curie Individual Fellowship Program. Some of her recent articles have appeared in *Development and Change*, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *Feminist Economics*, *International Feminist Journal of*

Politics, Sociology, Social Politics, and Third World Quarterly. She has co-authored *The American Passport in Turkey: National Citizenship in the Age of Transnationalism*, published by Penn Press (2020), and which recently won the American Sociological Association's GATS Best Book by an International Scholar Award.

Anastasia Barone is a research fellow within the Horizon project *FIERCE. Feminist movements revitalizing democracy in Europe*, at the Scuola Normale Superiore. She obtained her PhD in Political Science and Sociology from the Scuola Normale Superiore, with a thesis dedicated to feminist health movements and the institutionalization of health centers in Italy. She holds a BA in Philosophy from the University of Pisa and a Master Erasmus Mundus from the Universities of Toulouse and Coimbra. She also holds an MA in Gender Studies and Politics from the University of Roma Tre. Her work focuses on feminist movements, repertoires of action, collective memory, and health movements. She has published in international journals including *Social Movement Studies*, *Mobilization*, and *Frontiers in Political Science*. Her book *Feminist Health Activism and Institutionalization in Italy: The Politics of Care since the 1970s* is forthcoming in 2026.

Andreas Beyer Gregersen is a postdoctoral researcher in the Department of Politics and Society, Aalborg University. Gregersen has an educational background in applied philosophy with a specialization in cultural analysis and political philosophy. During his PhD studies, he has mainly worked within the intersection between ethics and political philosophy with a specific focus on how theories about civil society, civil disobedience, and democracy can connect moral norms and political conflict. In relation to this, Gregersen has also conducted research into ideas about so-called radical democracy as well as on political movements such as the trade union movement and the green movement in Denmark and Europe. Gregersen has been affiliated with the *FIERCE* project since October 2022.

Giada Bonu Rosenkranz is research fellow for the Horizon project *FIERCE. Feminist movements revitalizing democracy in Europe*, at the Scuola Normale Superiore. After participating in the Master's Program in Gender Studies and Politics at Roma Tre, she received her PhD in Political Science and Sociology from the Scuola Normale Superiore, and is part of the Center for Research on Social Movements. Her research focuses on the relationship between feminist movements, democracy, and urban

space with a focus on participatory methodologies. She is part of the editorial board of the journal on feminist studies *DWF donnaman-femme*. Since 2021 she has also been part of the scientific council of the Gender Studies section of the Italian Sociology Association and directs, together with Nicolò Bertuzzi and Jacopo Custodi, the series *Il cantiere delle idee* for Castelvecchi Editore. She published the book *Burn down the city. Gender, transfeminism and urban spaces*. Florence: Unifir, with Federica Castelli and Serena Olcuire.

Inés Campillo is Associate Professor of Sociology in the Department of Applied Sociology at the Complutense University of Madrid (Spain). Her main research interests are comparative social policy, gender studies, care, and social movements. Currently she is the PI of the *FIERCE. Feminist movements revitalizing democracy in Europe* project in Spain. Her most recent publications are: (2025) *Feminist for the masses: Spain* (with Elin Peterson, María Victoria Eizaguirre and Zoe Cerrada, in Bonu, G. and della Porta, D. (eds.) *The Feminist Movement in Time and Space*, Cham: Springer) and (2023) *El trabajo doméstico interno: las sombras del familiasmismo español* (with Jorge Sola, in Moreno Pestaña, J. L. and Costa, J. (eds.) *Todo lo que entró en crisis*, Madrid: Akal).

Guillermo Fernández-Vázquez is Associate Professor of Political Science at the Carlos III University of Madrid. Fernández Vázquez has degrees in Sociology and Philosophy and a PhD in Political Science. He has specialized in two complementary branches of research, on the one hand, the study of the discourse and strategies of the European radical right and on the other, the analysis of the concept of populism from a theoretical and applied perspective. He is the author of several academic papers focusing on the rhetorical and strategic trajectory of the French Rassemblement National and Vox in Spain. He is also the author of a monograph specializing in the French radical right: *Qué hacer con la extrema derecha en Europa. El caso del Frente Nacional* (2019, Lengua de Trapo). His most recent publication is *Vox in Spain: Similarities and differences with the far-right family* (International Sociology, 2024).

Alexandros Kioupiolis is Professor of Contemporary Political Theory at Aristotle University, Thessaloniki, Greece. He has studied Classics (BA, University of Athens) and Contemporary Political Theory (MA, Essex University, DPhil, Oxford University). His research interests are focused on radical democracy, the commons, social movements, and the

philosophy of freedom. He has directed an ERC COG project on these topics (Heteropolitics, 2017–2020) and has published numerous relevant books and papers, including the monographs *The Common and Counter-hegemonic Politics* (Edinburgh University Press 2019) and *Common Hegemony, Populism, and the New Municipalism: Democratic Alter-Politics and Transformative Strategies* (Routledge 2022).

Roman Kuhar is Professor of Sociology and a researcher in the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana. His research focuses on issues of discrimination, human rights, citizenship, and equality policies. He has participated in several domestic and international research projects and has published and edited several books, including *Beyond the Pink Curtain: Everyday Life of LGBT People in Eastern Europe* (with J. Takács, Peace Institute, 2007) and *Anti-gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against Equality* (with D. Paternotte, Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017). For the latter, he was awarded the ARRS Excellent in Science Award in 2018. From 2017 to 2021, he served as the Dean of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Ljubljana. He is currently a co-editor for the journal *Social Politics* (Oxford University Press), the head of the research unit in the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, and the President of the Slovenian Sociological Association.

Anna Lavizzari is a Ramón y Cajal Research Fellow at Universidad Complutense de Madrid. Her research agenda focuses on issues of political participation and behavior with notable attention to gender dynamics and protest politics. It aims to explore how gender dynamics play a role in the way protests unfold, and how social movements build their strategies, claims, and alliances while assessing the political, cultural, and biographical impact of social movement activities on gender politics and policies. Recent publications include *Urban Rebels? A Gendered Approach to Domicile and Protest Participation in Nine European Countries* (*Sociology* 2022, with M. Portos), *Contentious Gendered Politics in Italy and Croatia: Diffusion of Transnational Anti-Gender Movements to National Contexts* (*Social Movement Studies* 2022, with Z. Siročić), and *How young activists responded to the first wave of the COVID-19 crisis in Italy* (*Mobilization* 2023, with L. Bosi).

Susi Meret is an associate professor in the Department of Politics and Society at Aalborg University, Denmark. Her main research interest is in

populist radical right-wing parties in Europe, populisms, political extremisms, and civil society reactions hereto. She has conducted studies on right-wing populism in Denmark and beyond, also considering the mainstream parties' counter-strategies, the role of Islam, and more broadly the civil society responses to growing anti-immigration, and populist ethno-nationalisms. For more information: <https://vbn.aau.dk/en/persons/100658/publications/>.

Magdalena Muszel, PhD is a sociologist, cultural anthropologist, and feminist activist. She received her PhD in Social and Political Sciences from the European University Institute in Florence, where she studied transnational migration and gender relations. Since 2016, her research has focused on feminist social movements in Poland, particularly under conditions of democratic backsliding and anti-gender mobilization. She has published widely on transnationalism, feminist activism, and gender politics, contributing to both academic and policy-oriented debates. Muszel is currently a researcher in two Horizon Europe-funded projects: *FIERCE. Feminist Movements Revitalizing Democracy in Europe*, hosted at the University of Gdańsk, and *ProTest. Protest as a Democracy Test: Protest Culture under Transformation and as a Transformative Power*, hosted at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences. Since 2019, she has served as President of the Zatoka Foundation (www.fundacjazatoka.org), dedicated to advancing social research, education, and democratic engagement.

Ségolène Pruvot is a Director of European Alternatives. Pruvot has developed extensive experience in designing and implementing transnational participative cultural programs. She has managed, and coordinated artistic projects in several European countries, including the Transeuropa Festival. Pruvot has managed, as partner, the Horizon2020 Artsformation project focused on how arts can help manage the digital transition in contemporary societies. She has coordinated Room to Bloom, a project supporting the careers and production of young feminist postcolonial artists. Pruvot is a Doctor in Urban Sociology. In the course of her academic career and professional life, she has specialized in the exploration of the intersection between arts, the city, and social change. Her PhD thesis, realized at the University of Milano Bicocca, is entitled *Can Participatory Arts Help Deliver (more) Socially Just Creative Cities?* There she explored how the theoretical input of contemporary arts theory can help better

understand the role of arts in the city. She trained as a political scientist and urban planner in France, the UK, and Germany. Pruvot is passionate about the city, equality, feminism, and migrant and minority rights.

Lise Rolandsen Agustín is Associate Professor in the Department of Politics and Society, Aalborg University (Denmark). Her research focuses on EU gender equality policies and policy-making processes; sexism, gender-based violence, and sexual harassment; social movements and transnational activism; as well as diversity and intersectionality in feminist institutionalization and mobilization. She is the author of *Sexual Harassment in the Workplace* [Seksuel chikane på arbejdspladsen] (with Anette Borchorst, Aalborg University Press, 2017), and together with Petra Ahrens she co-edited *Gendering the European Parliament: Structures, Policies and Practices* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2019). She has participated in several European research projects within the field of gender equality and democracy: QUING (2007–2011); EUROSPHERE (2007–2012); bEUcitizen (2013–2017); and, most recently, FIERCE (2022–2025).

Eduardo Romanos is Associate Professor in the Department of Applied Sociology at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid (UCM). He received his PhD in Political and Social Sciences from the European University Institute in Florence and has worked as a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Trento, as a Juan de la Cierva Fellow at the Universidad Pública de Navarra, and as a Ramón y Cajal Fellow at the UCM. His main research interests are in the areas of political sociology and historical sociology, with a particular focus on social movements and protest. His publications include articles in *Social Movement Studies*, *Contemporary European History*, *Journal of Historical Sociology*, *Teaching Sociology*, REIS, RIS, and *Ayer*. He is also co-author of *Legacies and Memories in Movements* (Oxford University Press, 2018) and *Late Neoliberalism and its Discontents in the Economic Crisis* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

Igor Sádaba is a graduate in Physical Sciences (1996) and Sociology (2001) and has a PhD in Sociology from the Complutense University of Madrid (2007). He also holds a postgraduate degree in Critical Theory (2003). He was a professor in the Department of Political Science and Sociology at the Universidad Carlos III de Madrid from 2004 to 2008 and is currently a professor in the Department of Sociology: Methodology and Theory (UCM). His research interests include technologies, social movements, social exclusion, and economic sociology (inequality). He

belongs to the UCM Research Group *Digital Culture and Social Movements* (CIBERSOMOSAGUAS) of which he has been coordinator, to the UCM Research Group *Mobilisation, Political Contention and Social Change*, and to the University Institute for Social Transformations (TRANSOC).

Rok Smrdelj is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana. His research focuses on the sociology of media and communication, with a particular emphasis on the study of communication relations in the hybrid media sphere. He is also involved in several research projects on gender and sexuality. In the project *Citizenship and Discrimination: Intersectional Approach to Research of Social Exclusion* (funded by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency, 2018–2021), he studied intersectional discrimination against LGBTIQ+ individuals in media and political discourses. He is currently examining anti-gender movements in Europe as part of the project *FIERCE. Feminist movements revitalizing democracy in Europe* (funded by the European Commission, 2022–2025). His research is also part of the program *Problems of Autonomy and Identities at the Time of Globalisation P6-0194* (funded by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency).



The Rise of Anti-Gender Mobilizations

Roman Kuhar and Rok Smrdelj

In the lead-up to the European elections in June 2024, campaign posters from Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz party appeared across Hungary, depicting Orbán’s political opponents as humble servants of Brussels. These posters portrayed key opposition figures as butlers, offering voters three “main courses” from Brussels on silver platters: migration, war, and gender. Among these, the “gender” main course stood out, giving it a foreign air as the word “gender”—unlike war and migration—was written in English. This choice highlights Fidesz’s campaign’s belief that “gender,” referring to so-called “gender ideology”, has become mainstream enough to effectively communicate the alleged threat posed by the European Union’s equality politics. These three perceived threats—migration, war, and gender—were central themes in Fidesz’s political battle for the European Parliament and echoed in other radical right-wing parties’ rhetoric across Europe.

“Gender ideology” has become one of the crucial tools in the “politics of fear” (Wodak, 2015) propagated by neoconservative anti-gender,

R. Kuhar (✉) • R. Smrdelj
Faculty of Arts, Department of Sociology, University of Ljubljana,
Ljubljana, Slovenia
e-mail: roman.kuhar@ff.uni-lj.si; rok.smrdelj@ff.uni-lj.si

© The Author(s) 2025
R. Smrdelj, R. Kuhar (eds.), *Anti-Gender Mobilizations in Europe and the Feminist Response*, Palgrave Studies in European Political Sociology, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-87693-6_1

religious, and radical right-wing political currents. Orbán refers to it as a “progressive virus” which has been produced in well-funded centers of progressive ideology, including a lab in Brussels. In his speech during the second Conservative Political Action Conference in Budapest in 2023, attended by radical right-wing politicians from around the world, he boasted that Hungary had finally developed a “vaccine against the progressive virus.” He reassured his radical right-wing audience that they no longer need to search far and wide for the vaccine. “It is here, in Hungary. It is available to everyone. You can take it freely, it just needs a little local adaptation, and it will work anywhere: in hot or cold climates, in the North or in the South. It protects against all variants of the progressive forces and has no side effects. Ask your doctor or pharmacist. All that is needed, before the election, is to write in huge, prominent letters on your flag: ‘No migration! No gender! No war!’” (Orbán, 2023).

The political utility of the idea of “gender ideology” is particularly potent because the threat it represents is often unclear. Orbán equates “gender ideology” with communism and Marxism, claiming it artificially divides nations into minorities and sows discord among different groups. He boasts that Hungary has eradicated “gender ideologists,” asserting that they “can smell communists from afar,” referencing Hungary’s fifty years under communist oppression. Similarly, ten years ago, the Polish priest Tadeusz Pieronek warned from the pulpit that “gender ideology” posed a greater danger to Poland than communism and Nazism combined (Graff & Korolczuk, 2017). The French priest and psychoanalyst Tony Anatrella, a key figure in spreading the idea of “gender ideology” across Europe, associated it with cultural Marxism (Anatrella, 2011, 2015). The proponents of the idea argue that the social struggle is no longer between the working class and capital owners but between men and women, with the supposed goal of this cultural revolution being a post-gender society (Strehovec, 2013).

The term “gender ideology,” a notion perceived by anti-gender actors as a covert radical feminist and LGBT+ agenda, emerged in the mid-1990s. During this period, the United Nations incorporated sexual and reproductive rights into its human rights framework. The Beijing Platform for Action was adopted that recognized the right to reproductive health, with gender equality being viewed as a crucial component of sustainable development. The Vatican, in collaboration with mostly American and Canadian pro-family groups and member states of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, strongly opposed this development (Case, 2011).

The primary ideological conflict centered on concepts of equality, with two perspectives in opposition: the Vatican's advocacy for the idea of "sex complementarity" versus the broader international support for "gender equality." Sex complementarity posits that men and women are intrinsically linked and complement each other, deserving equal respect but fulfilling different social roles. Western feminist movements raised concerns with this perspective, arguing that under the guise of equal respect, the Vatican was attempting to embed androcentric principles into United Nations documents (Case, 2016, 2019; Paternotte, 2015). Feminism has historically challenged the notion of biology as destiny, opposing the idea that biological differences should dictate social, cultural, or political roles. Thus, feminism has promoted the concept of gender equality, asserting that all individuals are equal politically, culturally, and socially, and therefore deserve equal rights and opportunities.

The introduction of the concept of gender, which was utilized by second-wave feminism as a foundation for universal women's human rights, faced some internal feminist criticism even before becoming a primary target of the religious right. Criticism of the universal principle of gender equality primarily came from feminists from the Global South, who argued that human rights and gender equality reflected a predominantly Western perspective on gender justice. This critique pointed out that non-Western women's voices were once again being silenced, and Western feminism was indirectly operating under the principles of colonial history (Bob, 2012; Graff & Korolczuk, 2024).

Subsequently, the Vatican, along with other religious groups and state delegations at the United Nations, joined these criticisms, although their primary concern was not the fear of "Western colonization" but rather their discomfort with the progressive reforms advocated by the idea of gender equality. Additionally, the cultural wars in the United States during the 1980s established an agenda of "family values," which the American Christian Right successfully globalized over the following decades in their fight against abortion and LGBT+ rights (Buss & Herman, 2003; Graff & Korolczuk, 2024). In recent times, Russia has also actively propagated this agenda, positioning itself as the "last bastion" not yet affected by progressive "gender ideology" (Edenborg, 2021; Moss, 2017; Stoeckl, 2020).

During the World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, feminist groups successfully advocated for the official United Nations documents to replace the term "sex" with "gender." This shift was intended to highlight the cultural patterns and norms that discriminate against women,

rather than biological differences, which are a fact but should not confine half of humanity to roles such as “cooking and raising children.” For feminism, these shifts represented a significant victory (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017a). To this day gender equality remains the foundation for all equality policies and underpins the European Union’s “gender mainstreaming” framework, which involves integrating a gender perspective into all policies and aspects of social life. This framework, however, is not without its criticisms. Many equality policies are implemented in a “top-down” manner, which can make them appear redundant, overwhelming, and misunderstood. Right-wing populists often reinterpret these policies as efforts to grant additional privileges to certain groups. Nevertheless, without continuous attention to the gender aspect, androcentric culture persists, much like a stubborn weed. The contemporary restriction of abortion rights in some European countries and states in the United States exemplifies this ongoing challenge (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022).

The Vatican perceived the ascendancy of “gender equality” over “sex complementarity” as a diplomatic defeat, staunchly opposing the term “gender” and stressing the importance of biological differences (Case, 2011). At the 1995 United Nations conference, pamphlets were distributed that contrasted a “gender perspective,” seen as undermining women’s natural roles, with a “women’s perspective,” which respected motherhood and reproductive potential (O’Leary, 1995). This perspective argued that the “gender agenda” sought to dismantle traditional gender roles and the natural family, claims that have since been used by right-wing and populist actors to oppose gender equality. The anti-gender movement, viewing “gender ideology” as trivializing gender differences and promoting a culture of death (John Paul II, 1995) through abortion, contraception, and euthanasia, positioned itself as a reactionary force against progressive gender policies, leveraging fear and traditional values to counter perceived threats to societal norms (Grzebalska & Soós, 2016).

Although the ideological framework of “gender ideology” had been developed within Vatican intellectual circles by the early 2000s, it took nearly a decade for this ideological construction to gain traction with the general population. The period following the 2008 economic crisis provided fertile ground for fear politics and conspiracy theories, including “gender ideology.” This term, also referred to as “gender theory” or “genderism,” first gained significant public attention during the mass protests against the French government of François Hollande over same-sex marriage legislation in 2012 and 2013 (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017).

Organized by the *Manif pour tous* network, these protests saw over a million people in the streets of Paris and other French cities, with signs declaring “Non à la théorie du genre!” (No to gender theory!) (Fassin, 2020; Stambolis-Ruhstorfer & Tricou, 2017). This was followed by the emergence of new anti-gender campaigns and groups, such as *U ime obitelji* in Croatia (Hodžić & Štulhofer, 2017; Vučković Juroš & Gergorić, 2025), *Aliancia za rodinu* in Slovakia (Valkovičová & Meier, 2022), *Demo für alle* in Germany (Hajek & Dombrowski, 2022), *La Manif Pour Tous Italy* in Italy (Garbagnoli, 2017; Lavizzari, 2020), *Coalitia pentru Familie* in Romania (Norocel & Băluță, 2023), *Frente Nacional Por la Familia* in Mexico (Patiño, 2024), *Za otroke gre* in Slovenia (Kuhar, 2017; Perger & Smrdelj, 2025), and similar. Opposition to gender and feminism, which some authors term “genderphobia” (Takács et al., 2022), has become a strategy in the struggle for a new cultural and political hegemony (Sauer, 2019). This indicates that the Vatican had been preparing for a counterattack after the diplomatic setbacks of the mid-1990s, while many actors in civil society and officials responsible for equality politics remained unaware of the emerging neoconservative “anti-gender” mobilizations and failed to take them seriously when they first emerged.

Anti-gender mobilizations, described by Corrêa (2022; Corrêa et al., 2023) as a mythical hydra with many heads that regenerate when cut off, employ new political strategies that differ significantly from traditional conservative opposition to progressive policies. These groups have co-opted the discourse of human rights, invoking their own rights—primarily freedom of speech and religion—to abolish or reinterpret human rights for other groups. A key strategy involves the central role of the “innocent child,” with moral panic ignited by claims that children are threatened by the ideas of “gender ideology.” In the anti-gender narrative, children symbolize the future of “our family” and “our nation,” intertwining “gender ideology” with nationalist sentiments.

Paternotte (2023) persuasively illustrates the current waves of anti-gender mobilization as no longer under the control of their creator—the Catholic Church—but having, like Frankenstein, gained autonomous lives of their own. Furthermore, global comparative studies suggest that anti-gender mobilizations are rooted in long-standing patriarchal, colonial, and heteronormative ideologies, which are not limited to being exclusively Western imports (Holvikivi et al., 2024).

EMERGING STUDIES ON ANTI-GENDER MOBILIZATIONS

The organized mobilization against what is constructed as “gender ideology”—often referred to as anti-gender campaigns or the anti-gender movement—has been extensively studied by social scientists from various disciplines, including political science, sociology, gender studies, linguistics, philosophy, religious studies, and law. This phenomenon has been attracting significant scientific interest for nearly a decade, with scholarly attention continuing to increase. Initial research on anti-gender campaigns focused on individual national episodes of attacks often framed in terms of national exceptionalism. However, subsequent research began to highlight the transnational character of these movements, demonstrating shared patterns of mobilization, a common lexicon and repertoire of actions. Early comparative studies on anti-gender campaigns, such as those by Kováts and Pöim (2015) and Kuhar and Paternotte (2017), laid the foundation for understanding this phenomenon. These studies were instrumental in highlighting the socio-political dynamics, the actors involved, the strategies employed, and the discursive frames used by anti-gender actors.

Since then, the number of original scientific articles, chapters, and books on the anti-gender movement has increased significantly in parallel with the global rise of these movements and anti-gender discourses (Ayoub & Stoeckl, 2024; Beck et al., 2024; Holvikivi et al., 2024; Dietze & Roth, 2020; Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Möser et al., 2022; Verloo, 2018). A search in the Academic Digital Collection¹ using the keyword “anti-gender” and focusing on peer-reviewed articles revealed that there were sixteen articles on anti-gender mobilizations published in 2014, a year after the groundbreaking anti-gender protests in France organized by *Manif pour tous*. By 2020, this number had increased tenfold for articles published in a single year. The latest data for 2023 show that there were 293 peer-reviewed articles on the anti-gender movement published that year, with over 1300 scientific peer-reviewed articles published in the last decade.

¹The Academic Digital Collection is an integrated index of electronic resources that contains hundreds of millions of records for articles, e-journals, e-books, research reports, conference papers, audio and video content, etc. from a wide range of publishers (Elsevier, Wiley, Springer Nature, etc.), aggregators (EBSCO, ProQuest, etc.), and database providers (Web of Science, Scopus, etc.), as well as digital repositories from around the world.

Several new concepts and innovative applications of existing conceptualizations have been developed in the emerging studies on anti-gender mobilizations that can help us better understand the functioning of anti-gender campaigns, their actors, and discourses. One of the earliest and most frequently used concepts is that of “symbolic glue” (Kováts & Põim, 2015; Pető, 2015). It points to the “unifying nature” of anti-gender discourses which can mobilize various ideological and political factions around a common cause. In the context of conservative and right-wing movements, “gender” serves as “symbolic glue” (Kováts & Põim, 2015) by consolidating anti-liberal, anti-communist, anti-feminist, anti-LGBT+, and similar attitudes. The concept indicates that “gender ideology” transcends gender issues, masking broader agendas aimed at fostering significant changes in the political system and value orientations. The concept illustrates how a single term can serve as a focal point, bringing together diverse groups which do not necessarily share all their ideological positions. Bouvart et al. (2019, see also Norocel & Băluță, 2023) refer to these groups as engaging in “retrogressive mobilizations,” which are not confined to specific national contexts but operate through a complex, hybrid network of both national and transnational actors.

A frequently cited interpretation of “gender ideology” is that of an “empty signifier,” as proposed by Mayer and Sauer (2017). “Gender ideology” functions as an empty signifier, because it lacks a specific, particularistic meaning. Instead, the term is used in a way that enables unification of various disparate concerns and agendas. It plays a crucial role in establishing a “chain of equivalences,” linking, for example, anti-abortion, anti-LGBT+, and anti-feminist agendas. This versatility allows “gender ideology” to re-articulate elements of various discourses into a narrative of existential threat, portraying it as challenging to the survival of culture and society. The primary reason why “gender ideology” discourse can encompass diverse themes is its foundation on a robust and systematic structure. This structure ensures coherence and consistency across various topics, allowing proponents to effectively integrate and adapt arguments related to numerous diverse themes (Pajnik et al., 2025).

Another important concept that emerged from studies on anti-gender mobilizations and the broader phenomenon of illiberal states adopting anti-gender ideology is the “polypore state” (Grzebalska & Pető, 2018). This type of state is characterized as a parasitic governance model where the state functions similarly to a polypore fungus, feeding off and ultimately contributing to the decay of its host while creating a dependent

structure. In this context, illiberal regimes exploit and appropriate elements of democratic institutions and resources to sustain themselves. They dismantle and reframe existing democratic structures, diverting resources from established sectors, like human rights and civil society, to their own base to secure and expand power.

The fact that “gender ideology” connects diverse actors and groups, providing a political platform for collaboration among ideologically different entities, is encapsulated in the concept of “opportunistic synergies” (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022), which describes the strategic collaboration between ultraconservative religious actors and right-wing populist parties. This dynamic involves forming political alliances to secure power positions in governmental bodies, academia, and civil society. Right-wing populist parties use anti-gender rhetoric to attract traditionalist voters by portraying themselves as defenders of common people against corrupt elites. Concurrently, ultraconservative groups leverage these alliances to gain access to power, funding, and policymaking platforms, strategically placing their members in key positions within these institutions. Edenberg’s (2021) application of the concept of “discourse coalitions” highlights similar opportunities for collaboration among different actors connected by anti-gender rhetoric. Using the example of Russia, Edenberg demonstrates how a common storyline, such as anti-gender discourse, facilitates cooperation and communication across ideologically diverse positions and actors.

Most of the current studies on anti-gender mobilizations have focused on their actors, repertoire of actions, and discursive frames. Three primary types of actors have been identified: new groups of “concerned citizens,” who are typically, though not exclusively, the initiators of anti-gender mobilizations within their political and social spheres; existing organizations, such as pro-life groups, which perceive anti-gender mobilization as a novel political opportunity to further their agendas; and populist political parties and radical right-wing parties that have integrated the rhetoric of “gender ideology” into their discourse. Anti-gender actors do not operate in isolation but are supported by a large number of allies, including media outlets, academics, public figures, and religious institutions (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). Recent research has also investigated online anti-gender influencers and the manosphere, where anti-gender ideology is intensively propagated (Nicholas & Agius, 2018; Obst, 2017, 2024). Furthermore, studies have explored the connections between anti-vaccine and anti-gender networks (Martinsson & Ericson, 2023) and examined

the role of Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERFs) (Cabral Grinspan et al., 2023). Although TERFs originate in feminist movements and are not entirely synonymous with anti-gender activities, they share certain similarities with anti-gender actors and their rhetoric.

Discursive analyses of anti-gender rhetoric in both national (Popič & Gorjanc, 2022; Žuk & Žuk, 2019) and transnational contexts (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018) reveal significant similarities in rhetorical tropes. These studies highlight the crucial roles of social hierarchy and biological essentialism in anti-gender discourse, as well as the divisive demonization of perceived “enemies” (feminists, LGBT+ movements, political elites) and the appropriation of human rights discourses (Garbagnoli, 2016; Sanders & Jenkins, 2022). These ideas are propagated through skillful use of social media, public rallies, protests, and tools such as referendums, often involving the reversal of victim-perpetrator roles and self-victimization. According to Zarembek et al. (2021), anti-gender strategies have three main goals: reshaping public discussion on women’s rights by stoking moral panic about “the family” and/or “the nation”; diluting commitments and policy frameworks for gender equality; and stripping feminists and university gender studies programs of legitimacy and authority.

Studies on anti-gender campaigns’ financial background and transnational connections show that they receive significant support from conservative and religious organizations, with links to the conservative Christian right in the United States and oligarchs in Russia (Datta, 2021; Kalm & Meeuwisse, 2023; Stoeckl, 2020). Studies that have examined supporters of anti-gender movements (Obst, 2024; Rétióvá, 2022) reveal that their actions are mostly driven by the fears propagated by the movement or personal negative experiences with gender equality policies, which they perceive to be exaggerated. Conversely, in the political contexts where there has been a “conservative normalization” of progressive feminist and LGBT+ policies (e.g., German support for marriage equality), the spread of the anti-gender movement has been less prominent (Henninger, 2022).

Anti-gender mobilizations are deeply intertwined with the ongoing surge of right-wing populism in Europe and across the globe. These neo-conservative attacks and changes are often framed within broader conceptual frameworks such as “post-democracy” (Crouch, 2004; Mair, 2013), “de-democratization” (Lombardo et al., 2021), “democratic backsliding” (Greskovits, 2015; Krizsan & Roggeband, 2018), or “illiberal democracy” (Bogaards & Pető, 2022; Pető, 2021; Zakaria, 2007). According to Krizsan and Roggeband (2018), democratic backsliding contributes to

the reconfiguration of institutional and civic spaces and the dismantling of (gender) policies. Anti-gender mobilizations are viewed as integral components of these processes. However, some authors caution against uncritically conflating anti-gender movements with populism and populist actors or with all opposition to feminist and LGBT+ actions and goals (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018). While several parallels do exist between right-wing populism and anti-gender strategies—particularly their focus on “corrupt” elites and the aim to give voice to those perceived as silenced—anti-gender campaigns are not a direct result of the right-wing populist wave. The shift to the right, however, does strengthen these campaigns and it attracts new supporters who share ideological structures with right-wing populist ideology (della Porta, 2020; Perger & Smrdelj, 2025).

Most current research links the success of the anti-gender movement and anti-gender ideology to the negative economic and social consequences of neoliberalism (Bogaards & Pető, 2022; Graff et al., 2019; Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Grzebalska et al., 2017; Kováts, 2018; Zacharenko, 2019). The collapse of the welfare state, the commercialization of everyday life, and the rise of individualism in politics have created fertile ground for anti-gender discourse, particularly among those adversely affected by neoliberalism, often depicted as the “silent” or “silenced” majority. Graff and Korolczuk (2022) argue that anti-genderism is structured and legitimized as a conservative response to neoliberal excesses. Some claim we are facing a “dignity revolution,” where the underprivileged gain a sense of agency and act out of national pride and collective fantasies about silenced people and corrupt elites (Witoszek, 2019). In Eastern Europe, the mobilization against “gender ideology” is often fueled by anger over the EU’s failure to deliver on the promises of equal social and economic conditions. “What was imported instead, often with a patronizing attitude, were lessons on ‘correct’ attitudes and values” (Zacharenko, 2019). della Porta (2020) situates this phenomenon within the broader framework of backlash politics, characterized by the resurgence of traditional themes associated with the radical right. These themes are symbolically synthesized in slogans advocating for God, family, and fatherland. Additionally, some authors highlight the problem of neoliberal ideology co-opting feminist language and the individualist turn in feminist and LGBT+ activism, which facilitate the spread of anti-gender messages (Kováts, 2018; Kováts, 2022; Kováts & Zacharenko, 2021). Norris and Inglehart (2019) proposed cultural backlash theory to explain the rise of

populist politics and movements like anti-gender mobilizations, though empirical studies have shown limited support for this theory (Schäfer, 2022).

Another factor contributing to the emergence and success of anti-gender campaigns is the response to the so-called crisis of masculinity (Sauer, 2020; Unal, 2021). Some men who perceive themselves as disadvantaged by gender equality policies and feminist achievements view the anti-gender movement as an effort to restore traditional patriarchal roles. Sauer (2020) describes this phenomenon as “masculinist identity politics,” characterized by creating an atmosphere of fear, anxiety, anger, and rage directed at the proponents of “gender ideology.” This is also closely related to the concept of “equality fatigue” (Kuhar & Antić Gaber, 2022; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017b), which interprets equality as already achieved and perceives feminists and other minorities as seeking special protections and additional rights, rather than equal rights. This perspective aligns with a broader disillusionment with human rights discourses and the promises of democratic transformation in post-socialist societies (Ghodsee, 2014).

Finally, anti-gender mobilizations exploit and simultaneously contribute to the epistemic crisis, characterized by a growing distrust of science, particularly the social sciences. This struggle over the legitimacy of academic work, especially in gender studies, involves anti-gender actors seeking not only political power but also epistemic authority (Korolczuk, 2020). Their main strategy involves producing alternative knowledge and dismissing gender studies as ideological, unscientific, and contrary to the supposedly indisputable findings of the natural sciences, especially biology. Consequently, the anti-gender movement aims to become an alternative field of knowledge production, challenging social constructivist and post-structural research in the social sciences and humanities (Paternotte & Verloo, 2021).

The increasing use of anti-equality discourse and the close intertwining of populist and radical right policies with anti-gender rhetoric have led some to discuss a global conservative backlash and culture wars as a replacement for class struggle (Žižek, 2022). However, others caution that scholars should adopt more rigorous conceptual frameworks and conduct detailed theoretical and empirical research to better understand these phenomena. Contemporary forms of resistance may emerge from diverse and occasionally competing projects, indicating particular and contingent contacts rather than a monolithic coalition of hostile forces (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018). Furthermore, as della Porta (2020) points out, the current

offensive is not merely a reaction to rapid progressive advances in the context of gender and sexuality but also underscores the ongoing contest between progressive and regressive values. This suggests that effective responses to anti-gender mobilizations could potentially trigger a “backlash against the backlash.”

BRIDGING THE GAP: RESPONSES TO ANTI-GENDER MOBILIZATION

Despite the growing body of work on anti-gender mobilizations, which covers many aspects of these neoconservative forms of resistance to equality politics, there remains a persistent gap in studying how feminist and LGBT+ movements² respond to these attacks in the current social context. These movements not only face new forms of neoconservative resistance but are also situated in a specific socio-historical context characterized by antagonistic politics (Mouffe, 2013, 2018), post-truth, misinformation, and the crisis of trust in science (Benetka & Schor-Tschudnowskaja, 2023). The political mainstream, both nationally and globally, is shifting increasingly toward the radical right, signaling the erosion of democratic norms. This erosion is marked by distrust in public institutions, an increasingly polarized public discourse that fractures communities, and the favoring of private interests over public ones, leading to rampant commercialization and the depoliticization of citizens (Pajnik, 2023). The rise of populist leaders and the dissemination of false information through digital media exacerbate these trends, further undermining the credibility of scientific and academic communities.

Feminist and LGBT+ movements find themselves contending with multifaceted challenges. On one hand, they face direct opposition from anti-gender actors, who deploy sophisticated misinformation campaigns and exploit societal fears to rally support. On the other hand, they navigate a broader landscape where public engagement is waning and the mechanisms for civic participation and democratic oversight are weakening. Moreover, the infiltration of neoconservative ideologies into

² Although the title of this book mentions only the “feminist response,” in our analyses we also considered the responses of LGBT+ movements, which, like feminism, are among the primary targets of anti-gender mobilizations. Our research shows that closer cooperation has emerged between feminist and LGBT+ movements precisely because they face a common attack.

mainstream politics has resulted in policy rollbacks that threaten the advancements in gender equality and LGBT+ rights achieved over the past decades. In this climate, it becomes essential for feminist and LGBT+ movements to innovate and adapt, finding new ways to mobilize supporters, educate the public, and advocate for inclusive policies. Building coalitions across different social movements is also crucial to reinforce resilience and amplify impact in an era where collective action is necessary yet increasingly difficult to sustain.

While feminist and LGBT+ groups have been notably affected by the rise of anti-gender campaigns, the latter have also produced broader social and political ramifications. For instance, in Poland, women have been stripped of nearly all reproductive rights. In Croatia, a referendum successfully limited the definition of marriage to a union between a man and a woman, thereby preventing the adoption of marriage equality legislation. In Colombia, the peace agreement between the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) and the Colombian government was undermined by fears surrounding “gender ideology.” The Estrela report, a non-binding resolution on women’s health and reproductive rights in the European Union, was rejected by the European Parliament. This rejection was primarily due to allegations that the report endorsed “gender ideology,” a criticism also directed at the Istanbul Convention. Furthermore, the Bulgarian Constitutional Court declared the concept of “gender” unconstitutional, thereby obstructing the adoption of the Istanbul Convention into the Bulgarian legal system. In Hungary, gender studies programs at universities were targeted, leading to their marginalization or loss of accreditation. The effects of anti-gender campaigns are also evident in educational settings, where calls to parents to prevent the spread of “gender ideology” have incited moral panic, resulting in self-censorship among schools and teachers on topics such as sexuality and gender identities. Even in countries where referendums and protests failed—such as the referendums in Romania (2018) and Slovakia (2015)—anti-gender campaigns left lasting consequences. It is crucial to understand that anti-gender actors operate with long-term objectives, aiming to undermine equality policies and establish a less democratic political order. Even if they do not immediately succeed in directly changing laws or terminating specific policies, their efforts seek to instill doubt and erode public support for progressive reforms.

In light of these new challenges facing feminist and LGBT+ movements, several critical questions arise: How are feminist and LGBT+

movements adapting their strategies in response to the rise of anti-gender mobilizations in these circumstances? What new challenges do these movements face in an era of antagonistic politics and post-truth? How does the increasing polarization of public discourse impact the efforts of feminist and LGBT+ movements to counter anti-gender rhetoric? In what ways do digital media dynamics influence the strategies and effectiveness of these movements? How can these movements build resilience and develop new forms of resistance in the face of a shifting political landscape and the decline of democratic norms?

We aimed to answer these questions within the framework of the Horizon Europe research project *FIERCE – Feminist Movements Revitalizing Democracy in Europe*, and this book is partially based on the empirical material collected as part of this project, including interviews with feminist and LGBT+ actors from eight partner countries.³ Additional research was conducted specifically for this volume. We also co-produced knowledge through co-creation labs with feminist and LGBT+ actors in Denmark, France, Greece, Italy, Poland, Slovenia, Spain, and Turkey. This book presents a critical analysis of these case studies, highlighting the unique strategies and adaptations that feminist and LGBT+ movements employ in response to anti-gender mobilizations in these diverse socio-political contexts. This collective volume complements *The Feminist Movement in Time and Space: A European Perspective*, edited by Giada Bonu Rosenkranz and Donatella della Porta (Rosenkranz & della Porta, 2024), which was produced as part of the same project and fills a gap in the literature on feminist mobilizations by providing a systematic cross-national comparative analysis of the third wave of mobilization in the European context.

In our study we initially differentiated between anti-gender and anti-feminist actors. We define anti-gender actors as those who use terms like “gender ideology,” “gender theory,” or “genderism” as their key

³This project has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon Europe Research and Innovation program under Grant Agreement No. 101061748. Views and opinions expressed are, however, those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the European Research Executive Agency can be held responsible for them. In addition this text was also produced within the framework of the project “Gender, Democracy, and the Neoconservative Anti-Gender Movement” (J5-50158, 2023–2026) and the research program “Problems of Autonomy and Identity at the Time of Globalization” (P6-0194, 2019–2027), both funded by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency.

rhetorical tropes. This broad network includes citizens' initiatives, family associations, pro-life groups, nationalist actors, right-wing populists, and, in some countries, satellite organizations of the church. In some instances, these groups have transformed into political parties, and they are also organized internationally.

Anti-feminist actors, on the other hand, predate anti-gender actors and reject some or all forms of feminism, its political struggles for equality, and its principles. Anti-feminism generally rests on the belief that the traditional gender division of labor is natural or that women's rights and equality negatively affect men's rights and positions in society, without necessarily using concepts like "gender ideology" or "genderism" and without assuming features of conspiracy theories. Anti-feminist actors typically include men's and fathers' organizations, religious groups, pro-life initiatives, and similar entities.

Our research showed that many of these actors now overlap with anti-gender mobilizations or have used their discursive platform to spread their ideas. While analytically it makes sense to distinguish between the two because of their different histories and backgrounds, our empirical material shows that in places where anti-gender mobilizations have emerged, it is often no longer possible to distinguish between these two groups, especially in the rhetorical tropes used, as they have all adopted "anti-gender" discourses. The concept of "gender ideology" acts as a discursive "weed strategy," which outgrows and swallows up all similar exclusionary discourses. "Gender ideology" has become a "handy shortcut" for various forms of opposition to feminism and LGBT+ rights, rendering specific anti-feminist rhetoric that is not framed within this term almost invisible in these contexts.

The current body of knowledge on anti-gender mobilizations might create the impression that the targets of anti-gender campaigns are passive victims. On the contrary, our study shows that feminist and LGBT+ actors are not passive victims at all, but active agents who continually develop innovative strategies to counter anti-gender mobilizations, reflecting their resilience and creativity through diverse approaches. It also reveals that the new forms of neoconservative opposition to gender equality and sexual politics have been important learning experiences for feminist and LGBT+ movements, prompting them to adapt and rethink strategies. Our case studies show that these movements are not just focused on defending existing rights, but are actively exploring new areas of activism and engagement. Their strategies go beyond simple defense, introducing

forward-looking policies and initiatives, a process we refer to as “productive resistance.” It is a framework to understand the proactive strategies employed by feminist and LGBT+ movements in countering anti-gender mobilizations. Rather than solely defending existing rights, these movements are actively innovating and expanding their engagements, shaping new policies and practices that safeguard and advance rights in anticipation of future challenges.

Using a typological approach, the chapters in this volume are divided into three groups based on country-specific anti-gender activities, with some overlap between the groups. The first group includes “old” anti-gender countries with a long history of successful anti-gender mobilization. Italy, France, and Spain are among them, as is Slovenia, which was one of the first Eastern European countries to see the emergence of an anti-gender movement. The second group includes countries where anti-gender ideology is or was recently part of the official ideology of the political establishment. Poland and Turkey belong to this group, although Italy has recently flirted with this position, too. The third group includes countries where the anti-gender movement has not yet erupted into a full-fledged mobilization but where such mobilization is on the rise. Denmark and Greece belong to this group, although there are significant differences in the emergence of anti-gender discourse and the political opportunities for the anti-gender movement in the two countries.

In the concluding chapter, this volume provides a systematic cross-national comparison. By examining how these movements interact with and counteract anti-gender rhetoric across different national contexts, we gain comprehensive insights into the perseverance and adaptability of feminist and LGBT+ activists. Moreover, this comprehensive, cross-national approach not only enhances our understanding of these mobilizations but also sheds light on the broader implications for democracy, human rights, and social justice. Our study underscores the importance of creating inclusive spaces for collective action to effectively combat anti-gender narratives. It also calls for solidarity between feminists and LGBT+ communities, emphasizing the need to address broader issues underlying anti-gender mobilizations. In addition, this collective volume explores the personal stories and testimonies of activists through interviews, providing a personal dimension to the empirical and theoretical discussions. These narratives offer insights into the lived experiences of those on the frontlines, including their motivations, the emotional and psychological toll of their activism, and their resilience in striving for a more inclusive society, despite facing intense opposition to their efforts.

REFERENCES

- Anatrella, T. (2011). *Gender—La controversa*. Tequi.
- Anatrella, T. (2015). *La teoria del “gender” e l’origine dell’omosessualità*. San Paolo Edizioni.
- Ayoub, P. M., & Stoeckl, K. (2024). *The global fight against LGBTI rights*. New York University Press.
- Beck, D., Habed, A. J., & Henninger, A. (Eds.). (2024). *Blurring boundaries—‘Anti-gender’ ideology meets feminist and LGBTIQ+ discourses*. Verlag Barbara Budrich.
- Benetka, G., & Schor-Tschudnowskaja, A. (2023). Post-truth and scientific authority. *Cultura & Psyché*, 4(1), 133–144. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43638-023-00076-0>
- Bob, C. (2012). *The global right wing and the clash of world politics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bogaards, M., & Pető, A. (2022). Gendering de-democratization: Gender and illiberalism in post-communist Europe. *Politics and Governance*, 10(4), 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v10i4.6245>
- Bouvar, A., De Proost, M., & Norocel, O. C. (2019). I’ve got gender and I do not hesitate to use it. *Journal of the International Network of Sexual Ethics and Politics*, 7, 1–19.
- Buss, D., & Herman, D. (2003). *Globalizing family values: The Christian right in international politics*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Cabral Grinspan, M., Eloit, I., Paternotte, D., & Verloo, M. (2023). Exploring TERFnesses. *DiGeSt—Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies*, 10(2). <https://doi.org/10.21825/digest.90008>
- Case, M. A. (2011). After gender and deconstruction of man—The Vatican’s nightmare vision of the gender agenda for the law. *Pace Law Review*, 31(3), 802–817.
- Case, M. A. (2016). The role of the popes in the invention of complementarity and the Vatican’s anathematization of gender. *Religion & Gender*, 6(2), 155–172.
- Case, M. A. (2019). Transformations in the Vatican’s war on “gender ideology”. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 44(3), 639–664. <https://doi.org/10.1086/701498>
- Correa, S. (2022). “Ideología de género”. Una genealogía de la hidra. In M. C. Fernandez & C. V. Solis (Eds.), *La reacción patriarcal: Neoliberalismo autoritario, politización religiosa y nuevas derechas* (pp. 83–113). Bellaterra.
- Corrêa, S., Paternotte, D., & House, C. (2023). Dr Frankenstein’s hydra. In *Routledge handbook of sexuality, gender, health and rights* (pp. 484–493). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003278405-55>
- Crouch, C. (2004). *Post-democracy*. Polity.

- Datta, N. (2021). *Tip of the iceberg: Religious extremist funders against human rights for sexuality and reproductive health in Europe 2009–2018*. European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights. <https://www.epf-web.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/Tip%20of%20the%20Iceberg%20August%202021%20Final.pdf>
- della Porta, D. (2020). Conceptualising backlash movements: A (patch-worked) perspective from social movement studies. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 22(4), 585–597. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1369148120947360>
- Dietze, G., & Roth, J. (2020). In G. Dietze & J. Roth (Eds.), *Right-wing populism and gender* (Gender studies). Transcript. <http://cup.columbia.edu/book/right-wing-populism-and-gender/9783837649802>
- Edenborg, E. (2021). Anti-gender politics as discourse coalitions: Russia’s domestic and international promotion of “traditional values”. *Problems of Post-Communism*, 70(2), 175–184. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2021.1987269>
- Fassin, É. (2020). Campagnes anti-genre, populisme et néolibéralisme en Europe et en Amérique latine. *Revue Internationale et Stratégique*, 119(3), 79–87. <https://doi.org/10.3917/ris.119.0079>
- Garbagnoli, S. (2016). Against the Heresy of Immanence: Vatican’s ‘gender’ as a new rhetorical device against the denaturalization of the sexual order. *Religion and Gender*, 6(2), 187–204.
- Garbagnoli, S. (2017). Italy as a lighthouse: Anti-gender protests between the “anthropological question” and national identity. In R. Kuhar & D. Paternotte (Eds.), *Anti-gender campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against equality* (pp. 151–174). Rowman & Littlefield International.
- Ghodsee, K. (2014). A tale of “two totalitarianisms”: The crisis of capitalism and the historical memory of communism. *History of the Present*, 4(2), 115–142.
- Graff, A., & Korolczuk, E. (2017). “Worse than Communism and Nazism put together”: War on gender in Poland. In R. Kuhar & D. Paternotte (Eds.), *Anti-gender campaigns in Europe* (pp. 175–193). Rowman & Littlefield International.
- Graff, A., & Korolczuk, E. (2022). *Anti-gender politics in the populist moment*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003133520>
- Graff, A., & Korolczuk, E. (2024). ‘The west is trying too hard’: Gender and the right-wing critique of globalization. *Critical Sociology*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08969205241260001>
- Graff, A., Kapur, R., & Walters, S. D. (2019). Introduction: Gender and the rise of the global right. *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 44(3), 541–560. <https://doi.org/10.1086/701152>
- Greskovits, B. (2015). The hollowing and backsliding of democracy in East Central Europe. *Global Policy*, 6(1), 28–37.

- Grzebalska, W., & Pető, A. (2018). The gendered modus operandi of the illiberal transformation in Hungary and Poland. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 68, 164–172. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2017.12.001>
- Grzebalska, W., & Soós, E.-P. (2016). *Conservatives vs. the "Culture of Death": How progressives handled the war on "gender"?* Foundation for European Progressive Studies. Retrieved September 12, 2024, from <https://efps-europe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Conservatives-vs.-the-22culture-of-death22.-How-progressives-handled-the-war-on-22gender22.pdf>
- Grzebalska, W., Kováts, E., & Pető, A. (2017, January 13). *Gender as symbolic glue: How 'gender' became an umbrella term for the rejection of the (neo)liberal order*. Political Critique: Long Reads, Network 4 Debate. Retrieved September 12, 2024, from <https://politicalcritique.org/long-read/2017/gender-as-symbolic-glue-how-gender-became-an-umbrella-term-for-the-rejection-of-the-neoliberal-order/>
- Hajek, K., & Dombrowski, V. (2022). Contesting the meaning of gender: Right-wing populism and gender in Germany. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 95, 102633. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2022.102633>
- Henninger, A. (2022). Marriage equality in Germany: Conservative normalisation instead of successful anti-gender mobilisation. *German Politics*, 31(1), 79–100. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2021.1992389>
- Hodžić, A., & Štulhofer, A. (2017). Embryo, Teddy Bear-centaur and the constitution: Mobilizations against “gender ideology” and sexual permissiveness in Croatia. In R. Kuhar & D. Paternotte (Eds.), *Anti-gender campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against equality* (pp. 59–78). Rowman & Littlefield.
- Holvikivi, A., Holzberg, B., & Ojeda, T. (Eds.). (2024). *Transnational anti-gender politics: Feminist solidarity in times of global attacks* (Thinking Gender in Transnational Times). Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-54223-7>
- John Paul II, PP. (1995). *Evangelium Vitae*. Retrieved September 12, 2024, from https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html
- Kalm, S., & Meeuwisse, A. (2023). Transcalar activism contesting the liberal international order: The case of the world congress of families. *Social Politics*, 30(2), 556–579. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxad001>
- Korolczuk, E. (2020). Counteracting challenges to gender equality in the era of anti-gender campaigns: Competing gender knowledges and affective solidarity. *Social Politics*, 27(4), 694–717. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxaa021>
- Kováts, E. (2018). Questioning consensus: Right-wing populism, anti-populism, and the threat of ‘gender ideology’. *Sociological Research Online*, 23(2), 528–538. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1360780418764735>
- Kovats, E. (2022). Only ! Know my gender: The individualist turn in gender theory and politics, and the right-wing opposition. *Intersections: East European*

- Journal of Society and Politics*, 8(1), 110–127. <https://doi.org/10.17356/icejsp.v8i1.448>
- Kováts, E., & Pöim, M. (2015). *Gender as symbolic glue*. FEPS, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/budapest/11382.pdf>
- Kováts, E., & Zacharenko, E. (2021). The right-wing opposition to “gender” in the light of the ambiguity of the meaning of the term in EU documents. *Politické Vedy*, 24(4), 56–82.
- Krizsan, A., & Roggeband, C. (2018). Towards a conceptual framework for struggles over democracy in backsliding states: Gender equality policy in Central Eastern Europe. *Politics and Governance*, 6(3), 90–100. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v6i3.1414>
- Kuhar, R. (2017). Changing gender several times a day: The anti-gender movement in Slovenia. In R. Kuhar & D. Paternotte (Eds.), *Anti-gender campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against equality* (pp. 215–232). Rowman & Littlefield International.
- Kuhar, R., & Antić Gaber, M. (2022). Women as a linguistic footnote: Equality fatigue in the debate on gender-sensitive language in Slovenia. *Gender and Language*, 16(3), 241–264. <https://doi.org/10.1558/genl.21680>
- Kuhar, R., & Paternotte, D. (2017). In R. Kuhar & D. Paternotte (Eds.), *Anti-gender campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against equality*. Rowman & Littlefield International.
- Lavizzari, A. (2020). *Protesting gender: The LGBTIQ movement and its opponents in Italy*. Routledge.
- Lombardo, E., Kantola, J., & Rubio-Marin, R. (2021). De-democratization and opposition to gender equality politics in Europe. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, 28(3), 521–531. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxab030>
- Mair, P. (2013). *Ruling the void: The hollowing of western democracy*. Verso.
- Martinsson, L., & Ericson, M. (2023). ‘Fight pandemics with protective masks or gender?’ Emerging collective identities and anti-gender movements on Twitter during the COVID-19 crisis in Sweden. *Feminist Media Studies*, 23(5), 2011–2027. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.2009898>
- Mayer, S., & Sauer, B. (2017). “Gender ideology” in Austria: Coalitions around an empty signifier. In R. Kuhar & D. Paternotte (Eds.), *Anti-gender campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against equality* (pp. 23–40). Rowman & Littlefield.
- Möser, C., Ramme, J., & Takács, J. (Eds.). (2022). *Paradoxical right-wing sexual politics in Europe*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Moss, K. (2017). Russia as the Saviour of European civilization: Gender and the geopolitics of traditional values. In R. Kuhar & D. Paternotte (Eds.), *Anti-gender campaigns in Europe* (pp. 195–214). Rowman & Littlefield International.
- Mouffe, C. (2013). *Agonistics: Thinking the world politically*. Verso.
- Mouffe, C. (2018). *For a left populism*. Verso.

- Nicholas, L., & Agius, C. (2018). #Notallmen, #Menenism, manospheres and unsafe spaces: Overt and subtle masculinism in anti-“PC” discourse. In *The persistence of global masculinism* (pp. 31–59). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-68360-7_2
- Norocel, O. C., & Băluță, I. (2023). Retrogressive mobilization in the 2018 “referendum for family” in Romania. *Problems of Post-Communism*, 70(2), 153–162. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2021.1987270>
- Norris, P., & Inglehart, R. (2019). *Cultural backlash: Trump, Brexit, and authoritarian populism*. Cambridge University Press.
- O’Leary, D. (1995). *Gender: The deconstruction of women: Analysis of the gender perspective in preparation for the fourth world conference on women, Beijing, China, September, 1995*. https://books.google.si/books?id=NcV_GwAACAAJ
- Obst, M. (2017). How opposition to gender and feminism emerged in Spain. *Feminism and Gender Democracy*. Retrieved September 12, 2024, from <https://www.gwi-boell.de/en/node/10395>
- Obst, M. (2024). Not in the mood for gender and feminism. Exploring affect and expertise through Spanish anti-gender movements. *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 104, 102892. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsfi.2024.102892>
- Orbán, V. (2023). *Speech by prime minister Viktor Orbán at the opening of the CPAC Hungary conference*. Retrieved September 12, 2024, from <https://miniszterelnok.hu/en/speech-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-at-the-opening-of-the-cpac-hungary-conference/>
- Pajnik, M. (2023). Transformations of the media sphere: Amplifying opportunity structures for populism. In P. Diehl & B. Bargetz (Eds.), *The complexity of populism* (pp. 161–177). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003302513-13>
- Pajnik, M., Kuhar, R., & Smrdelj, R. (2025). Gender ideology as a frame repertoire: Transversal instrumentalization of gender equality. *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research*. (In the peer review process.)
- Paternotte, D. (2015). Blessing the crowds: Catholic mobilisations against gender in Europe. In S. Hark & P.-I. Villa (Eds.), *Anti-Genderismus* (pp. 129–147). transcript Verlag. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783839431443>
- Paternotte, D. (2023). Victor Frankenstein and his creature: The many lives of ‘gender ideology’. *International Review of Sociology*, 33(1), 80–104. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03906701.2023.2187833>
- Paternotte, D., & Kuhar, R. (2017a). “Gender ideology” in movement: Introduction. In R. Kuhar & D. Paternotte (Eds.), *Anti-gender campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against equality* (pp. 1–22). Rowman & Littlefield International.

- Paternotte, D., & Kuhar, R. (2017b). The anti-gender movement in comparative perspective. In R. Kuhar & D. Paternotte (Eds.), *Anti-gender campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against equality* (pp. 253–276). Rowman & Littlefield International.
- Paternotte, D., & Kuhar, R. (2018). Disentangling and locating the “global right”: Anti-gender campaigns in Europe. *Politics and Governance*, 6(3), 6–19. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v6i3.1557>
- Paternotte, D., & Verloo, M. (2021). De-democratization and the politics of knowledge: Unpacking the cultural Marxism narrative. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, 28(3), 556–578. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxab025>
- Patiño, M. E. (2024). Citizenship of the conservative movements in Mexico and defense of the formation of the family: The case of Frente Nacional por la Familia. *Religions*, 15(4), 410. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15040410>
- Perger, N., & Smrdelj, R. (2025). ‘First our children, then our gender’: Anti-gender mobilization in Slovenia. In R. Kuhar & A. Zaharijević (Eds.), *Anti-gender mobilizations in post-Yugoslav space*. Palgrave.
- Pető, A. (2015). “Anti-gender” mobilisational discourse of conservative and far right parties as a challenge for progressive politics. In E. Kováts & M. Pöim (Eds.), *Gender as symbolic glue* (pp. 126–131). FEPS, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.
- Pető, A. (2021). Gender and illiberalism. In A. Sajó, R. Uitz, & S. Holmes (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of illiberalism* (pp. 313–325). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367260569-24>
- Popič, D., & Gorjanc, V. (2022). Corpus-linguistic analysis of speech communities on anti-gender discourse in Slovene. *Gender a Vyzkum/Gender and Research*, 23(2), 140–166. <https://doi.org/10.13060/gav.2022.020>
- Rétiová, A. S. (2022). “A milestone in the history of Slovakia”: Two narratives about the 2015 referendum on the family in Slovakia. *Sociologický Časopis/ Czech Sociological Review*, 58(3), 309–334.
- Rosenkranz, G. B., & della Porta, D. (Eds.). (2024). *The feminist movement in time and space: A European perspective*. Palgrave.
- Sanders, R., & Jenkins, L. D. (2022). Special issue introduction: Contemporary international anti-feminism. *Global Constitutionalism*, 11(3), 369–378. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S2045381722000144>
- Sauer, B. (2019). Anti-feminist mobilization in Europe. Struggle for a new political hegemony?; [Anti-feministische Mobilisierung in Europa. Kampf um eine neue politische Hegemonie?]. *Zeitschrift Fur Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft*, 13(3), 339–352. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12286-019-00430-8>
- Sauer, B. (2020). Authoritarian right-wing populism as masculinist identity politics. The role of affects. In G. Dietze & J. Roth (Eds.), *Right-wing populism and gender* (pp. 23–40). Transcript Verlag.

- Schäfer, A. (2022). Cultural backlash? How (not) to explain the rise of authoritarian populism. *British Journal of Political Science*, 52(4), 1977–1993. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123421000363>
- Stambolis-Ruhstorfer, M., & Tricou, J. (2017). Resisting “gender theory” in France: A fulcrum for religious action in secular society. In R. Kuhar & D. Paternotte (Eds.), *Anti-gender campaigns in Europe: mobilizing against equality* (pp. 79–98). Rowman & Littlefield.
- Stoeckl, K. (2020). The rise of the Russian Christian right: The case of the world congress of families. *Religion, State and Society*, 48(4), 223–238. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2020.1796172>
- Strehovec, T. (2013). Zakonska zveza v perspektivi drugega vatikanskega koncila. *Bogoslovni Vestnik*, 2, 233–249.
- Takács, J., Fobear, K., & Schmitsek, S. (2022). Resisting genderphobia in Hungary. *Politics and Governance*, 10(4), 38–48. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v10i4.5528>
- Unal, D. (2021). The masculinist restoration project in the rhetoric of anti-gender movements: The case of Turkey. In O. Hakola, J. Salminen, J. Turpeinen, & O. Winberg (Eds.), *The culture and politics of populist masculinities* (pp. 67–88). Lexington Books.
- Valkovičová, V., & Meier, P. (2022). “Everyone has the right to their opinion”: “Gender ideology” rhetoric and epistemic struggles in Slovak policymaking. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, 29(3), 1080–1099. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxab008>
- Verloo, M. (Ed.). (2018). *Varieties of opposition to gender equality in Europe*. Routledge.
- Vučković Juroš, T., & Gergorić, M. (2025). Mobilizing the womb: Anti-abortion activism and the institutionalization of the anti-gender movement in Croatia. In R. Kuhar & A. Zaharijević (Eds.), *Anti-gender mobilizations in post-Yugoslav space*. Palgrave.
- Witoszek, N. (2019). *The origins of anti-authoritarianism*. Routledge.
- Wodak, R. (2015). *The politics of fear: What right-wing populist discourses mean*. Sage.
- Zacharenko, E. (2019, September 30). *The neoliberal fuel to the anti-gender movement*. IPS Journal. Retrieved September 12, 2024, from <https://www.ips-journal.eu/regions/europe/the-neoliberal-fuel-to-the-anti-gender-movement-3747/>
- Zakaria, F. (2007). *The future of freedom: Illiberal democracy at home and abroad*. W. W. Norton.
- Zaremborg, G., Tabbush, C., & Friedman, E. J. (2021). Feminism(s) and anti-gender Backlash: Lessons from Latin America. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 23(4), 527–534. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2021.1956093>

- Žižek, S. (2022, August 3). What the “woke” left and the alt-right share. *Project Syndicate*. Retrieved September 12, 2024, from <https://prosyn.org/98c6Ncd>
- Žuk, P., & Žuk, P. (2019). ‘Murderers of the unborn’ and ‘sexual degenerates’: Analysis of the ‘anti-gender’ discourse of the catholic church and the nationalist right in Poland. *Critical Discourse Studies*, 17(5), 566–588. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2019.1676808>

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if you modified the licensed material. You do not have permission under this license to share adapted material derived from this chapter or parts of it.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter’s Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter’s Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copy-right holder.





Contentious Gender Politics in Italy: Feminist Responses to Anti-Gender Mobilizations

*Anna Lavizzari, Anastasia Barone,
and Giada Bonu Rosenkranz*

INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines the responses of feminist movements to the growing strength of anti-gender politics in Italy. Anti-gender movements in the country have increasingly expanded starting from the 2010s. While this process of growth and consolidation has initially taken the shape of grass-roots mobilizations, it has recently culminated in the establishment of anti-gender influence in parliamentary politics, especially thanks to their

A. Lavizzari (✉)

Department of Political Science and Administration, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Madrid, Spain

e-mail: alavizza@ucm.es

A. Barone • G. Bonu Rosenkranz

Faculty of Political and Social Sciences, Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa, Italy

e-mail: anastasia.barone@sns.it; giada.bonu@sns.it

© The Author(s) 2025

R. Smrdelj, R. Kuhar (eds.), *Anti-Gender Mobilizations in Europe and the Feminist Response*, Palgrave Studies in European Political Sociology, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-87693-6_2

25

alliance with populist right-wing parties such as the League and Brothers of Italy. As has been widely argued, the strengthening of anti-gender politics has often resulted in attacks on women's and LGBT+ rights, as well as in the promotion of conservative ideas about gender roles. The Italian context is no exception: the institutionalization of anti-gender activism has given a significant impulse to the contraction of rights, especially in the realm of LGBT+ and reproductive rights. At the same time, the last decades have seen the resurgence of a strong and massive feminist movement in Italy. This new phase of mobilization was triggered by the increasing number of femicides and the emergence of a new transnational feminist wave, but it was also partly prompted by the threats that anti-gender groups and right-wing actors have enacted on previously established achievements and more generally on women's and LGBT+ rights. Although the feminist movement in Italy cannot be reduced to a reaction to a backlash, the role of anti-gender actors should not be underestimated when examining the specific strategies that have been increasingly adopted by the movement. Indeed, as a significant body of scholarly work has highlighted, within the intricate dynamics of sexual and gender politics, the interplay between pro-life, pro-family, religious, and conservative movements, and LGBT+, pro-choice, and progressive movements has a significant impact on the strategies adopted by feminist movements. Scholars in the field of social movement studies have developed concepts like spillover (Whittier, 2013), diffusion (McAdam & Rucht, 1993), and spin-off movements (McAdam, 1996) to understand the evolving interactions between different social movements. Furthermore, scholars have addressed movements' interaction through the analysis of movement and countermovement dynamics (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996). This approach allows for an understanding of how antagonist movements may influence one another. Scholars working in this field have underscored the impact of conservative movements on the political strategies and framing tactics employed by LGBT+ activists, as well as feminists and pro-choice advocates (for a review see Stone, 2016). Indeed, as opposing movements enter the public sphere, activists must navigate shifting political landscapes, introduce new frames, and manage the dynamics of contention. The clashes surrounding gender and sexual equality are therefore encapsulated within the framework of "contentious gender politics," defined as the ongoing contestation between movements representing opposing views on the institutional organization and discursive construction of gender (Lavizzari & Siročić, 2023).

To describe the contemporary political context, scholars have introduced the concept of backlash against gender politics (Faludi, 1991; Köttig et al., 2017). In Italy, this involves conservative and traditionalist actors, including religious movements, pro-life and anti-gender groups, as well as political parties and entities under the umbrella of the far-right, aligning on one side to oppose progressive gender policies. In particular, they target reproductive rights and bodily integrity, LGBT+ rights, kinship structures, sexual morality, and gender equality institutionalization. On the other side, they aim to advance a political, social, and economic agenda that is not only reactionary but actively seeks to reinforce the rights and privileges of those conforming to a cis-heteropatriarchal model, while punishing dissenters. Understanding the active agenda of anti-gender actors, as emphasized by Paternotte (2023), is crucial in grasping the nature of a political project grounded in gender ideology, akin to a creature with its own life—a Frankenstein’s monster—around which political positions, claims, and policy proposals are articulated beyond their reactionary nature. The concept of backlash, in this sense, along with the directionality of interactions between movements and counter-movements, needs to be contextualized within a framework of broader dynamics. It is not always possible to categorize the actions of anti-gender actors as solely reactionary, nor is it always feasible to consider progressive action as preceding.

Together with the rise and diffusion of anti-gender mobilizations, the literature addresses the increasing mobilizations of feminist movements in the wake of anti-austerity protests and the economic crisis (Bereni, 2016; Crossley & Hurwitz, 2013; Eschle & Bartlett, 2023). The critical juncture of 2015, marked by massive mobilizations in Latin America against gender-based violence and increasing social inequalities, spurred the transnational diffusion and global resurgence of feminist movements (Eschle, 2018; Eschle & Maignushca, 2018; Gago, 2020; Daby & Moseley, 2022). Mostly concerned with the rates of femicide and rape culture, these movements also engage with neoliberalism and the consequences of colonialism, extractivism, and multiple crises, such as the economic crisis and the pandemic (Gago, 2020; Weldon et al., 2023). Unlike before, the feminist movements adopted an intersectional perspective, disentangling the different axes of oppression that produce inequalities (Lépinard, 2020). In Italy, there was continuity between previous loose networks of groups and collectives and the mass mobilizations that started in 2016 with the feminist movement *Non Una di Meno* (Not One (Woman) Less, NUDM).

NUDM developed through significant protests—on 25 November, the International Day against Gender-Based Violence, and the global feminist strike on 8 March—and direct social action (Barone & Bonu, 2022). Given the increasing threats posed by anti-gender actors in the sphere of gender politics, and in particular concerning reproductive rights, health, LGBT+ rights, education, gender identity, and gender norms, feminist groups have frequently adopted responsive actions. Yet, the literature has not adequately investigated these responses, apart from some cases, such as the World Congress of Families in Verona (Cossutta & Habed, 2021). In addition, the scenario of feminist responses to anti-gender mobilizations is complicated by the presence of gender-critical feminists, whose positions on gender identity, surrogacy, and sex work have often produced unintended convergences with far-right, populist, and anti-gender groups (Gusmeroli, 2023).

Drawing on these considerations, the chapter explores the strategies that the feminist movement in Italy has adopted to counter anti-gender attacks. Firstly, our analysis acknowledges the gendered nature of opposing movements' interactions, as argued by scholars like Roggeband (2018) and Blais and Dupuis-Déri (2012). Secondly, it recognizes that such interactions involve a diverse array of actors, both formal and informal, within networks, coalitions, or alliances (Whittier, 1995). Thirdly, it emphasizes the interdependent nature of these interactions, where the tactical gains or losses of one movement can influence the strategic goals of another (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996). Lastly, it highlights the fluidity of movement dynamics, where a reacting movement may itself become a countermovement, illustrating the complex and co-dependent nature of these interactions over time.

Based on these premises, we outline certain aspects that can help us contextualize the dynamics between the opposing movements analyzed in this study. Indeed, as mentioned, the ability of each movement to act within a political framework, as well as the opportunity to confront its opponents, also depends on the nature, strategies employed, and resources available to each movement. Primarily, as discussed in the following sections, in the Italian context, the anti-gender movement and the feminist movement maintain very different relationships and positions concerning institutions. For example, the anti-gender movement has consistently focused on developing a political strategy aimed at engaging with major government institutions, through agenda-setting activities and lobbying, as well as forming alliances and influencing far-right political parties

through campaigns and electoral tools (Lavizzari, 2025). This aspect is followed by a varying degree of policy engagement, whereby the anti-gender movement has been able to carve out space for its actors and objectives within state institutions, universities, hospitals, etc., attaining positions of power and proposing public policies and laws. Conversely, from a historical perspective, the Italian movement has always refused to interact directly with institutions (Alonso et al., 2023). Compared to other countries, it is not possible to detect state feminism in Italy (Outshoorn & Kantola, 2007). This strategic choice has, on the one hand, allowed the preservation of a radical political culture and, on the other hand, prevented substantial improvements in terms of progressive gender policies.¹

Through our analysis, we detect two main types of protest strategies: confrontational and non-confrontational. Confrontational strategies are those through which the movement directly targets anti-gender actors, such as demonstrations, sit-ins, and other forms of street protest. Among these, we distinguish between loose, medium, and strong tactics. Non-confrontational strategies include direct social action, cultural initiatives, and camouflage within institutional channels. Throughout our examination, we also highlight the disparity in terms of resources that characterizes

¹The chapter is based on 20 interviews with Italian feminist activists and on data collected during co-creation labs with feminist associations. The age of the interviewees ranges from 27 to 74 years old. Concerning the sample of activists, most of them are part of Non Una di Meno (NUDM), which as of 2016 is the biggest and widespread feminist movement network in Italy. Among them, we aimed to cover various generations of activists as well as an adequate geographical spectrum, including Northern, Central, and Southern Italy. In the sample, we also included feminist collectives that are not necessarily part of NUDM, such as Cagne Sciolte, Consultoria Fam, the women's house Lucha Y Siesta, Laboratorio Smaschieramenti, Obiezione Respinta, Cà Nisciun È Fessa, and Radio Onda Rossa, depending on their expertise and themes and on the historical role in the Italian context. All of them work through horizontal structures, without formal hierarchies and division of roles. Thus, the interviewees define themselves as just activists of the movement/collective/group. Interviews have been anonymized. The interviewees are identified with the label FA (feminist activist), the name of the group, and the age of the interviewee. The interviews were conducted between 2023 and 2024.

Activists were asked about *their groups' organizational structures, the main issues they tackle, and the repertoires and strategies they adopt. Furthermore, we conducted two co-creation labs in July and December 2023 with feminists from associations active in the field of education. The labs aimed to produce a collectively written self-defense guide for teachers and educators active in the field of sexual education, as a way to counter and avoid the attacks and threats they face from anti-gender actors.*

the confrontation between the feminist and anti-gender movements. Indeed, feminist movements in Italy are essentially grassroots and have not established relationships with political parties or established a presence within institutions, while anti-gender movements have been able to benefit from both political and economic backing from institutional actors and political parties.

The first section of this chapter situates our research within theoretical developments about opposing movement dynamics to highlight the specific character of Italy's contentious gender politics. It also offers an overview of the Italian context, highlighting the contentious confrontation between anti-gender and feminist movements in the country. The second section delves into the examination of the evolution of anti-gender politics in Italy, showing the trajectory that the movement has followed during the last decade. The third section examines feminist responses to anti-gender movements.

THE ANTI-GENDER MOBILIZATION: CONSOLIDATION AND INSTITUTIONALIZATION

The mobilization against “gender ideology” has attracted the interest of several Italian scholars, mostly in the fields of sociology and political science. Since 2010, studies analyzing anti-gender campaigns in Italy have concentrated on three main lines of inquiry. The first focuses on the content of the anti-gender discourse and rhetoric, rooted in the Vatican's “gender ideology” rhetoric developed during the 1990s and subsequently adapted in the Italian national context by conservative religious organizations, as well as right-wing social and political actors (Garbagnoli, 2016; Garbagnoli & Prearo, 2018; Spallaccia, 2020; Colella, 2021). A second line of investigation has focused on the emergence and establishment of an anti-gender movement, including empirical findings on the main actors, their relation to the state and religious institutions, and their repertoires of action and claim-making strategies (Lavizzari, 2019; Prearo, 2020; Trappolin, 2022). Finally, later studies have paid increased attention to the alliance between anti-gender actors and Italian populist radical right parties, most notably the League and Brothers of Italy, focusing on the appropriation or instrumentalization of the anti-gender discourse by the parties' leaders and exponents in their attempt to qualify themselves as the political representatives of Italian Catholics (Bellè & Poggio, 2018; Lavizzari &

Prearo, 2019; Prearo, 2020; Serughetti, 2021; Giorgi, 2022; Trappolin, 2022). As Giorgia Serughetti (2020) explains

[t]he ‘gender’ favors the alliance between conservative forces also for its ability to bring together under a single label a plurality of controversial issues referable to the opposing camp of progressive forces. As an umbrella term, ‘gender’ is used with a semantic scope that goes beyond the strict reference to the family and sexual order, evoking a wider threat to the life of individuals and communities, for which responsibility is attributed to democratic-liberal thinking. (p. 121)

In the Italian context, religious authorities and the Vatican have historically played significant roles in deploying their power through Catholic morality and doctrine, intervening in the public debate at multiple levels, and determining a complex dialectic among social and political actors along the spectrum. The Church’s positioning in the Italian socio-political context has opened up structural opportunities and repertoires of action appealing not only to public opinion at large but also to decision-makers, resulting from powerful lobbying activities. A distinctive trait of the Italian landscape is the Catholic Church’s direct influence in the political activities of right-wing and center-left parties. This influence is the legacy of Christian Democracy, a post-war Christian democratic political party that played a leading role in the first phase of the Italian Republic for 50 years, until its dissolution in 1994 amid corruption scandals. After the party’s dissolution, many religious voters felt orphaned without a powerful Catholic party to support. Since then, politically committed Catholics have engaged in defending and promoting religious values in government policies, not as a single Catholic party, but dispersed throughout most of the parties along the political spectrum (Lavizzari & Prearo, 2019). In this context, as a consequence of the waning of conventional political influence through a single, hegemonic party, religious issues became highly politicized by different political entrepreneurs, including Catholic movements. The activism of this movement consists precisely in picking up the lines of the discourse elaborated by the Vatican on “gender theory” to make it an extra-ecclesiastical discourse mobilized in the streets and public squares, a discourse that responds to the desire for mobilization of the minoritarian and radical components of the Catholic people (Prearo, 2020, p. 116).

Since the success of the first national March for Life organized by the pro-life movement in 2011 and 2012, a segment of radical Catholics has

progressively coalesced around the anti-gender cause. The emergence of this new militant field unfolds also via the NGO-ization (Vaggione, 2005) of the Catholic movement, which since 2013 has established new satellite organizations, such as La Manif Pour Tous Italy. Moreover, the establishment of the anti-gender movement in the Italian landscape since the early 2010s has been favored by certain political opportunities. In this sense, we can consider the onset of the anti-gender mobilization as part of a political and public debate that has developed around a series of bills aimed at strengthening the institutional recognition of LGBT+ subjectivities through civil unions, the introduction of the crime of homotransphobia, and the introduction of gender and sex education in the national school system. These political circumstances shaped different phases of the anti-gender movement's evolution.

Although historical pro-life and Catholics groups had been active before, starting in 2013, the anti-gender movement entered a phase of expansion and consolidation, by which the newly created organizations such as La Manif Pour Tous Italia – Family Generation and the Committee to Defend Our Children (CDNF) initiated an intense cycle of protest mobilization, often mirroring strategies and argumentative elements of progressive movements. In this period, the Family Day rallies that took place in 2015 and 2016 were critical for the newly established organizations in their attempt to consolidate as key and visible actors in the public debate around gender issues. In May 2016, the Democratic Party, the center-left party in government at the time, approved the Law on Civil Partnership, which legally recognized and regulated same-sex civil unions. This political development sparked public confrontations between anti-gender groups and the progressive civil society, including feminist and LGBT+ groups. In the context of the contentious politics of gender in Italy at the time, the approval of the Law on Civil Partnership was a major political opportunity shift for both conflicting sides (Lavizzari & Siročić, 2023). From the anti-gender perspective, this quickly resulted in the need for a strategic turn toward the institutional arena, notably through lobbying with political parties, “contaminating” them with the movement's discourses, rhetoric, and, ultimately, pro-family and anti-gender programmatic points, and by providing voting guidance to voters. In this process of electoral mobilization, the anti-gender movement expanded the definition of the “fight against gender ideology” to encompass a wider range of issues, including women's rights, abortion, adoption, same-sex marriage,

surrogacy, and educational freedom, while linking these issues to a “decline in family values.”

In a subsequent phase between 2016 and 2018, the movement started to focus more consistently on the electoral arena, intensifying its efforts to cooperate with political parties, notably Matteo Salvini’s League, Silvio Berlusconi’s Go Italy, and Giorgia Meloni’s Brothers of Italy. Following the 2018 political elections, movement actors successfully infiltrate public offices and the political agenda of the government by leveraging years of lobbying and agenda-setting. Thanks mostly to its alliance with the League, the anti-gender movement was able to strengthen its influence over the agenda-setting process following the center-right coalition’s electoral triumph. Indeed, before the Italian elections on 4 March 2018, Massimo Gandolfini, the founder and leader of the CDFN and the major promoter of Family Day, explicitly invited Italian citizens to vote for center-right parties based on their commitment to the anti-gender movement’s values and goals—pro-life, pro-family, and freedom of education. Thus, beginning with the 2018 elections, the League facilitated candidates who supported anti-gender stances to run for public office. Among them was Simone Pillon, a well-known ultraconservative, homophobe, and anti-abortionist. In addition to being a prominent supporter of Family Day, he was also a member of the Neocatechumenal Way, a former Forum of the Families member, and the driving force behind the contentious Pillon Bill about joint parental custody. Another ultraconservative and pro-life leader, Lorenzo Fontana, was Minister of Family and Disability from 2018 to 2019 before taking over as President of the Chamber of Deputies in October 2022.

At the peak of this phase of consolidating movement and parties’ relations, at the 2019 World Congress of Families in Verona, Giorgia Meloni openly backed her party’s cooperation with the movement. According to several scholars, the World Congress of Families in Verona is the League’s and Brothers of Italy’s most visible endeavor supporting the anti-gender movement (Pavan, 2020; Cossutta & Habed, 2021; Trappolin, 2022). In the end, the outcomes of the September 2022 political elections, in which Giorgia Meloni’s Brothers of Italy prevailed, represent a continuation of the preceding phase but also a definite demonstration of the movement’s institutionalization and the successful integration of the anti-gender agenda into the platforms of the ruling parties. Under Meloni’s government, the presence of anti-gender exponents in public offices is consolidated through the appointment of key positions: Eugenia Roccella,

spokesperson and supporter of the Family Day staunchly opposed to abortion and LGBT+ rights, as Minister for Family, Natality, and Equal Opportunities; Alfredo Mantovano, an active member of the Committee to Defend Our Children and President of the Catholic jurists' network Livatino Studies Centre, as undersecretary to the Prime Minister's office; Lorenzo Fontana as President of the Chamber of Deputies; and Massimo Gandolfini, although not directly running in the elections, as a consultant for Anti-Drug Policies at the Prime Minister's office.

FEMINIST MOVEMENTS' RESPONSES TO ANTI-GENDER POLITICS

From a global perspective, the reaction to gender backlash and anti-gender mobilizations can be considered one of the components that triggered the resurgence of feminist movements. The re-emergence of massive feminist mobilizations over the last decade was often prompted by growing attacks on women's and LGBT+ rights. For example, feminist movements mobilized in Poland against attacks on abortion rights, and mobilizations in Argentina and Brazil targeted the reactionary backlash against women and LGBT+ people (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Corrêa, 2021). The latest wave of massive feminist mobilizations in Italy, starting in 2016, was strongly influenced by these developments unfolding around the globe:

The Argentine movement provided significant impetus. In Argentina, there was the issue of the abortion law and the referendum; in Poland, there was an attack on freedom of choice; in Spain, there was the Green Wave, along with various other feminist social movements. Thus, 2016 was a year when the stars aligned, and we decided to take a chance and organize a national assembly and protest in Rome to bring together feminist activists. (FA9, NUDM, 32)

The reaction against anti-gender movements is therefore part of the impulse from which the new feminist wave arises. As we previously highlighted, anti-gender actors succeeded in gaining access to institutional settings, achieving positive cultural and political outcomes, and actively infiltrating key public institutions, such as public schools and the national healthcare system. In this section, we discuss the different strategies that the feminist movement has adopted in Italy in reaction to anti-gender attacks. We identify two main types of strategies: confrontational and

non-confrontational tactics. The choice of strategy depends on the type of attack, the networks involved, the context, and the goal of the mobilization (Tarrow, 1993; Taylor & Van Dyke, 2004; Jasper, 2004; McAdam & Tarrow, 2018). Due to the increasing level of diffusion of anti-gender groups, feminist movements have had to adopt and adapt their strategies depending on the expected goal and the tactical evaluation of the situation.

Confrontational Tactics: Public Protests and Counter-Actions

Confrontational tactics are actions oriented to directly address, denounce, and attack claims, events, and protests of the anti-gender movement. Confrontational tactics can take several forms: calling a protest in response to an event; going directly to the venue of an event, e.g., a book presentation, and disrupting it with banners, choirs, and interventions; or staging creative performances to denounce actions of anti-gender movements. In some cases, these actions take place through direct interaction, i.e., actors from both sides arguing with or confronting each other, while in others, the action may take place at a distance, without direct interaction.

To disentangle these strategies, we can differentiate between *loose confrontational action*, *medium-intensity confrontational action*, and *strong confrontational action*. This categorization depends on the time and space of mobilizations. The dimension of time refers to actions that occur with short notice or are planned over a long period. Space, on the other hand, concerns the setting where actions take place, which also shapes the form of the action and the interactions between movements. In the case of loose confrontational action, the choice to intervene by feminist groups can happen at any moment, as a reaction to relevant news in the media, or because activists learn through informal channels of an anti-gender initiative taking place. The response is therefore not structured and organized but takes the form of an immediate intervention with few resources (e.g., a few flyers and a megaphone). As one activist explains:

We went to annoy a group linked to the churches that we knew would be collecting signatures for the law for listening to the fetal heartbeat, because a girl from that neighborhood wrote to us saying: ‘I come from a super-Catholic family, I can’t take it, my parents told me that there is this collection of signatures, so please we have to react’. So, we went to annoy them with a banner, leaflets, and papering the area a bit. (FA15, CNF, 27)

This type of reaction is often linked to territorial contexts and thus to the daily politics of feminist groups, which monitor and intervene in the dynamics of their neighborhoods. *Loose confrontational actions* can occur on the spot, without prior structured organization, e.g., through writing on walls or shutters or disruptive actions circumspect in time and space: “I remember this moment during the first demonstration on 8 March when we wrote with pink paint on the objector pharmacy [pharmacy refusing to supply the morning-after contraceptive pill] in the center of Pisa” (FA5, NUDM, 31). As another interviewee says, already in the early 2000s there were widespread actions in front of hospitals for the induction of the RU486 (abortion pill), which often took place in a form that was not entirely organized and planned but equally confrontational:

Pillolissima [big abortion pill], in 2009 had started right in front of the hospitals, so in the same night we went to make the writings, to attach the banners, to throw leaflets in front of all the hospitals in Rome. That was a lot of fun. Those years we did a lot of things all over the city. (FA7, ROR, 43)

More recently, during the demonstration on 25 November, a spontaneous action attacked with smoke bombs the headquarters of the Pro Life and Family group, the largest anti-gender association active in Italy, while also writing on the shutter. In explaining the action, one of the interviewees reports that within the mass context of the demonstration, there were actions of pure and spontaneous rage, such as the attack on Pro Life and Family, which were not necessarily planned but escalated in conflict at the moment:

NUDM is the movement that has comrades who rightly want to break down the portcullis of the ProLife headquarter. The portcullis is not the main point, and it’s not always the movement’s most representative practice, but that’s also an option. (FA18, NUDM, 33)

In this set of tactics, we can also include cultural subversion, which means the creative, ironic, and debunking creation of performances and actions toward ridiculing the claims and actions of anti-gender movements. A recurring practice of anti-gender movements is the posting of huge posters on city street bulletin boards attacking abortion: “Though their posters are increasingly present around the city, the anti-gender movement is not readily apparent – that is, they don’t occupy the streets

or engage in other similar activities” (FA18, NUDM, 29). Indeed, although anti-gender movements are less often directly present and visible through public events in the streets, they nevertheless manage to be strongly present in the public space through the massive use of posters on walls. Very often, feminist groups have responded to the hanging of posters by ironically altering them, for example through the practice of lettering, as happened recently in Pisa. On a poster with a picture of a fetus that says “9 out of 10 biologists recognize me as a human being, how about you?” activists affixed lettering that says “10 out of 10 women must have the right to choose.”

Medium-intensity confrontational actions require higher organizational structure; they often imply coalition-building, an already existing repertoire of action, and resources. They can take place as a reaction to a specific type of anti-gender action—as we will see with the case of the Standing Sentinels—or they can happen through the creation of a campaign that regularly takes place as a response to anti-gender politics. As an example, an interviewee mentions the case of the Tuscany region that voted to finance on a regular basis anti-gender associations to get into hospitals and public health clinics. The practice of allowing anti-gender and anti-choice associations to access public institutions and public funding has been increasingly implemented in Italy. To react to this public funding expenditure, local feminist movements went to every session of the regional council where the allocation of funds was discussed, ridiculing the claims and actions of anti-gender movements:

Our experience concerns Tuscany, where we identified the Region as the counterpart. A few years ago, we found out that the then president of the region, Rossi (of the Democratic Party), was going to finance the Forum of Families, which is this association of anti-abortion associations, with 195 thousand euros of public money for three years. This resolution was about to pass, which would have given 200,000 Euros of public money to anti-abortion associations to get in through the window, to allow them to increase their economic and political power in the region. In response, we formed a coalition comprising all the various Tuscan nodes [of Non Una Di Meno]. It was one of the first instances that we all took coordinated action, preventing the municipal councils from discussing this financing at meetings. (FA5, NUDM, 31)

Medium-intensity confrontational tactics are planned over a period of time, and involve a certain level of organization, the creation of networks

and alliances (e.g., between feminist groups in the Tuscany region), as well as repertoires of actions (such as creative performances with which to interrupt regional council meetings). Another example of medium-intensity tactics has been the response to the action of the Standing Sentinels, a campaign carried out by anti-gender groups that between 2014 and 2015 gathered in the squares of cities in Italy, standing at a regular distance from each other, reading a book for an hour in silence, in the name of freedom of thought and expression against the spread of gender ideology. Feminist groups reacted by often organizing noisy and ironic mobilizations at the same time in adjacent squares, with the aim of disrupting and denouncing the anti-gender action. Again, actions were organized over a period of time, through coalition-building between feminist and LGBT+ actors and a shared repertoire of actions.

Strong confrontational actions, on the other hand, are prepared over a longer time frame, and involve coalition-building at local, national, and transnational levels, a structured communication campaign, adequate resources for public protest preparation, and a clear, vocal, and confrontational public demonstration. In Italy, this was the case, for example, from 29–31 March 2019, when, on the occasion of the World Congress of Families, an international network of anti-gender and anti-feminist movements, feminist movements organized a public counter-protest called “Verona Transfeminist City.” Over the three days, the feminist movement organized art exhibitions, book presentations, events, a demonstration that brought together more than 100,000 people, and a transnational assembly with participants from Latin America, Poland, Kurdistan, Turkey, Switzerland, Spain, and Andorra (Cossutta & Habed, 2021). “The International Congress of Families in Verona had to face a very strong response with a national demonstration of hundreds of thousands of people from all over Italy” (FA5, NUDM, 31). The choice of strong confrontational tactics brings in a symbolic level—responding to the display of strength by showing the feminist movement’s strength; a political dimension—representing the opposition to anti-gender policies and the existence of different ways of life and perspectives on social justice; and a strategic element—the creation of an emblematic case for shedding light on the transnational connections between right-wing and religiously inspired movements in the field of gender politics.

There, the movement had a significant impact. The movement succeeded in bringing a genuine uprising against everything that was stated there to

Veronese streets. It was crucial to something that went beyond simply being a congress held in Italy; it was also the dissemination of papers and arguments concerning the common theme that brought together all of these right-wing, anti-choice, and gender-repositioning movements abroad. I mean, it raised awareness of the ways in which these things will converge. (FA2, NUDM, 62)

Yet, successful strong confrontational tactics also require continuity of framing and actions, as one interviewee explains in the case of Verona. Opposition to religiously inspired movements has always been part of the history of feminist and LGBT+ movements, so it is from that history that it was possible to build a highly confrontational and successful moment in 2019:

The pro-life movement and clericalism are inextricably linked, that is, this interdependence between church and right. A very pertinent demonstration to the LGBT+ cause took place in Verona in 1995. It was the only event that I can remember from the 1990s that was not a Pride. It is the sole event that did not originate from large organizations, and it did so directly against the powerful Catholic fundamentalist groups that operate in that region. In actuality, they created the World Family Conference 25 years later. There, the topics are identical. The passage of twenty-five years made them old or transformed persons. Therefore, I thought it was crucial that the feminist movement respond, and I think that this contentious attitude against pro-life groups has always been a part of feminist movements. (FA8, ROR, 54)

The interplay between loose, medium-intensity, and strong confrontational tactics has often represented an overall key strategy to obtain fundamental outcomes. This was the case, for instance, for the proposed amendment to the Family Code by Senator Simone Pillon, an exponent of the anti-gender movements, aimed at introducing Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS) as a tool for disempowering women with children during the process of separation or divorce from violent husbands. PAS, indeed, is often used to discredit women who press charges against their partner for domestic violence, with the accusation of alienating their children's relationship with the father (Abrahams, 2021). As much as the response was a medium-term campaign—at the time of the debate in the courtroom—often actions were organized with very little notice, on the spot, to react to last-minute events, such as when Senator Pillon spoke at a public meeting or presentation. Furthermore, the fight against Pillon's proposed

amendment was one of the key claims of the campaign that led to the “Verona Transfeminist City” demonstration that we just mentioned as an example of strong confrontational tactics. This mix of strategies, loose, medium-intensity, and strong, has brought about the withdrawal of the proposal by the senator. This was a key outcome for the feminist movement, which provided it with the perception of a growing climate of consensus around their proposals and the need to adapt strategies to the context, as in this case through more direct confrontation with institutions:

Things were saved. The previous minister Pillon, who introduced PAS, attempted to pass it into law at one point, but this was stopped [by NUDM]. These things did not exist seven years ago, and since we now have such a strong political influence, we are really considering whether to implement our reactions to threats and attacks systemically. Maybe we should try to engage with the opposing side more on some matters, like PAS, or the whole problem of secondary victimization in the legal system. Of course, by violence I mean courts, magistrates, judges, police officers, and all other perpetrators of violence. (FA5, NUDM, 31)

As the analysis has shown, in some cases, feminist responses to anti-gender actors have been able to counter and stop key attempts at the level of policies and laws. More broadly, these different strategies have resulted in increased awareness of several issues, such as reproductive rights and women’s and LGBT+ rights in general. Furthermore, responses to anti-gender actors have fostered and strengthened coalition-building and facilitated the establishment of transnational networks among feminist actors worldwide.

Non-Confrontational Tactics: Direct Social Action, Culture, Institutions

While confrontation and public protest have been among the main strategies adopted by the feminist and LGBT+ movements in the country, activists have also often resorted to *direct social action* (DSA) as a strategy (Bosi & Zamponi, 2015; Zamponi, 2019). With this term, we refer to those initiatives aimed at providing peer-to-peer and mutualistic support. The adoption of DSA has been particularly relevant in the field of health. As mentioned earlier, the health issue has been a key site of contention for the feminist movement in Italy. The increased strength of anti-choice actors

has threatened the right to abortion by infiltrating public hospitals and clinics and by promoting public campaigns blaming women who interrupt their pregnancies. Together with the growing presence of conscientious objectors within hospitals and clinics, the presence of anti-choice actors within health facilities and the proliferation of so-called centers supporting life have contributed to hindering the right to abortion in the country. In response to this situation, the movement has developed different forms of DSA aiming at providing peer-to-peer support to users to obtain safe access to abortion.

Among the initiatives adopted in this context, the practice of *monitoring and filtering* has been of particular significance. The movement has engaged in extensive activities with the aim of gathering information about healthcare facilities and constructing autonomous maps that could act as a filter preventing other users from undergoing negative experiences. For example, feminist activists have started to systematically monitor the presence of conscientious objectors through the bottom-up creation of virtual maps. In fact, in Italy, conscientious objectors are not officially listed by the government or by public hospitals. Consequently, one of the key challenges in accessing abortion services concerns the lack of information about the location of non-conscientious objectors. The *Obiezione Respinta* (Objection Rejected) collective started creating a digital and bottom-up map in 2016, as a reaction to the negative experience activists themselves had undergone:

Obiezione Respinta is a project of mapping conscientious objection in Italy, born in Pisa from embodied experiences, in the sense that it emerged from a group of students who, in one of these moments, let's say of self-consciousness related to health, realized...we realized, that it had happened to several of us not to receive the morning-after pill at the pharmacy, or to have had bad experiences concerning voluntary termination of pregnancy. (FA9, OR, 33)

The map consists of green and red pins that identify the facilities where abortion is granted and easily accessible as well as those where conscientious objectors are present. The pins are created based on users' experiences, collected via anonymous testimonies. This self-organized map represents a technological tool to avoid and circumvent the obstacles that users may encounter when aiming to interrupt a pregnancy. The map originated as a local initiative but has since become a national point of

reference and a fundamental tool in the procedure for accessing abortion in the country.

Furthermore, forms of monitoring have also proliferated thanks to the autonomous activation of professionals and users who have increasingly reached out to local feminist collectives to signal the presence of conscientious objectors or anti-choice actors within health facilities. In response, feminist activists have often reacted by entering hospitals as a means to display their presence while at the same time verifying the actions of anti-choice actors within the facility:

For example, this morning we went to this hospital that had been reported to us for the second time, there were doctors, social workers, the person who had reported it to us explained how the dynamic had been the other time, we stayed there a while because it seemed that these people were going back and forth through the corridor. (FA15, CNF, 27)

Hence, activists physically monitor public hospitals to assess and prevent the presence of anti-choice actors. In other instances, activists monitor access to abortion by assuming the role of users in need and inquiring with medical professionals at various hospitals or clinics. This allows them to gain insights on how the procedure works and assess the safety of the facility. The information gathered through monitoring provides activists with comprehensive knowledge about the functioning of health facilities, as well as about the reliability of doctors and professionals. This knowledge is later used to filter and facilitate access to abortion for other users.

In addition to monitoring and filtering, feminist activists also actively support individuals in need of abortion by practicing *accompagnement*. This involves physically accompanying others to the hospital, staying by their side to address any potential difficulties they may encounter, as well as more generally providing social and moral support. This accompaniment serves as a safe and welcoming point of reference during the entire process, offering care and reassurance to ensure that the persons do not feel isolated. Indeed, beyond the tangible obstacles posed by hostile doctors or conscientious objectors, one of the primary challenges individuals face when accessing abortion is the pervasive judgmental climate they encounter. This atmosphere often makes it difficult, if not impossible, for them to have a positive experience with the procedure. Thus, activists have expanded their focus beyond merely publicly denouncing inefficiencies and obstacles to include “accompanying people who find themselves in

need of abortion or need of contraceptives and who find themselves in a situation of difficulty” (FA5, NU DM, 37).

As the following quote shows, accompaniment is a key part of activists’ repertoires that aim at facilitating access to abortion, while supporting through care:

The idea was also to give space to people who might need to be accompanied. When we say accompaniment, we don’t mean just physical accompaniment, like accompanying someone to the counselling center or the hospital, but we mean a more comprehensive approach. In many cases we don’t even meet people before their abortion, we meet them afterward, at some point we always meet them, but many of them...we meet them when it’s all done, just for the pleasure of seeing each other in person...but there is this whole part of the support that we do that is at a distance. It is related to giving clear information, helping people contact healthcare providers, and making appointments. (FA15, CNF, 27)

Hence, the adoption of direct social action has been particularly relevant in the health field as a means to circumvent the obstacles that anti-choice actors and policies pose to those who require an interruption of pregnancy. It has also represented a tool for empowering users in front of the medical authority. Although these strategies cannot be directly related to the consolidation of anti-gender actors in the country, their increased strength has certainly worsened the conditions for access to abortion and given a strong impulse to the presence of anti-choice actors within healthcare institutions. Consequently, the role of these platforms of peer-to-peer support has become increasingly central during the last decade.

Another significant strategy employed by activists involves promoting grassroots campaigns aimed at disseminating information and *sharing knowledge and expertise* to counter anti-gender narratives. In this regard, the cultural arena has become a focal point of contention for the movement. Once more, the health sector emerges as a pivotal example of this dynamic. The feminist movement actively disseminates information and knowledge about abortion, as well as women’s rights in healthcare, in response to the campaigns and narratives propagated by anti-choice actors. Thus, for example, several online projects have emerged recently such as *IVG Ho Abortito e Sto Benissimo* (VIP [voluntary interruption of pregnancy] I had an abortion and feel perfectly fine) and *Libera di Abortire* (Free to abort), aiming at deconstructing stigmatizing narratives about

abortion and fostering positive accounts of women's self-determination. These campaigns have sought to promote alternative narratives about abortion that challenge the notion that it is inherently traumatic, violent, and painful. Activists emphasize that such initiatives, which aim to influence the cultural sphere, have been effective in spreading awareness and providing support:

In general, the work we have conducted on the narrative around abortion, although we keep hearing on TV that abortion is a painful thing, at the general level there has been a clear change. It is evident to us from the kind of testimonies that we receive, concerning abortion and how people perceive their abortions, the recognition of the abuses they go through, and so on. (FA9, OR, 33)

Besides DSAs and cultural-oriented initiatives, in some cases, institutional channels have been relevant as well. Both in the fields of education and health, for example, activists have started reflecting on adopting strategies based on *camouflage* to get access to institutional channels. In the field of education, for example, given the particularly contentious dynamics that have emerged in the country concerning sexual education in schools, feminist associations tend to downplay their identity to be accepted as external providers. This strategy emerged prominently during our co-creation labs. Associations and individual teachers have emphasized the importance of subtly integrating sexual education without explicitly labeling it as such. This approach aims to circumvent opposition from school directors, anti-gender associations in the community, and organized groups of parents. Similarly, in the health field, the strategy of camouflage is increasingly gaining relevance for feminist actors as a way to counter the presence of pro-life actors within healthcare facilities. Indeed, in certain cities, the presence of anti-choice actors within public hospitals and clinics has been facilitated by regional governments financing such associations under the guise of supporting motherhood. As previously discussed, the feminist movement has primarily responded to this through protest. However, some activists are beginning to contemplate the potential of adopting camouflage as a strategy. This involves applying for funds and gaining access to public hospitals through this channel while simultaneously subverting it to advance feminist agendas. While the feminist movement is essentially grassroots and self-organized, activists reflect upon the possibility of strategically using more structured associative

forms to gain access to those funds that the regional government makes available for anti-choice actors. Their goal is “to participate in the call and take the money away from them, as much as possible, to try to get around it from the inside and do a work of this kind for stated political purposes” (NUDM). Thus, camouflage is thought of as a strategy that aims to disempower anti-choice associations by subverting the channels that have been structured to maintain an anti-abortion presence within healthcare facilities.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the movement has also at times adopted “avoidance” as a strategy to disempower anti-gender actors by withdrawing from the confrontational field. While at times this has been an openly articulated strategy, at other times, as one activist reported to us, this has resulted from what could be seen as an underestimation of the broader dynamics (and their power) underpinning the most visible local manifestation of anti-gender activism:

And then we have the Vatican in the house, and that obviously obstacles a lot of issues even at the cultural level. On that, in my opinion we left a little bit [...] it's not that it's our fault, but in front of the rise of the various movements, associations, pro-life organizations, the congress of families in Verona, and the sacred heart of Mary brought forward by Salvini, we remained somewhat silent. We preferred more to see how ridiculous certain things were, instead of looking at the structural issues that were being brought forward, the Atlantic alliances with respect to funding, and to certain political movements far beyond us, and yet then governing us. So, we kind of gave up from this point of view. (FA9, NUDM, 32)

As we have discussed so far, feminist actors adopt different strategies to react to anti-gender threats. It is worth noting, however, that, as many interviewees stressed, this reaction is based upon a disparity in terms of resources. The confrontation between feminist actors and anti-gender movements, thus, cannot be considered as based on equal premises. While anti-gender movements may enjoy a network of local and international funding, feminist groups are often totally grassroots, do not access public funding, and therefore do not have the same resources for their political organization, which also significantly influences the type of outcome they may achieve. Again, the health field represents a key example of such a disparity:

Of course, at the city level there are certainly pharmacies, hospitals and aid-for-life centers, big ones that we have not talked about but which are systemically and endemically present in Italy. So the fact is that in Italy, especially in northern Italy, the aid-for-life centers, which are these centers run by anti-abortion associations, particularly Casini's *Movimento per la Vita* (Movement for Life), have gigantic economic and political power that has grown in recent years and they run these centers where you are directed if you are unlucky, when you make the certificate of voluntary interruption of pregnancy and you meet an objector doctor, who understands that you have economic problems, if you are unlucky they may send you to these centers that try to dissuade you from having an abortion by giving you nappies, plasmon and a few hundred euro a month. (FA5, NUDM, 33)

Every time there are anti-abortionist associations that picket, on Tuesdays when there is a day of voluntary termination of pregnancy in front of the hospital, the nurses or the doctors often send us photos...to get us out they call the police, they do things, and let's say that this is clearly not easy because there is a bit of a perception that you can never win. However, this was also a big blow because after years and years of being mobilized only on this thing, to see that whatever you do, even with very transversal alliances, it doesn't go, and in any case, there are legislative instruments to prevent everything passing into a political discussion, everything being questioned in some way. This left us very puzzled and also a little disappointed because it is often not easy when you don't see results to see the sense of political activism, when you lose such structural things and then say that we had done so many demonstrations. (FA16, NUDM, 29)

As we can see from the quotes, the availability of resources also enables pro-life groups to counter abortion with material aid to women, thus encouraging them not to have abortions. In contrast, feminist movements usually have very few financial resources even to organize protests, print leaflets, or buy materials. Moreover, despite the existence of abortion legislation, pro-life movements seem to enjoy a network of protection and complicity involving institutions, hospitals, and law enforcement, in a framework of latent consent to their demands that makes it even more difficult for feminist movements to have an impact.

To conclude, as this paragraph has highlighted, feminist movements in Italy have resorted to different strategies to react to anti-gender and anti-choice actors. Confrontational tactics have coexisted with non-confrontational ones like direct social action, cultural interventions, and institutional channels. Nevertheless, the respondents emphasize that the effectiveness of these strategies depends on the availability of political,

financial, and human resources. While anti-gender movements have access to considerable resources both locally and internationally, often succeeding in achieving positive outcomes, feminist movements, on the other hand, are often much more lacking in resources, and this strongly affects their ability to respond and succeed.

CONCLUSIONS

In the last decade, contentious gender politics in Italy has been characterized by the growing involvement of various institutional and movement actors around increasingly polarizing issues, particularly in the fields of education, reproductive rights, and LGBT+ rights. Within this framework, the feminist movement and the anti-gender movement have played primary roles, leading to opposition dynamics characterized by actions and reactions over time. In the initial phase of the emergence and development of the anti-gender movement, characterized by a strong presence in public squares, the feminist movement's responses were timely and consequential, often indicating a co-presence within the public space. It is in this phase that the feminist movement frequently employed confrontational tactics, including public protests and counter-actions, to react to anti-gender actions. These actions, which can be categorized as loose, medium-intensity, and strong, varied depending on the time, space, and resources employed to carry them out. They ranged from quickly organized actions to provide an immediate response—such as cultural subversion and on-the-spot protest actions—to more structured actions involving multiple movement actors through the activation of networks and alliances, up to large events organized on a national and transnational scale, as was the case with the Verona Transfeminist City protest.

On the one hand, therefore, the nature and characteristics of the feminist movement's response strategies have adapted over time, demonstrating the versatility of strategies and the mobilization capacity of the new wave of the feminist movement. On the other hand, the variety of responses and the adaptability of the movement must be seen in continuity with the actions of their opponents. A crucial factor in this context has been the trajectory followed by the anti-gender movement, which has seen its progressive and effective institutionalization within government bodies and public institutions more generally, particularly through the consolidated alliance with populist right-wing parties such as Brothers of Italy and the League. The anti-gender movement has pursued a dual anti-gender

strategy: maintaining a presence in the public space to establish itself as a fundamental and recognizable actor in the gender debate in Italy, while simultaneously focusing on institutional and electoral politics. The shift in the balance of power in government, partially occurring with the 2018 political elections and the rise to power of the League, and subsequently in 2022 with the success of all the center-right forces, particularly Brothers of Italy, has led to a significant change in the movement's strategy. This shift has opened up the opportunity to implement its anti-gender agenda from a position of strength in government. The transition from a mostly reactive position to a proactive one, with the possibility of concretizing policies, proposed laws, and initiatives, indirectly produces effects on opposing movements' dynamics. It is within this framework of dual strategy that we see the deployment of the mentioned confrontational actions and non-confrontational strategies, essentially aimed at containing a proactive agenda capable of producing effects on the ground, such as the right to abortion and the increasing presence of anti-gender actors in public hospitals. These have been countered through monitoring and filtering strategies, accompaniment, and the production and sharing of knowledge and expertise.

At the same time, it is crucial to underline how the contentious gender politics indeed sees the evolution of opposing forces and dynamics, but that these cannot be considered equivalent. The disparity of forces is articulated particularly in terms of resources. The anti-gender movement, which includes among its main actors associations and NGOs with a high level of bureaucratization and professionalization, can easily tap into national and international funds. In contrast, the essentially grassroots nature of the feminist movement greatly limits access to public funds, thus determining the tactical-strategic choices of the movement itself as well as the types of outcomes. Furthermore, the adaptability of the feminist movement is contingent on a different, opposite approach to institutions. Unlike the anti-gender movement, the feminist movement often refuses to engage in dialogue and interact with institutions. This impacts not only strategies but also the potential access to institutional representation, institutional networks, and power.

REFERENCES

- Abrahams, N. (2021). Parental alienation and domestic violence: A feminist critical discourse analysis of key informants' accounts in family court, child protection and domestic violence services in ontario. Research Paper. <https://ruor.uottawa.ca/items/3fe3c036-dd84-4e2a-8e77-f89bc5b16c9d>
- Alonso, A., Ciccía, R., & Lombardo, E. (2023, May). A Southern European model? Gender regime change in Italy and Spain. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 98, 102737. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2023.102737>
- Barone, A., & Bonu, G. (2022). Ni Una Menos/Non Una di Meno. In D. A. Snow, D. Della Porta, D. McAdam, & B. Klandermans (Eds.), *The Wiley-Blackwell encyclopedia of social and political movements*. Wiley.
- Bellè, E., & Poggio, B. (2018). New faces of populism: The Italian 'anti-gender' mobilization. In U. Kovala, E. Palonen, M. Ruotsalainen, & T. Saresma (Eds.), *Populism on the loose* (pp. 115–129). Nykykulttuurin tutkimuskeskuksen julkaisuja.
- Bereni, L. (2016). Women's movements and feminism. In R. Elgie, E. Grossman, & A. Mazur (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of French politics* (pp. 532–549). Oxford University Press.
- Blais, M., & Dupuis-Déri, F. (2012). Masculinism and the antifeminist counter-movement. *Social Movement Studies*, 11(1), 21–39. <https://doi.org/10.1080/014742837.2012.640532>
- Bosi, L., & Zamponi, L. (2015). Direct social action and economic crises. The relationship between forms of action and socio-economic context in Italy. *Partecipazione e Conflitto*, 2(8), 367–391. <https://doi.org/10.1285/i20356609v8i2p367>
- Colella, D. (2021). Femonationalism and anti-gender backlash: The instrumental use of gender equality in the nationalist discourse of the Fratelli d'Italia party. *Gender and Development*, 29(2–3), 269–289. <https://doi.org/10.1080/013552074.2021.1978749>
- Corrêa, S. (2021). Anti-gender politics in Latin America: summaries of country case-studies. <https://sxpolitics.org/GPAL/uploads/E-book-Resumos-completo.pdf>
- Cossutta, C., & Habel, A. J. (2021). From Verona, with love: "Anti-gender" mobilizations and transfeminist (re)actions. In B. Sauer & E. Köttig (Eds.), *Mobilisierungen gegen Feminismus und 'Gender'. Erscheinungsformen, Erklärungsansätze und Gegenstrategien* (Vol. 6, pp. 139–154). Verlag Barbara Budrich.
- Crossley, A. D., & Hurwitz, H. M. (2013). Women's movements. In D. A. Snow, D. Della Porta, D. McAdam, & B. Klandermans (Eds.), *The Wiley-Blackwell encyclopedia of social and political movements*. Wiley.

- Daby, M., & Moseley, M. W. (2022). Feminist mobilization and the abortion debate in Latin America: Lessons from Argentina. *Politics & Gender*, 18(2), 359–393. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X20000197>
- Eschle, C. (2018). *Global democracy, social movements, and feminism*. Routledge.
- Eschle, C., & Bartlett, A. (2023). *Feminism and protest camps*. Bristol University Press.
- Eschle, C., & Maiguashca, B. (2018). Theorising feminist organising in and against neoliberalism: Beyond co-optation and resistance? *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, 1(1–2), 223–239. <https://doi.org/10.1332/251510818X15272520831120>
- Faludi, S. (1991). *Backlash: The undeclared war against American women*. Crown Publishers.
- Gago, V. (2020). *Feminist international: How to change everything*. Verso Books.
- Garbagnoli, S. (2016). Against the heresy of immanence: Vatican’s ‘gender’ as a new rhetorical device against the denaturalization of the sexual order. *Religion and Gender*, 6(2), 187–204. <https://doi.org/10.18352/rg.10138>
- Garbagnoli, S., & Prearo, M. (2018). *La crociata “anti-gender”. Dal Vaticano alle manif pour tous*. Kaplan.
- Giorgi, A. (2022). Hijack or release? On the heuristic limits of the frame of instrumentalization of religion for discussing the entanglements of populism, religion, and gender. *Identities*, 29(4), 483–499. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2021.2002583>
- Graff, A., & Korolczuk, E. (2022). *Anti-gender Politics in the Populist Moment*. Routledge.
- Gusmeroli, P. (2023). Is gender-critical feminism feeding the neo-conservative anti-gender rhetoric? Snapshots from the Italian public debate. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 28(3), 382–399. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2023.2184908>
- Jasper, J. (2004). A strategic approach to collective action: Looking for agency in social-movement choices. *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, 9(1), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.17813/mai.9.1.m112677546p63361>
- Köttig, M., Bitzan, R., & Pető, A. (Eds.). (2017). *Gender and far right politics in Europe*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lavizzari, A. (2019). *Protesting gender: The LGBTIQ movement and its opponents in Italy*. Routledge.
- Lavizzari, A. (2025). The anti-gender movement and the populist radical right in Italy: a symbiotic relationship. *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, 8(1), 207–233. <https://doi.org/10.1332/25151088Y2024D000000047>
- Lavizzari, A., & Prearo, M. (2019). The anti-gender movement in Italy: Catholic participation between electoral and protest politics. *European Societies*, 21(3), 422–442. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2018.1536801>

- Lavizzari, A., & Siročić, Z. (2023). Contentious gender politics in Italy and Croatia: Diffusion of transnational anti-gender movements to national contexts. *Social Movement Studies*, 22(4), 475–493. <https://doi.org/10.1080/014742837.2022.2052836>
- Lépinard, É. (2020). *Feminist trouble: Intersectional politics in postsecular times*. Oxford University Press.
- McAdam, D. (1996). Conceptual origins, current problems, future directions. In D. McAdam, J. D. McCarthy, & M. N. Zald (Eds.), *Comparative perspectives on social movements: Political opportunities, mobilizing structures, and cultural framings* (pp. 23–40). Cambridge University Press.
- McAdam, D., & Rucht, D. (1993). The cross-national diffusion of movement ideas. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 528(1), 56–74. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716293528001005>
- McAdam, D., & Tarrow, S. (2018). The political context of social movements. In D. A. Snow, S. A. Soule, H. Kriesi, & H. J. McCammon (Eds.), *The Wiley Blackwell companion to social movements* (pp. 18–41). Wiley.
- Meyer, D. S., & Staggenborg, S. (1996). Movements, countermovements, and the structure of political opportunity. *American Journal of Sociology*, 101(6), 1628–1660. <https://doi.org/10.1086/230869>
- Outshoorn, J., & Kantola, J. (Eds.). (2007). *Changing state feminism*. Springer.
- Paternotte, D. (2023). Victor Frankenstein and his creature: The many lives of ‘gender ideology’. *International Review of Sociology*, 33(1), 80–104. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03906701.2023.2187833>
- Pavan, E. (2020). We are family: The conflict between conservative movements and feminists. *Contemporary Italian Politics*, 12(2), 243–257. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23248823.2020.1744892>
- Prearo, M. (2020). *L'ipotesi neocattolica: Politologia dei movimenti anti-gender*. Mimesis.
- Roggeband, C. (2018). The good, the bad, and the ugly: Making sense of opposition to feminisms from a social-movement perspective. In M. Verloo (Ed.), *Varieties of opposition to gender equality in Europe* (pp. 19–37). Routledge.
- Serughetti, G. (2020). *Democratizzare la cura/curare la democrazia*. Nottetempo.
- Serughetti, G. (2021). *Il vento conservatore: La destra populista all'attacco della democrazia*. Gius. Laterza & Figli Spa.
- Spallaccia, B. (2020). Ideologia del gender: Towards a transcultural understanding of the phenomenon. *Modern Italy*, 25(2), 131–145. <https://doi.org/10.1017/mit.2019.63>
- Stone, A. (2016). The impact of the anti-gay politics on the LGBTQ movement. *Sociology Compass*, 10(6), 459–467. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12373>
- Tarrow, S. (1993). Cycles of collective action: Between moments of madness and the repertoire of contention. *Social Science History*, 17(2), 281–307. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1171283>

- Taylor, V., & Van Dyke, N. (2004). “Get up, stand up”: Tactical repertoires of social movements. In D. A. Snow, S. A. Soule, & H. Kriesi (Eds.), *The Blackwell companion to social movements* (pp. 262–293). Blackwell Publishing.
- Trappolin, L. (2022). Right-wing sexual politics and “anti-gender” mobilization in Italy: Key features and latest developments. In S. Emanuela & C. Ketola (Eds.), *Paradoxical right-wing sexual politics in Europe* (pp. 119–143). Springer.
- Vaggione, J. M. (2005). Reactive politicization and religious dissidence: The political mutations of the religious. *Social Theory and Practice*, 31(2), 233–255.
- Weldon, S. L., Lusvardi, A., Kelly-Thompson, K., & Forester, S. (2023, July). Feminist waves, global activism, and gender violence regimes: Genealogy and impact of a global wave. *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 99, 102781. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2023.102781>
- Whittier, N. (1995). *Feminist generations: The persistence of the radical women’s movement*. Temple University Press.
- Whittier, N. (2013). Spillover, social movement. In D. A. Snow, D. Della Porta, D. McAdam, & B. Klandermans (Eds.), *The Wiley-Blackwell encyclopedia of social and political movements*. Wiley.
- Zamponi, L. (2019). Direct social action, welfare retrenchment and political identities: Coping with the crisis and pursuing change in Italy. *Partecipazione e Conflitto*, 12(2), 382–409. <https://doi.org/10.1285/i20356609v12i2p382>

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if you modified the licensed material. You do not have permission under this license to share adapted material derived from this chapter or parts of it.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter’s Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter’s Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.





Navigating Antagonism: Feminist and LGBT+ Responses to Slovenian Anti-Gender Mobilizations

Rok Smrdelj

INTRODUCTION¹

Contemporary struggles between advocates and opponents of equality politics unfold in specific socio-historical contexts, characterized by “antagonistic politics” (Mouffe, 2013, 2018). This form of politics is

¹In addition to the project “FIERCE – Feminist Movements Revitalizing Democracy in Europe” (No. 101061748), funded by the EU Horizon Europe research and innovation program, this text was also produced within the framework of the project “Gender, Democracy, and the Neoconservative Anti-Gender Movement” (J5-50158, 2023–2026) and the research program “Problems of Autonomy and Identity at the Time of Globalization” (P6-0194, 2019–2027), both funded by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency. Moreover, the author thanks Mojca Pajnik for the insightful debates and exchanges on conceptualizing feminist and LGBT+ responses to anti-gender mobilizations.

R. Smrdelj (✉)

Faculty of Arts, Department of Sociology, University of Ljubljana,
Ljubljana, Slovenia

e-mail: rok.smrdej@ff.uni-lj.si

© The Author(s) 2025

R. Smrdelj, R. Kuhar (eds.), *Anti-Gender Mobilizations in Europe
and the Feminist Response*, Palgrave Studies in European Political
Sociology, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-87693-6_3

53

marked by pronounced polarization, confrontation, and heightened antagonism among ideologically diverse actors. “Antagonistic politics” presupposes a public sphere not founded on deliberation and the pursuit of consensus but is rather defined by conflictual relationships and embedded tensions. While a “pure” consensus among ideologically diverse actors has never truly existed—politics being inherently conflictual—the contemporary public sphere is characterized by an intensification and extreme escalation of these antagonisms, arguably more than ever before. Hence, contemporary “antagonistic politics” is an objective social framework that conditions the opportunities and obstacles for strategies to achieve specific political goals (Kováts, 2018). Defined as such, it provides a productive theoretical starting point for analyzing the complex dynamics between advocates and opponents of equality politics.

The deepening antagonism between advocates and opponents of equality politics begins with the normalization of exclusionary and discriminatory views, along with their increased visibility in the public sphere. These views, often cloaked in a liberal guise and expressed with subtle sophistication, conceal blatant discrimination and are increasingly infiltrating legitimate public debates. Wodak (2015) discusses this shift within the context of populist political parties, which skillfully exploit available “structural opportunities” (Pajnik, 2023), such as social media. They employ strategies such as scandalization, mobilizing fear and anger, and other emotional responses, while distinctly delineating “the people” from “the elites” and “us” from “them,” the “other.” These strategies foster a “politics of fear” that maintains their visibility and helps them gain voter support. This situation legitimizes intolerance and exclusion as acceptable and even desirable elements of political dialogue (Wodak, 2020). This transition to a “new normality” (Krzyżanowski et al., 2023), where exclusionary views are visible, perceived as legitimate, and influential in public debate, fosters polarization, reinforces existing societal divisions, and creates pronounced tensions in public dialogue and communication.

In the realm of equality politics, the rapid intensification of antagonism has occurred with the rise of anti-gender mobilizations, which began emerging in Europe and globally over the past decade. These mobilizations have become the most recognizable wave of contemporary opposition to equality politics (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018; Paternotte, 2023). Slovenia is among the countries where mobilizations have gained momentum.

In Slovenia, as in other post-socialist countries, the swift spread, influence, and visibility of anti-gender initiatives can largely be attributed to their integration into civil society (see Böhmová, 2024). This integration has been achieved by appropriating liberal discourse—such as invoking “human rights”—utilizing democratic mechanisms like referendums, lobbying, and strategic litigation, and emulating strategies and discourses previously employed by progressive movements. In countries like Slovenia, anti-gender actors have established organizations that mirror those of feminist and LGBT+ movements, effectively NGO-izing their activities. These organizations present themselves as secular and independent of religious affiliations, although religious institutions often remain covert supporters (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). Moreover, before the emergence of anti-gender mobilizations, civil society in Slovenia was primarily a domain for progressive movements such as feminist and LGBT+ groups. The strategic actions of anti-gender actors have not only allowed them to infiltrate civil society but also to engage in transnational activities, impacting political decision-making processes at the EU level. In this transnational context, it is important to note that the EU is founded on democratic principles, including human rights, the rule of law, equality, and equal opportunities. These principles initially provided a platform for feminist and LGBT+ movements to voice their demands. However, with the emergence of anti-gender mobilizations, conservative actors, both in Slovenia and beyond, have adopted similar discursive approaches to gain entry into the EU arena (e.g., Ahrens et al., 2021).

By successfully appropriating the strategies and discourse of feminist and LGBT+ movements, anti-gender actors have established themselves within civil society, becoming key figures in discussions on equality politics (Böhmová, 2024). Their positions are now considered within the legitimate framework of debate, significantly intensifying the existing antagonism between them and their opponents, namely feminist and LGBT+ movements. This conflict has further exacerbated the increasing social polarization around issues of equality politics. A critical question arises: How are feminist and LGBT+ movements responding to this escalating antagonism? Mouffe (2013, p. 14) suggests that antagonism, an inherent structural element of contemporary politics, cannot be eliminated by denial. This leads to further inquiry into how social groups navigate their activities within the contemporary public sphere. Specifically, how do feminist and LGBT+ movements confront novel manifestations of conservative opposition to equality politics? How are they tackling the emergence

of anti-gender actors who appropriate their symbolic space and strategies within civil society? Are these movements developing practices to delegitimize anti-gender positions, or are they acknowledging these actors as legitimate counterparts? What structural opportunities and obstacles do they encounter while attempting to symbolically and materially diminish anti-gender efforts?

We examine these questions through the case of feminist and LGBT+ movements in Slovenia.² Slovenia was selected as a case study because its feminist and LGBT+ movements confronted a powerful anti-gender movement early on. This began in 2009 when the center-left government introduced a reform of the Family Code. The peak of anti-gender mobilization in Slovenia occurred with two referendums on marriage equality in 2012 and 2015, both decisively rejected, marking Slovenia as the only European country to twice reject marriage through referenda (Kuhar, 2017, p. 224). Despite these setbacks, Slovenia achieved a significant breakthrough when the Constitution Court ruled in favor of same-sex partnership rights, including full marriage equality, and child adoption

²To examine how Slovenian feminist and LGBT+ movements are responding to intensified antagonism, we conducted 23 interviews with feminist and LGBT+ actors from December 2023 to February 2024. We aimed to comprehensively capture the heterogeneity of civil society actors in the fields of feminism and LGBT+ rights by employing the typology of social movement organisations proposed by Mattoni and Treré (2014). According to this typology, we included both feminist and LGBT+ organizations with informal structures, characterized by the absence of formal hierarchies, horizontal organizational frameworks, non-representational modes of operation, and an emphasis on self-organization, as well as those with more formal organizational structures and hierarchies. From the first group (Formal Feminist and/or LGBT+ Organisations, FFLO), we selected six organizations, conducting 10 interviews, and from the second group (Informal Feminist and/or LGBT+ Organizations, IFLO), we selected eight organisations, conducting 11 interviews. Furthermore, we interviewed two feminist and/or LGBT+ activists (Feminist and/or LGBT+ Activists, FLA) who, though not currently affiliated with any organization, have demonstrated significant engagement in feminist and/or LGBT+ movements in recent years.

In analyzing feminist and LGBT+ strategies, we focused on whether they were implemented by formally structured organizations (first group) or informally structured ones (second group). This distinction is critical, as we hypothesize that formal organizations, due to their structurally advantageous position characterized by better access to resources and funding, are able to execute more sophisticated and complex strategies. Our analysis thus examined not only the strategies employed but also who implements them and under what conditions. We believe that this approach provides deeper insights into the dynamics and effectiveness of the various strategies, and how organizational structures influence strategic actions.

rights, in the summer of 2022. This ruling positioned Slovenia as the first Eastern European country to embrace full marriage equality (Kuhar, 2022).

While similar anti-gender movements in other parts of Europe were only beginning to gain political significance, the Slovenian movement had already amassed considerable political experience, mobilizing thousands and securing its first victory in the 2012 referendum. By the 2015 referendum, the movement had refined its strategies, built a robust network of supporters, and established significant political influence with transnational connections (Kuhar, 2017, p. 224). The successes of anti-gender actors in opposing marriage equality in 2012 and 2015 led to their strategies being adopted by other movements opposing equality politics, particularly in the field of reproductive rights (Kralj et al., 2024). Consequently, feminist and LGBT+ movements faced a highly effective coalition of opponents, making them a pertinent case study for analyzing response strategies to the rising anti-gender mobilizations.

In the following sections, we will first provide a comprehensive overview of the anti-gender movement in Slovenia, focusing on their mobilization areas, strategies, and discourses that have positioned them as notable civil society actors. This overview will illustrate how their activities have exacerbated antagonism in the realm of equality politics in Slovenia. The central part of this chapter will present our findings on key strategies employed by feminist and LGBT+ actors to counteract anti-gender mobilizations. In the discussion section, we will evaluate whether these strategies effectively engage with, overcome, or bypass the existing antagonistic structures. In the conclusion, we will summarize our principal findings and suggest directions for further research.

ANTI-GENDER MOBILIZATIONS IN SLOVENIA

The introduction of the center-left government's Family Code reform in 2009, as previously mentioned, was the primary catalyst for the emergence of anti-gender mobilizations in Slovenia. During this period, conservative organizations and actors, previously known in the Slovenian public for their opposition to equality politics, began rebranding themselves as civil society actors, as the voice of "concerned citizens," and advocates for protecting "our children." They founded numerous organizations, portraying themselves as secular associations and integral parts of civil society. However, in reality, they were satellite organizations of the Slovenian Roman Catholic Church (RCC). Through these satellite organizations,

the RCC sought to establish itself as a moral authority on sexual and reproductive rights, with the goal of incorporating its doctrine on gender and sexuality into state policies and legal norms, all while concealing its role as a central orchestrator. This strategy was crucial for the RCC, as the Slovenian public is highly attentive to the separation of church and state, a principle enshrined in the Slovenian Constitution. Moreover, the RCC's reputation in Slovenia had been tarnished by financial scandals during the economic crisis at the turn of the previous decade. Consequently, the RCC sought to "secularize" its public image by establishing or supporting satellite organizations, movements, and initiatives that disseminated its messages, influence, and ideology, thereby effectuating the "clericalization" of Slovenian society through these entities (Kuhar, 2017; Kuhar & Pajnik, 2020; Kralj et al., 2024). Furthermore, a significant reason for the RCC's attempt at this satellite "clericalization" of Slovenian society is the diminishing mobilizing effect of biblical discourse in the contemporary antagonistic public sphere (Kuhar, 2015a, 2015b). Thus, addressing issues in the field of equality politics becomes more compelling when framed in terms of "human rights" and other similar signifiers that constitute liberal discourse.

The establishment of anti-gender organizations in the first half of the previous decade, which outwardly operate as secular entities but are, in fact, satellite organizations of the RCC, has had significant implications for civil society activism and discussions on equality politics in Slovenia. Through these satellite anti-gender organizations, conservative actors have likely made their first substantial, organized, and ideologically driven foray into civil society to oppose equality politics.³ Their most notable "symbolic" achievement is the strategic portrayal of opposition to equality politics as a legitimate stance within the prevailing political discourse, without being perceived as overtly discriminatory and as inconsistent with

³This does not imply that anti-gender actors were not previously active within civil society, opposing equality politics and utilizing democratic means, such as referenda, to pursue undemocratic objectives. These practices were evident in Slovenia as early as 2001, when a key future anti-gender actor gathered enough signatures to call for a referendum on the right of women in non-heterosexual relationships to access in vitro fertilization. The same actor was active again in 2003, attempting to gather signatures for a referendum on the decriminalization of prostitution, although this effort was unsuccessful. However, what distinguishes these earlier conservative practices from subsequent anti-gender ones is the latter's increased scope, deliberation, and organization, coupled with a clearer ideological agenda centered on opposition to the so-called gender theory (Kuhar, 2017).

the legitimate framework of debate. They achieve this by appropriating the strategies and discursive terrain of feminist and LGBT+ movements. This appropriation manifests in the subtle articulation of their discriminatory views under the guise of liberalism, thereby intensifying the antagonism within the field of equality politics. As a result, their opposition appears acceptable, normal, and legitimate, and is recognized as a voice representing the “other side of the coin,” which the public must hear to gain a comprehensive understanding of the equality politics issues.

In addition to appropriating the liberal discourse and strategies of feminist and LGBT+ movements, a crucial factor in legitimizing their opposition to equality politics in the public sphere is the successful normalization of the so-called gender theory, which serves as their central mobilizing discursive tool, functioning similarly to “gender ideology” in other European countries.⁴ This term was first employed by opponents of marriage equality during the second referendum in 2015 and was subsequently adopted by other actors opposing equality politics, such as those concerning reproductive rights (Kralj et al., 2024). Furthermore, representatives of right-wing political parties and their youth organizations, as well as the mass media, incorporated this term into their discourse, thereby ensuring its normalization within the broader public (Srnđelj & Pajnik, 2022). Social media platforms also played a crucial role in the normalization of “gender theory,” facilitating the rapid dissemination and sharing of posts by anti-gender actors and their supporters (Popič & Gorjanc, 2022).

The primary discursive “legacy” of the anti-gender movement is that, since 2015, any opposition to equality politics in Slovenia has been framed within the discourse of “gender theory” (Srnđelj et al., 2024). This has established a new political antagonism in discussions on equality politics in Slovenia, dividing the debate into supposed supporters and opponents of “gender theory.” This antagonism is particularly pronounced since “gender theory” functions as an “empty signifier” (Mayer & Sauer, 2017). Its

⁴It is not entirely clear why Slovenian anti-gender actors more frequently used the term “gender theory” rather than “gender ideology,” which is commonly employed in other European countries. One explanation is that they adopted this term from the French anti-gender network *La Manif Pour Tous*, from which they also translated propaganda materials. By labeling “gender” as a “theory,” they aimed to depict it as an academic construct disconnected from common sense and real-life experiences. This strategy enabled them to confront the Slovenian academic elite, a prominent advocate for marriage equality that exposed the misuse and distortion of research findings by anti-gender actors, to advance their ideological agenda (Kuhar, 2017, p. 230).

inherent vagueness and ambiguity allow it to encompass a broad range of meanings, from specific areas of equality politics (e.g., marriage equality, abortion) to broader social orders, such as the so-called leftist experiment allegedly brought about by “gender theory.” Thus, “gender theory” doesn’t merely create ideological division and polarization around specific issues within equality politics but also serves as a foundation for broader ideological divisions regarding the overall vision of society (Paternotte, 2023). In this sense, “gender theory” has the capacity to extrapolate antagonism between its supposed opponents and supporters from the level of individual issues within the equality policies to the broader societal level.

The antagonism established by the “gender theory” discourse in Slovenia has expanded beyond marriage equality campaigns to other areas, most notably reproductive rights, including abortion, hormonal contraception, and in vitro fertilization for women in non-heterosexual relationships. This expansion can be attributed to organizations and actors involved in reproductive rights perceiving anti-gender mobilizations as an opportunity to enhance their political influence. Their success in opposing marriage equality motivated them to adopt anti-gender strategies and discourses to further their own political objectives (Smrdelj & Kuhar, 2024). In addition to marriage equality and reproductive rights, the rights of transgender individuals have also become a significant target for anti-gender actors (Perger & Smrdelj, 2024), serving as a highly effective means of generating “moral panic.” Although early anti-gender campaigns primarily focused on same-sex partnership rights, transgender individuals were nonetheless attacked. They were utilized as a convenient tool for fear-mongering, operating on the premise that worse than having children raised by two men is having them encouraged to change their gender in schools. This brings us to another critical area targeted by anti-gender actors in Slovenia: the creation of “moral panic” regarding “indoctrination” in public schools, where LGBT+ activists are purportedly promoting “gender theory” (Kovač Šebart & Kuhar, 2015, 2017). Moreover, migration has also been a significant topic of concern (Sobočan & Pollak, 2016), particularly within the context of anti-gender actors’ primary focus on the biological reproduction of the “Slovenian nation,” thereby rendering “mixing” with migrants undesirable. Recently, anti-gender actors have also become active in the area of euthanasia, a pertinent topic in Slovenia due to ongoing discussions surrounding the draft law on voluntary ending

of life. Similar to their opposition to abortion, their opposition to euthanasia is framed within the argument of the right to life.

Slovenian anti-gender actors employ strategies within the framework of civil society and liberal democracy. A central organizational strategy is the establishment of civil society organizations, many of which were founded in Slovenia over the past decade (Smrdelj & Kuhar, 2024). They also initiate referendums and utilize other democratic tools such as petitions, protests, and public rallies to further their ideological agenda (Smrdelj & Kuhar, 2024). Social media and the Internet are effectively used to disseminate populist messages, collect signatures, fundraise, and publish sensational stories with dubious sources about the negative effects of “gender theory” (Smrdelj & Kuhar, 2024). In addition to public gatherings and counter-actions to Pride parades, anti-gender actors engage in public spaces through advertisements, billboards, and propaganda films. They hold press conferences and issue statements to the media, embedding themselves within the mass media agenda. As civil society actors, they lobby government institutions and participate in parliamentary hearings, committee meetings, and strategic litigation, and submit legislative proposals (Kralj et al., 2024; Kuhar, 2017; Kuhar & Pajnik, 2020). Internationally, they establish connections with organizations from other EU Member States and beyond, influencing equality politics at European and global levels (Datta, 2018, 2021).

These strategies are framed by discourses that combine appropriated elements from feminist and LGBT+ movements (e.g., invoking human rights) with those representing their ideological agenda. The latter are fundamentally grounded in principles of heteronormativity and the imperative of biological reproduction of the “nation,” which is perceived as being threatened by the enactment of equality politics (Šabec et al., 2021). For instance, opposition to marriage equality is rooted in an essentialist discourse that posits marriage equality as a threat to the “traditional,” “natural” family, fatherhood, motherhood, and particularly innocent children and the future of the Slovenian nation (Sobočan & Pollak, 2016). By emphasizing the “smallness of the Slovenian nation,” which is purportedly facing a “demographic winter,” same-sex couples, transgender individuals, and abortion advocates are constructed not only as Others within the nation but also as adversaries of the nation (Kuhar, 2017, p. 225). Moreover, a central ideological premise of the anti-gender agenda is the assertion that there are two biologically distinct sexes with inherently different social roles, and any intervention in this “natural” binary system is

viewed as an undesirable social experiment (Pajnik et al., 2016). An important mechanism for generating “moral panic” and manipulating fear is the invocation of children’s rights and the emphasis on their well-being. It is frequently argued that children’s well-being will be compromised by equality politics (Kuhar, 2017; Smrdelj & Pajnik, 2022). This discourse leverages the emotionally charged nature of children’s vulnerability, enabling mobilization against equality politics perceived to disrupt the “natural” order. By invoking children’s well-being, opponents of equality politics incite fear and concern among parents and the broader public, suggesting that children are endangered by shifts in social norms and structures. Furthermore, anti-gender actors often employ a “pseudoscientific discourse” (Vežjak, 2018), which entails distorting and manipulating existing scientific knowledge to align with their ideological agenda or rejecting scientific findings that contradict their views, dismissing them as products of “leftist ideology” and inconsistent with “common sense” and “nature.”

Through the presented discourses and strategies, anti-gender actors have infiltrated the prevailing political dialogue in Slovenia, posing a significant challenge to feminist and LGBT+ movements. As noted in the existing literature (e.g., Antić Gaber & Kuhar, 2019), the response of the feminist and LGBT+ movements to one of the initial anti-gender mobilizations, exemplified by the 2012 marriage equality referendum, was predicated on rational, scientific language supported by sociological and psychological research. This strategy assumed a public sphere based on consensus and grounded in “reason,” anticipating that once citizens were presented with scientific arguments, they would be adequately informed and decide how to vote accordingly. However, this strategy proved ineffective, as scientific arguments could not compete with populist discourses emphasizing the concern for “our children” in an antagonistic public sphere. Consequently, feminist and LGBT+ organizations and actors altered their tactics during the 2015 referendum campaign, more realistically considering the antagonistic conditions of public debate. Inspired by discussions from abroad, particularly in the United States and Ireland, they highlighted emotionally charged rhetoric, asserting that love is the same regardless of the partners’ gender. In this approach, the scientific community and its arguments were not at the forefront. Nevertheless, this strategy also failed, primarily because the feminist and LGBT+ community lacked political backing and clear support during the pre-referendum period, which was crucial for addressing the broader citizenry. This was

not the case for anti-gender actors, who were supported by the RCC, right-wing political parties, and their satellite media. Moreover, despite mobilizing “affective communication” (Papacharissi, 2015), the feminist and LGBT+ community could not compete with the “moral panic” created by anti-gender actors around common-sense discourses highlighting the perceived threats to children, family, and the Slovenian nation.

Since 2015, feminist and LGBT+ actors have developed numerous additional strategies to counteract anti-gender efforts aimed at restricting equality politics, which have yet to be comprehensively analyzed. These strategies and approaches, which emerged in response to ongoing anti-gender endeavors to implement a neoconservative social vision, are examined in detail in the following section.

FEMINIST AND LGBT+ STRATEGIES FOR COUNTERING ANTI-GENDER MOBILIZATIONS IN SLOVENIA

Based on the analysis of interviews conducted with feminist and LGBT+ organizations and actors, we have identified five key strategies for addressing anti-gender mobilizations: (1) Strategic Non-Engagement, (2) Solidarity Actions and Counter-protests, (3) Public Education and Awareness Campaigns, (4) Reporting Threats and Incidents to Authorities, and (5) Social Media Moderation and Messaging Control.

In the following subsections, we provide a detailed analysis of each strategy. Subsequently, we will examine how these strategies, informed by our theoretical assumptions about the positioning of feminist and LGBT+ actors within antagonistic political contexts, address existing antagonism between proponents and opponents of equality politics. Specifically, we will assess whether these strategies engage with, attempt to overcome, or ignore this antagonism. Engaging means directly interacting with and utilizing antagonistic structures, overcoming involves attempting to transform or surpass these structures, and ignoring entails operating without addressing them.

Strategic Non-Engagement

Strategic non-engagement is a tactic employed by feminist and LGBT+ actors to avoid legitimizing anti-gender actors as credible participants in discussions on equality politics. The essence of strategic non-engagement

does not involve ignoring attempts to oppose and restrict equality politics, nor does it deny the antagonistic conditions of public debate. Instead, it involves selectively refraining from responding to specific provocations and actions that could further amplify the visibility and attention of anti-gender actors, thereby exacerbating antagonism in the domain of equality politics:

If we engage directly with a small group of people who oppose abortion rights, we might sometimes give them more space and attention, making the conflict more interesting to the broader public. They are very aggressive in their words and actions, and you can't win if you don't plan to use the same methods, which we never intend to do. (FFLO, 1)

Furthermore, strategic non-engagement also involves prioritizing the articulation of their own viewpoints by feminist and LGBT+ actors without engaging in direct dialogue with anti-gender actors:

We do not engage in cultural dialogue with them; we merely express our own viewpoints. We believe it is important to respond, but not by engaging in conversation or addressing their arguments. Instead, we assert our thoughts, perspectives, and positions clearly and emphatically. (IFLO, 3)

The practice of strategic non-engagement also encompasses refusing to participate in talk shows or round-table debates in mass media. According to one of the IFLO (2) respondents, participating in such events would lend legitimacy to the opposing position against equality politics, treating it as equal to the advocacy for these politics—a scenario that feminist and LGBT+ actors strategically avoid. Similarly, they refuse to collaborate with right-wing media outlets associated with anti-gender actors, due to their bias and the predetermined discursive framework designed to legitimize the rejection of equality politics.

The practice of strategic non-engagement also extends into the digital media sphere. One interviewee (FFLO 1) explained that their organization deliberately avoids sharing hostile posts from anti-gender actors to prevent attracting more users into the hostile environment and to minimize the increased visibility of such posts. Instead, when responding to a specific hostile post, they create separate posts with their own commentary, deliberately excluding the original hostile post. Moreover, within the framework of strategic non-engagement, feminist and LGBT+

organizations conduct training sessions for their members and supporters during specific campaigns, emphasizing the key guideline of avoiding direct provocations and conflicts online.

Strategic non-engagement in the digital media sphere is also exemplified by feminist and LGBT+ actors primarily assuming the roles of observers and monitors, rather than active participants, in social media discussions:

For instance, our organization maintains a presence on Twitter [now X] solely to prevent impersonation. Similarly, on TikTok, our primary use is for monitoring. [...] We frequently observe these platforms to understand the direction of the discourse and identify references being made to our organization. (FFLO, 2)

The purpose of strategic monitoring in the digital media sphere is to ensure that feminist and LGBT+ actors are adequately prepared for potential challenges:

It is important for us to monitor trends, identify who the opinion leaders are, understand their actions, recognize which arguments they are using, and determine what we need to be prepared for. (FFLO, 3)

Non-engagement is not necessarily a strategic choice; it can also stem from structural constraints within organizations, such as limited financial resources, a small number of activists, time constraints, lack of infrastructure, and similar factors. Consequently, organizations set priorities and concentrate on issues they deem most critical: “It largely depends on our own capacities. We will respond to what we consider very urgent, and we will tolerate what we can to avoid burning out our collective” (IFLO, 3). Our respondents also stressed that, in addition to tactically responding to current challenges, they strive to develop their own discourse and strategies to strengthen their positions and goals: “Feminist activities often focus on responding to the erosion of our rights, but we also need to consider how to establish our own narrative in the long term” (IFLO, 3).

Solidarity Actions and Counter-Protests

In response to anti-gender mobilizations, feminist and LGBT+ actors deploy strategies for direct intervention in public spaces. These strategies

encompass organizing solidarity actions to support victims of hate speech, staging counter-protests in response to demonstrations and public gatherings of anti-gender actors, such as the March for Life, and hosting other public events with an artistic dimension, including cabaret performances and graffiti actions.

An example of a solidarity action supporting victims of hate speech is the “Only Love” campaign. As elucidated by the interviewees from the FFLO (1) organizing body, the campaign was initiated in response to the pervasive hatred in public discourse toward individuals advocating for a more compassionate and tolerant society. The fundamental premise of the campaign is that when an individual in a position of power attacks someone, public support is mobilized for the victim, provided the victim consents. A notable instance of this campaign’s success involved a transgender student who was negatively portrayed in the media. The organization contacted the student, obtained her permission, and with her consent, initiated a wave of public support for her on Facebook and Instagram. Participants in the campaign received a text message detailing the situation regarding this transgender student and providing a link where they could post their supportive and kind messages:

The aim of the campaign was to counteract hateful comments with more positive, loving ones. We found that users prone to hate are more likely to comment than others, creating the impression that there is more hate than there actually is. (FFLO, 1)

Moreover, the goal of this campaign is to find ways to express messages that foster identification and understanding, rather than merely opposition:

I would say that it is necessary to find ways to express what you want to communicate. It should never be solely about opposing by saying ‘no, you are wrong.’ People can relate to and understand a narrative much more than a mere statement of conflict. So, in addition to responding and condemning the wrongdoings, it is essential to continuously explore new ways of communication. (FFLO, 1)

Another example of intervention in public spaces is the organization of counter-protests and counter-rallies in response to demonstrations by anti-gender actors. The purpose of these actions is to raise public awareness of the presence of feminist and LGBT+ actors and to express

opposition to anti-gender efforts. One of the organizations we interviewed organized a counter-protest in 2023 to emphasize the importance of reproductive rights and to advocate for women's right to make decisions about their own bodies:

There have been several smaller actions to disrupt their rallies, but this year we decided that a counter-rally was necessary. [...] We cannot allow them to dominate the media space; we need to clearly state that we are also here and that our opinions must be considered. (IFLO, 3)

Moreover, a significant aspect of the counter-protest that took place alongside the 2023 March for Life was not only the public presentation of a pro-reproductive rights position alongside the anti-abortion stance, but also the actual and symbolic occupation of physical and public space. As one of the rally participants explained: "When we passed through Prešeren Square, we thought, 'This is our space. What are you doing here, taking over this space?' Then we moved in another direction to occupy another part of the public space, our own" (IFLO, 3). Additionally, the same interviewee mentioned that a similar counter-protest was organized by their organization a few years earlier in response to anti-abortion prayers held in front of the gynecology clinic in Ljubljana. During this protest, activists from the organization stood with their own signs, positioned opposite those who were praying.

Among the interventions in public spaces, cabaret performances have become an increasingly common approach to responding to anti-gender discourses within the Slovenian cultural sphere, according to one interviewee: "There are an increasing number of cabarets that playfully mock these discourses, which may reflect a sense of powerlessness, as structurally we don't have the means to address them in any way other than through humor" (IFLO, 6).

Lastly, we can highlight graffiti actions, which is another innovative way of responding to anti-gender messages in public spaces. These actions involve direct visual interventions, where graffiti is used to correct and alter messages that spread misinformation or hate:

We tried to find innovative ways to respond without repeating the incorrect information. For context, the graffiti on the facade read: 'Abortion is murder!' We visually crossed out 'murder' and added statements like: 'Abortion

is a choice, abortion is a right.’ Essentially, we took the original message and corrected it to make it accurate. (FFLO, 2)

Public Education and Awareness Campaigns

An important strategy employed by feminist and LGBT+ actors in response to the anti-gender mobilizations is the comprehensive education and information dissemination to the broader public, while simultaneously refuting false information propagated by anti-gender groups. This approach includes debunking false claims related to opposing equality politics and countering misinformation intended to discredit feminist and LGBT+ movements.

One key tactic for informing and educating the public is creating neutral and accessible resources on important topics. In Slovenia, one such topic is the right to abortion, particularly given the active efforts of anti-gender and anti-abortion groups:

If you Google ‘How to get an abortion,’ the first results are websites that try to dissuade you from having one. That’s why we created a website some time ago that explains the procedures in a very neutral manner. It neither encourages nor discourages abortion. We have now decided to update it to include more information on other areas of reproductive health as well. (FFLO, 1)

The purpose of this website is to provide access to reliable information, which is frequently distorted or concealed by anti-gender and anti-abortion groups, thereby facilitating informed decision-making.

All respondents generally agreed on the importance of providing “education for healthcare staff, school staff, and new generations at all levels wherever possible” (FLA, 1). Within the framework of education, the interviews underscored the strategy of posing questions during training sessions for specific professional groups (e.g., school staff) to stimulate critical thinking and identify weaknesses in the arguments of anti-gender actors. In this way, feminist and LGBT+ actors seek to expose unsupported claims and foster critical thinking among participants:

In training sessions, we usually employ the classic ‘Socratic’ method. I do this by asking participants to explain their questions in more detail. For example, when we are asked, ‘What is your stance on gender theory in

kindergartens?’ we respond by asking them to clarify what they mean by ‘gender theory.’ This often causes them to struggle to provide a clear answer. (FFLO, 2)

In the context of education, one of the FFLO (6) organizations highlighted an initiative centered on toxic masculinity and safe Internet use, conducted on Safer Internet Day. The workshops underscored the importance of human rights education and raised awareness about individuals’ roles in combating harmful stereotypes and misinformation. These sessions aimed to empower participants to create counter-narratives that effectively challenge the falsehoods and prejudices propagated by anti-gender groups. By equipping participants with tools and knowledge for critically evaluating online content, this initiative aimed to foster a more responsible and informed online community.

Moreover, the respondents emphasized that in the fight against anti-gender efforts to undermine equality politics, it is crucial not only to inform and educate but also to raise public awareness about rights and practices established in other parts of the world:

We always aim to use arguments to illustrate what is happening, how Europe has addressed these issues, where the best practices in Europe are, how far we are from these best practices, and where we might excel globally. This is the approach we strive to take. (FFLO, 8)

Education also has a pivotal role in building broader coalitions within society, encompassing various social groups and institutions within the framework of the feminist and LGBT+ agenda. For instance, one of the interviewed FFLO organizations strives to annually integrate new schools trained to work with LGBT+ individuals and to increase the number of non-governmental organizations and youth centers that support LGBT+ youth:

We build the resilience of our current allies and invest in those with the potential to become allies. The majority of our efforts – 90 percent – are focused on proactive activities, while only 10 percent are reactive and more visible externally. Our work often feels Sisyphean, appearing as endless effort without visible progress. Nonetheless, we persist because we recognize that the system itself does not contribute to enhancing the overall resilience of the population or strengthening the institutions that address these issues. (FFLO, 3)

Reporting Threats and Incidents to Authorities

Feminist and LGBT+ actors face numerous challenges, including hate speech, physical attacks, intimidation, threats, and the spread of misinformation about their activities. These challenges arise from broader anti-gender mobilizations that normalize a hostile environment and foster violent acts. Addressing these issues involves regularly reporting such instances to the relevant authorities. This aspect of their activities is crucial: “In addition to action plans, such as organizing campaigns, we regularly submit reports to the journalistic and ethical tribunal, the Advocate of the Principle of Equality, and the Human Rights Ombudsperson” (FFLO, 2).

Even organizations that initially did not report attacks and threats later recognized the necessity of doing so. Initially, they attempted to downplay the significance of the threats, but eventually, they acknowledged the need to set a positive example and take active measures through reporting and filing complaints. Reporting became a crucial component of their strategy, as it demonstrated their commitment to combating discrimination and violence, while also encouraging others to take similar actions: “If we are fighting against hate speech, it is important to demonstrate how it should be addressed through legal means” (FFLO, 1).

The organizations further elucidated that this strategy has systemic limitations, which are evident in the inadequate responses from relevant institutions:

At the press conference where we were standing, we experienced three incidents of yelling and spitting at us. [...] We were told that this is simply not considered hate speech and cannot be treated as such. This reveals a significant lack of legislation in this area. (FFLO, 4)

There is also a problematic imbalance of power between activists and those who attack them. Organizations lack sufficient mechanisms for protection and preparation in such situations, which exacerbates their sense of vulnerability. “The power dynamics between us and the individuals who seek to discredit us are never equal. Being forced to defend ourselves against this speech or to think about how to respond puts us in a difficult position” (FFLO, 4). However, despite systemic obstacles and shortcomings, organizations believe it is essential to continue reporting such acts:

This issue is truly systemic, and we cannot ignore that these individuals are also prisoners of the same ideologies that bind us. However, this does not absolve them of responsibility – we still report them. One of our strategies is to report extensively. We also report advertisements that are explicitly ‘gendered’. (FFLO, 4)

Social Media Moderation and Messaging Control

In the digital media sphere, feminist and LGBT+ organizations strategically moderate communication on social media platforms to prevent the visibility and dissemination of anti-gender viewpoints and hateful comments. Through this strategic moderation, detailed further below, they actively resist not only the anti-gender discourse itself but also the broader conditions of the contemporary digital media environment that facilitate the perpetuation of anti-gender viewpoints and populist discourse in general.

The most recognizable tactic in the context of strategic moderation on social media platforms is undoubtedly the deletion of hateful comments and the blocking of users who post them: “We block almost all hateful content on our profile; we don’t engage with it at all. [...] Sometimes we leave it up so that people can see the absurdity and form their own opinions” (FFLO, 5). The objective of deleting hateful comments and blocking the users who disseminate them is not solely to prevent the visibility and virality of such discourse but also to safeguard members of the minority community who are targets of anti-gender attacks: “We save the hateful comment and then delete it as quickly as possible. We don’t want to expose our users to this hatred, so we work to remove it promptly” (FFLO, 4). The activists interviewed retain hateful comments to maintain a record for potential reporting or other legal proceedings. By storing these comments, they document patterns of hateful behavior, which can serve as evidence when reporting hate speech to relevant authorities or when defending against potential accusations. Additionally, this record enables organizations to better understand the nature and extent of hostility. As explained by the activists, documenting hateful comments allows them to track trends and changes in hate discourse, thereby aiding in the development of long-term strategies for protecting their members and communities.

Lastly, feminist and LGBT+ actors impose restrictions on who can respond to their posts to prevent hateful and vulgar reactions. This

approach enables organizations to focus on disseminating significant content and messages without constant disruptions and attacks:

Twitter [now X] has become a very unpleasant social network where the level of communication has drastically declined – to the point where I can no longer even call it a discussion. Therefore, we have implemented restrictions on who can respond to our posts. This measure is absolutely necessary because the responses we receive do not contribute anything meaningful, least of all to dialogue. (IFLO, 4)

DISCUSSION

Based on our interview analysis, it is evident that feminist and LGBT+ actors in Slovenia have devised at least five key strategies to counter anti-gender mobilizations. These strategies vary in their approach to employing “antagonistic politics”: some engage directly with antagonistic structures (e.g., solidarity actions and counter-protests), others aim to overcome them (e.g., social media moderation and messaging control, informing and educating the public, reporting threats and attacks), and some operate by ignoring the antagonism altogether (e.g., strategic non-engagement). However, by categorizing identified strategies into these three groups, we do not imply that they can be neatly separated in practice. In reality, strategies from different groups intertwine and mutually influence each other. Nevertheless, this division into three categories allows us to more easily identify their *modus operandi* within the existing social context represented by “antagonistic politics.”

Regarding strategies that engage directly with antagonistic structures, the most notable is the online solidarity campaign known as “Just Love.” In this campaign, activists sent messages of compassion, love, and support to individuals who had been victims of hate speech or violence. This action is significant as it directly engages with one of the main structures of “antagonistic politics,” namely affect and emotional communication. Similar to how anti-gender actors exploit affective communication to generate “politics of fear” centered around perceived threats of “gender theory” to children, families, and the Slovenian nation, feminist and LGBT+ actors seek to leverage this same structural opportunity to spread positive emotions. In this case, feminist and LGBT+ actors do not start from a position of denying or overcoming “antagonistic politics.” Instead, they directly engage with its structural characteristics and attempt to exploit

them to advance their agenda. Moreover, the example of the “Just Love” campaign is also significant because it demonstrates how affect, as one of the fundamental structural characteristics of “antagonistic politics,” not only forms the basis for constructing “politics of fear” but can also be mobilized to build a more tolerant and inclusive society.

Another important example of a strategy that directly addresses antagonistic structures is counter-protests. A protest relies on visibility in both physical and media spaces, as news about a particular protest can quickly spread across the digital media sphere, a fundamental arena of contemporary “antagonistic politics.” When feminist and LGBT+ actors organize counter-protests to those staged by anti-gender actors, they challenge the notion that only anti-gender agendas should dominate the physical and digital spaces. With counter-protests, they strive for their agenda to be equally or even more visible, highlighting that anti-gender actors are not the sole voices in the public sphere. As I explained in the introduction to this chapter, the visibility of anti-gender positions is the primary condition for their normalization and legitimization in public, enabling them to infiltrate the dominant political dialogue and shift the boundaries of what is considered normal, as Wodak (2020) notes. Thus, striving for visibility in physical and digital spaces by feminist and LGBT+ actors through counter-protests and similar actions means directly addressing antagonistic structural conditions, as visibility is a key means of establishing legitimacy in the dominant political dialogue.

In contrast to strategies that engage directly with existing antagonistic structural opportunities, some strategies aim to transcend the existing antagonism itself. These strategies do not seek to engage with antagonistic structures but instead act in opposition to their logic, attempting to neutralize and mitigate them. One example of such a strategy is social media moderation and messaging control. Organizations employing this strategy actively confront and resist the structural conditions of contemporary digital communication, which facilitate the proliferation of anti-gender stances. By deleting comments and directing the discussion, they not only prevent the visibility of anti-gender positions and reduce the chances of these messages becoming viral and resonant, but they also directly oppose the logic of contemporary social media. This logic structurally favors the virality of scandalous, negative content that intensifies existing antagonistic relations.

Another example of strategies aimed at overcoming antagonistic conditions includes informing and educating the public, as well as reporting

threats and attacks to relevant authorities. Educating the public seeks to neutralize existing antagonism by raising awareness about anti-gender mobilizations and clarifying their true implications for current equality policies. This strategy involves providing credible and accurate information, avoiding oversimplified answers to complex social issues, and refraining from spreading “moral panic” around specific issues in the field of equality policies. Moreover, reporting incidents helps reduce antagonistic conditions by ensuring that authorities are aware of these incidents and can prosecute them accordingly. This approach increases the likelihood that the public will learn about these incidents and develop zero tolerance toward them, thereby alleviating antagonism and building a consensus that all forms of violence are unacceptable.

Strategies that ignore existing antagonism in equality policies fall into a third category. These strategies neither engage with nor attempt to overcome the antagonistic structures. However, they can still contribute to mitigating antagonism, as demonstrated by the approach of strategic non-engagement. This approach includes a range of tactics aimed at preventing the recognition and visibility of anti-gender stances in public discourse. The goal of strategic non-engagement is to ignore antagonism in a way that avoids granting greater legitimacy to anti-gender actors by not responding to their provocations or engaging with them in public dialogue, such as at roundtable discussions. This approach demonstrates that ignoring antagonism can also be an effective means to reduce it.

However, ignoring the antagonistic reality can also contribute to the intensification of existing antagonism, thereby bolstering the success of anti-gender mobilizations. Our interviewees discussed the neglect and ignorance of these antagonistic conditions in the context of clear and accessible communication. They were highly critical of this strategy, considering it an underdeveloped approach within feminist and LGBT+ activities:

Sometimes, it seems that right-wing groups use very simple language that everyone understands, appealing to common sense. [...] In contrast, when feminist movements address the public, they often rely too heavily on terms that are not widely recognized. This reliance can result in a significant loss of audience because their message comes across as academic speech rather than common sense. (IFLO, 2)

We can speculate that the interviewed organization did not adapt its communication to the antagonistic reality primarily due to its structural position. Whether feminist and LGBT+ organizations respond to anti-gender mobilizations and to what extent they adapt their strategies to the antagonistic reality depends primarily on their structural characteristics. These include financial resources, social capital, activist base, media access, institutional support, political context, and legal frameworks. Thus, the ability of an organization to respond and adapt strategies to the antagonistic reality depends on the level of privilege it holds, a factor that was also noticeable in our interviews. Although we cannot reveal the names of the organizations due to anonymity, we observe that those that are more visible and stronger in terms of funding, resources, and knowledge tend to practice more sophisticated strategies and are better equipped to engage with existing antagonistic structures. However, this disparity in privilege is evident not only between formal and informal organizations but also within formal organizations themselves.

Moreover, the success of any strategy, regardless of its sophistication, ultimately hinges on the broader social context. This was clearly demonstrated in the 2015 marriage equality referendum in Slovenia. Despite feminist and LGBT+ advocates crafting a thoughtful campaign that strategically leveraged the “affect” of love to navigate antagonistic structural conditions, it fell short. Anti-gender actors held significant structural advantages, including staunch support of the Roman Catholic Church and backing from the right-wing political bloc. In contrast, the left coalition bloc lacked uniform, unequivocal, and decisive support for marriage equality.

Almost 10 years later, our interviewees reported a similar unequal structural situation between feminist and LGBT+ organizations on one hand and anti-gender organizations on the other:

The problem we continually face is the influx of American money from ultraconservative and anti-abortion lobbies and radical religious organizations. This funding, amounting to millions, supports conservative movements across Central and Eastern Europe with the primary goal of erasing us. These large systemic issues are, in my view, extremely problematic. (FFLO, 3)

Another crucial factor influencing the success of a particular strategy is the social minority that the organization represents. Although this is not

directly evident in our analysis due to the anonymity of the responses, organizations advocating for the rights of transgender individuals reported the greatest difficulties in dealing with anti-gender reactions. This is attributed to the fact that the transgender community receives the least public acceptance among the sub-groups that constitute the LGBT+ community in Slovenia (see Podreka et al., 2019).

In summary, the success and effectiveness of strategies employed by feminist and LGBT+ organizations to counter anti-gender mobilizations depend on various structural factors, including financial resources, social capital, activist base, media access, institutional support, political context, and legal frameworks. Organizations better endowed with these resources are more capable of developing effective strategies. The broader social context, particularly support from political and religious institutions, also significantly impacts the effectiveness of these strategies. Additionally, the specific social minority represented influences the organization's capacity to respond to antagonistic conditions. Therefore, we can conclude that adapting to political antagonism is broadly conditioned by all these aforementioned structural factors, rather than solely depending on the agency of individual organizations or actors.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we analyzed the responses of feminist and LGBT+ movements to anti-gender mobilizations in Slovenia. Our focus was on understanding how these movements address anti-gender attacks on equality politics within the framework of "antagonistic politics," which represents an objective social framework that conditions the opportunities and obstacles for strategies to achieve specific political goals. Through interviews with representatives of the Slovenian feminist and LGBT+ movements, we discovered that these organizations and actors employ various strategies to counter anti-gender mobilizations. These strategies can be categorized based on their approach to antagonistic structures, including direct engagement with such structures through online solidarity actions and counter-protests, overcoming them through social media moderation and public education, and ignoring them via strategic non-engagement. Moreover, the effectiveness of strategies used by feminist and LGBT+ organizations against anti-gender mobilizations is influenced by structural factors such as financial resources, social capital, media access, institutional support, political context, and legal frameworks. Additionally, the broader

social context and the specific social minorities represented also significantly impact the ability to respond to antagonistic conditions, indicating that adaptation to political antagonism is shaped by these structural factors rather than solely by individual agency.

In our analysis of interviews with feminist and LGBT+ organizations and actors, the digital media sphere emerged as a significant domain for contemporary struggles over equality politics. Thus, we recommend that future research on the responses of feminist and LGBT+ organizations to anti-gender mobilizations should more closely examine the structural opportunities and obstacles presented by the digital media sphere. Given the logic of contemporary social media, which relies heavily on short posts and algorithmic content selection, it is pertinent to investigate how specific feminist and LGBT+ strategies, characteristic of “antagonistic politics,” such as the mobilization of affect and techniques like storytelling, are realized. Furthermore, within the framework of the hybrid media system model (Chadwick, 2017), it would be valuable to explore what strategies, if any, feminist and LGBT+ actors employ to penetrate mass media reporting and achieve broad public visibility. A comprehensive analysis of these factors could enhance our understanding of how feminist and LGBT+ organizations effectively utilize the digital media sphere to defend and advance equality politics, particularly in areas where equality has not yet been fully realized.

REFERENCES

- Ahrens, P., Gaweda, B., & Kantola, J. (2021). Reframing the language of human rights? Political group contestations on women’s and LGBTQI rights in European Parliament debates. *Journal of European Integration*, 44(6), 803–819. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2021.2001647>
- Antić Gaber, M., & Kuhar, R. (2019). Identitetna gibanja in politike spola in seksualnosti v Sloveniji. In R. Kuhar (Ed.), *Identitete na presečišču kriz* (pp. 101–122). Znanstvena založba Filozofske fakultete.
- Böhmová, L. (2024). We are civil society!: Strategic practice used by the Croatian feminist movement to address the controversy around the right to abortion as a response to growing conservatism. *Intersections. East European Journal of Society and Politics*, 10(2), 132–150. <https://doi.org/10.17356/icejsp.v10i2.1273>
- Chadwick, A. (2017). *The hybrid media system: Politics and power*. Oxford University Press.

- Datta, N. (2018). *Restoring the natural order: The religious extremists' vision to mobilize European societies against human rights on sexuality and reproduction*. European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights. Retrieved May 20, 2023, from https://www.epfweb.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/rtno_EN_epf_online_2021.pdf
- Datta, N. (2021). *Tip of the iceberg: Religious extremist funders against human rights for sexuality and reproductive health in Europe 2009–2018*. European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights. Retrieved May 20, 2023, from <https://www.epfweb.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/Tip%20of%20the%20Iceberg%20August%202021%20Final.pdf>
- Kovač Šebart, M., & Kuhar, R. (2015). Med formalnim okvirom in strokovno avtonomijo: Predšolska vzgoja in pluralizacija družinskega življenja. *Sodobna Pedagogika*, 66(1), 88–103.
- Kovač Šebart, M., & Kuhar, R. (2017). The pluralisation of family life: Implications for preschool education. *CEPS Journal: Center for Educational Policy Studies Journal*, 7(3), 155–171. <https://doi.org/10.26529/cepsj.292>
- Kováts, E. (2018). Questioning consensus: Right-wing populism, anti-populism, and the threat of 'gender ideology'. *Sociological Research Online*, 23(2), 528–538. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1360780418764735>
- Kralj, A., Rener, T., Leskošek, V., Mencin, M., Ule, M., & Kurdija, S. (2024). *Abortion and reproductive rights in Slovenia: A case of resistance*. Routledge.
- Krzyżanowski, M., Wodak, R., Bradby, H., Gardell, M., Kallis, A., Krzyżanowska, N., Mudde, C., & Rydgren, J. (2023). Discourses and practices of the 'new normal'. *Journal of Language and Politics*, 22(4), 415–437. <https://doi.org/10.1075/jlp.23024.krz>
- Kuhar, R. (2015a). Playing with science: Sexual citizenship and the Roman Catholic Church counter-narratives in Slovenia and Croatia. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 49, 84–92. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsisf.2014.07.005>
- Kuhar, R. (2015b). Konec je sveta, kakršnega poznamo: Populistične strategije nasprotnikov Družinskega zakonika. *Časopis za Kritiko Znanosti*, 43(260), 118–132.
- Kuhar, R. (2017). Changing gender several times a day: The anti-gender movement in Slovenia. In R. Kuhar & D. Paternotte (Eds.), *Anti-gender campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against equality* (pp. 215–232). Rowman & Littlefield.
- Kuhar, R. (2022). How the anti-gender movement contributed to marriage equality in Slovenia. *The Illiberalism Studies Program, Culture Wars Papers*, 36. Retrieved June 5, 2024, from <https://www.illiberalism.org/how-the-anti-gender-movement-contributed-to-marriage-equality-in-slovenia/>
- Kuhar, R., & Pajnik, M. (2020). Populist mobilizations in re-traditionalized society: Anti-gender campaigning in Slovenia. In G. Dietze & J. Roth (Eds.),

- Right-wing populism and gender: European perspectives and beyond* (pp. 167–184). transcript Verlag.
- Kuhar, R., & Paternotte, D. (2017). The anti-gender movement in comparative perspective. In R. Kuhar & D. Paternotte (Eds.), *Anti-gender campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against equality* (pp. 253–276). Rowman & Littlefield.
- Mattoni, A., & Treré, E. (2014). Media practices, mediation processes, and mediation in the study of social movements. *Communication Theory*, 24(3), 252–271. <https://doi.org/10.1111/comt.12038>
- Mayer, S., & Sauer, B. (2017). ‘Gender ideology’ in Austria: Coalitions around an empty signifier. In R. Kuhar & D. Paternotte (Eds.), *Anti-gender campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against equality* (pp. 23–40). Rowman & Littlefield.
- Mouffe, C. (2013). *Agonistics: Thinking the world politically*. Verso.
- Mouffe, C. (2018). *For a left populism*. Verso.
- Pajnik, M. (2023). Transformations of the media sphere: Amplifying opportunity structures for populism. In P. Diehl & B. Bargetz (Eds.), *The complexity of populism: New approaches and methods* (pp. 161–177). Routledge.
- Pajnik, M., Šori, I., & Kuhar, R. (2016). Populism in the Slovenian context: Between ethno-nationalism and re-traditionalisation. In G. Lazaridis, G. Campani, & A. Benveniste (Eds.), *The rise of the far right in Europe: Populist shifts and “othering”* (pp. 137–160). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Papacharissi, Z. (2015). *Affective publics: Sentiment, technology, and politics*. Oxford University Press.
- Paternotte, D. (2023). Victor Frankenstein and his creature: The many lives of ‘gender ideology’. *International Review of Sociology*, 33(1), 80–104. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03906701.2023.2187833>
- Paternotte, D., & Kuhar, R. (2018). Disentangling and locating the “global right”: Anti-gender campaigns in Europe. *Politics and Governance*, 6(3), 6–19. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v6i3.1557>
- Perger, N., & Smrdelj, R. (2024). “First our children, then our gender”: The anti-gender mobilization in Slovenia. In R. Kuhar & A. Zaharijević (Eds.), *Anti-gender mobilizations in the post-Yugoslav space*. Palgrave Macmillan. Forthcoming.
- Podreka, J., Smrdelj, R., & Kuhar, R. (2019). Acceptance with reservations: LGBT people in Slovenia. In G. Piotr & G. Viggiani (Eds.), *Awareness of anti-LGBT hate crime in the European Union* (pp. 180–197). Lambda Warsaw.
- Popič, D., & Gorjanc, V. (2022). Corpus-linguistic analysis of speech communities on anti-gender discourse in Slovene. *Gender a Výzkum/Gender and Research*, 23(2), 140–166. <https://doi.org/10.13060/gav.2022.020>
- Šabec, K., Mencin, M., & Perger, N. (2021). A dry branch on the nation’s body: The nation’s biological reproduction between gender and sexuality. *Razprave in Gradivo: Revija za Narodnostna Vprašanja*, 87(87), 69–85. <https://doi.org/10.36144/rig87.dec21.69-85>

- Smrdelj, R., & Kuhar, R. (2024). Neokonservativna opozicija politikam enakosti: Antigendersko gibanje v Sloveniji. *Social Science Forum, XL*. Forthcoming.
- Smrdelj, R., & Pajnik, M. (2022). Intersectional representation in online media discourse: Reflecting anti-discrimination position in reporting on same-sex partnerships. *Gender, Technology and Development, 26*(3), 463–484. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09718524.2022.2144100>
- Smrdelj, R., Kuhar, R., & Kalin Golob, M. (2024). Expanding boundaries: “Gender theory” and Twitter debate on gender-sensitive language. *Intersections: East European Journal of Society and Politics, 3*. Forthcoming.
- Sobočan, A. M., & Pollak, S. (2016). Manifestacije moralne panike v medijskih podobah novele družinske zakonodaje. *Časopis za Kritiko Znanosti, 44*(266), 163–187.
- Vezjak, B. (2018). Seksizem in mizoginija skozi psevdoznanstveni diskurz: Medijski konteksti obravnave “napačnega spola”. *Javnost—The Public, 25*(Suppl 1), S97–S113. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2018.1554314>
- Wodak, R. (2015). *The politics of fear: What right-wing populist discourses mean*. Sage.
- Wodak, R. (2020). ‘The boundaries of what can be said have shifted’: An expert interview with Ruth Wodak (Questions posed by Andreas Schulz). *Discourse & Society, 31*(2), 235–244. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926519889109>

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if you modified the licensed material. You do not have permission under this license to share adapted material derived from this chapter or parts of it.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter’s Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter’s Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copy-right holder.





The Battle of Concepts: French Feminist Mobilizations Against the Far Right's Appropriation of the Feminist Legacy

Ségolène Pruvot

INTRODUCTION¹

On November 19, 2022, during the annual demonstration against sexist and sexual violence organized by the feminist collective *NousToutes* around November 25 (International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women), the far-right group *Némésis* infiltrated the march, wearing outfits resembling niqabs. Their banners displayed slogans such as “My burqa, my choice,” “Feminist and Islamist,” and “My Koran, my laws.” The aim of these identitarian activists was to “denounce the inconsistency of neo-feminism with respect to political Islam, the fact that today, they

¹I am indebted to Mounia E. Kotni, Gabrielle Jourde, and Laetitia Caumes for their contributions to the collection and analysis of the data.

S. Pruvot (✉)
European Alternatives, Paris, France
e-mail: s.pruvot@euroalter.com

© The Author(s) 2025
R. Smrdelj, R. Kuhar (eds.), *Anti-Gender Mobilizations in Europe and the Feminist Response*, Palgrave Studies in European Political Sociology, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-87693-6_4

tolerate Islamist slogans more than anti-immigration ones,” as explained by Alice Cordier (in Simovic, 2022), spokesperson for *Némésis*.

Media-focused flash actions are one of the favored strategies of this new breed of extreme right-wing groups. Small groups like *Les Antigones* or *Némésis*—limited in numbers of their members but with significant media presence and social media followings—position themselves as the true defenders of women’s rights, contrasting their actions with those of “neo-feminists,” “woke,” and “islamo-leftist” feminists, whom they claim endanger women and women’s rights.

Since La Manif Pour Tous (The Protest For All, LMPT) in 2013, anti-gender movements in France have become more active in the public sphere. They vehemently oppose what they derogatorily term “gender theory” or “gender ideology.” Initially, these movements focused on opposing marriage equality and same-sex families. However, since 2018, their focus has shifted primarily to opposing feminism, which they perceive as unnatural due to its differentiation between sex and gender. Transgender rights and medically assisted procreation (MAP) for all have become prime targets for anti-gender activists, with feminist movements advocating for transgender rights becoming one of their main adversaries. Anti-gender movements strive to appropriate the legacy of feminism, positioning themselves as the true defenders of women’s rights against what they consider deviant feminist movements.

This chapter analyzes the strategies of anti-gender activists in France, who target “woke” feminism as their primary adversary, examining the impact on feminist movements and the strategies these movements have developed to counter these attacks. This provides insight into the actual impact of anti-gender mobilization on the ability of intersectional trans-feminist movements² to continue defending women’s and LGBT+ rights. While anti-gender and anti-feminism are not equivalent terms, the current focus of anti-gender actors in France on anti-feminist mobilization allows us to move beyond the initial focus on La Manif Pour Tous and its demonstrations against marriage equality. Despite the proliferation of new far-right, identitarian, and ultra-conservative groups, Christine Bard et al.

²Trans-feminist movements refer to feminist groups that defend transgender rights and welcome transgender individuals as peers within their communities. The term “intersectionality,” coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, is now widely used by feminist movements to demonstrate their understanding and recognition that various forms of oppression, including racial discrimination, intersect. Feminism, therefore, must be sensitive to these intersections and committed to combating all forms of domination.

(2019b) notes that “anti-feminism still benefits from relative intellectual disinterest.” Recent works, such as Magali Della Sudda’s (2022) analysis of new extreme right-wing women’s movements, have begun to address this gap, and this chapter contributes to that literature.

The first section of the chapter synthesizes the rise of anti-gender movements over the last decade, clarifying the context in which feminist strategies were deployed. It reveals how the right-wing conservative mobilization against “Le mariage pour tous” (marriage equality, marriage for all) provided a training ground for a new constellation of anti-gender actors (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Bard et al., 2019b) and how conservative forces were offered the opportunity to reframe the debate around gender and feminism. It details how the feminist legacy is being appropriated by the extreme right wing to serve discriminatory purposes and provide a new definition of the nation. It exposes the main lines of arguments and new repertoires of action developed, which often mirror the practices of left-leaning social movements. It also reveals how anti-gender actors, often aligned with the extreme right, have been able to leverage an intersectionality of hate (Bard et al., 2019b), mixing anti-gender, anti-migrant, and anti-Islam positions to discredit feminist movements and attack women’s and LGBT+ rights.

The second part of the chapter provides a classification and analysis of the strategies developed by feminist movements in response to anti-gender attacks. This section identifies seven main types of responses employed by feminist movements, showcasing the dynamism and adaptability of feminism in France over the past decade. These responses are categorized into two primary groups: direct responses and long-term strategies. Direct responses involve immediate and reactive measures to counteract anti-gender attacks, focusing on mitigating their immediate impact. In contrast, long-term strategies are proactive and sustained efforts aimed at fostering systemic change, building resilience, and promoting a positive cultural shift to support feminist movements over time.

ANTI-GENDER MOBILIZATION IN FRANCE

In 2019, twenty years after the publication of her landmark study on anti-feminism, historian Christine Bard wrote:

Twenty years after *A Century of Anti-Feminism*, an intellectual mobilization is taking place (...) It delves into the history of French anti-feminism, explor-

ing its links with the extreme right, pro-family conservatives, natalists, and religions. It shows its contemporary developments in response to issues such as co-education, gender, the legalization of same-sex marriage, and, in a word, ‘sexual democracy’. (2019b, pp. 7–8)

Bard’s latest volume shows that even though anti-feminist movements are more of a constellation than a single group (Devreux & Lamoureux, 2012), gender is becoming an organizing concept for many of them.

To date, most studies on anti-gender and anti-feminism in France concentrate on La Manif Pour Tous, the conservative, anti-gender, and homophobic network which is considered the beginning of anti-gender mobilizations in France, and to some extent, across Europe (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). In 2012, presidential candidate François Hollande promised to legalize same-sex marriage, making matrimonial union open for all without gender discrimination (*Mariage pour tous*). Even before the parliamentary debates on marriage equality, a strong opposition emerged, including from the Catholic Church, right-wing politicians, and sympathetic media (Hugonnier, 2021). The government was surprised by the large turnout of these protests, considering that in the previous decade, many of the involved actors had been relatively inactive and unnoticed, with anti-abortion and anti-contraception activism largely fading from public attention. However, LMPT’s significant size was due to the preparedness of conservative and Catholic movements, supported by the Vatican and other international links. As Kuhar and Paternotte (2017, p. 4) point out, mobilizations against “*Mariage pour tous*” were “generally understood as another French exception, overlooking the similarities with forms of resistance elsewhere, as well as their anteriority in countries like Spain, Italy, Croatia or Slovenia.”

Despite months of intense mobilization and protests, the “*Mariage pour tous*” act was passed in the spring of 2013. The movement’s scale led some to refer to it as the “Conservative May 68” (Brustier, 2014). The LMPT protests also marked the moment when “gender” became a contested term for the French public. Its opponents explicitly linked the term with American academia in order to position it strategically as a suspect “foreign import.” “Gender theory” became the theme around which diverse groups could organize, renewing a conservative and largely Catholic opposition to female and LGBT+ emancipation and equality (Fassin, 2001). Interestingly, the French anti-gender movement is the only one in Europe—alongside the Slovenian anti-gender movement—that

refers to “gender theory,” while the term “gender ideology” is used by anti-gender movements in other European countries and globally.

In this context, in September 2013, the government launched “Les ABCD de l’égalité” (The ABCDs of Equality), an experimental program in 600 schools across the country to raise awareness about gender stereotypes. As soon as the project was announced, LMPT and their allies, including right-wing Muslim parents and public personalities (Gallot & Pasquier, 2018), launched a massive campaign involving street protests, spreading false information online, and targeted cyber-attacks. The program’s opponents claimed that the ABCDs were teaching explicit sexual content to children (Picq, 2014) and brainwashing them with “gender theory” (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Gallot & Pasquier, 2018; Harsin, 2018; Stambolis-Ruhstorfer & Tricou, 2018; Harsin, 2018). Although initial results were encouraging among participating classes, the project was canceled after a teacher received death threats (Blézat, 2022). One consequence of the LMPT battle against the ABCD de l’égalité was the removal of the word “gender” from some educational content (Gallot & Pasquier, 2018).

Before 2022, anti-gender movements had limited legislative success, beyond the withdrawal of the ABCD de l’Egalité. However, their influence within the state has been documented, notably concerning the weight given to fathers’ rights movements in discussions about children’s rights, as seen in the general recognition of the “syndrome of parental alienation” in French jurisdictions (Sueur, 2022). More recently, an official Senate report on gender transitions was heavily influenced by the anti-gender association *Observatoire la Petite Sirène* (Observatory of the Little Mermaid) and adopted as a new law proposal by the Senate in May 2024 (Sénat, 2024).

In 2017, presidential candidate Emmanuel Macron proposed to open medically assisted procreation (MAP) to “all women,” arguing that differentiating between heterosexual and lesbian women was discriminatory. In 2019, the first protest against “MAP for all women” took place, coordinated by the newly formed *Marchons enfants!* collective. This collective includes many former members of LMPT (Béraud, 2021; Hugonnier, 2021). Between 2019 and 2021, protests by both pro- and anti-‘MAP for all’ activists occurred. Although the anti-‘MAP for all’ groups never mobilized as strongly as LMPT, a heated public debate ensued.

Following the adoption of the ‘MAP for all’ law (August 2021), the debate shifted to transgender rights. A heated debate, notably fueled since

2021 by the *Observatoire la Petite Sirène*, is ongoing in French media and public discourse regarding children and teenagers' medical transitions and operations, as well as simplified measures for changing gender officially in the civil status after a transition (proposed since 2017 by trans rights associations and some political parties and supported by the "Defender of Rights"). Strong opposition to the law passed in January 2022, which protects transgender people from involuntary operations aimed at suppressing their gender identity, further fueled the debate.

Avanza and Della Sudda (2017) highlight that, despite the diversity and divergence in socio-economic and educational backgrounds, age of members, and organizational structures within Catholic and nationalist movements—along with their distinct and sometimes antagonistic political cultures—these actors converged in the streets during the demonstrations of 2012 and 2013, and continued to meet sporadically thereafter. The opposition to marriage equality "cemented" their unity. "Sexual questions became central, offering common ground in defending heterosexual families and children" (Avanza & Della Sudda, 2017, p. 8). This new articulation of sexual and reproductive rights as the core of the national debate converged with the Islamophobic rearticulation of white women's rights defense against the perceived "great replacement" (Lépinard, 2021). Consecutive laws against veiling in public schools and places in France have been grounded in rising Islamophobia, which divided feminist movements into pro-veil and anti-veil groups.

The new "nebula" or constellation of anti-gender and anti-feminist movements appears to have strengthened and consolidated considerably following LMPT, converging on issues linked to reproductive rights. Among the new groups, some have gained considerable influence in the public debate and within political parties, such as *Sens Commun*, a direct offspring of LMPT created in 2013 "with the stated aim of influencing from within the conservative political party, UMP" (Le Monde, 2020). Smaller "radical" extreme right-wing groups, such as the *French Spring* and *Génération Identitaire*, gained visibility, and new public figures emerged, often young women like Thaïs d'Escufon, the then-spokesperson of *Génération Identitaire*.

A recent mapping by C.A.R.T.E (2022), an organization advocating for trans rights, presents a typology of some of the most virulent groups and personalities against trans rights in recent years, broadly covering the landscape of extreme right movements and major public figures in France. The typology includes groups with or without legal existence and

key public figures within six meta-groups: “international influencers,” “eco-essentialists,” “dissident feminists” (i.e., Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists, TERFs), “Traditionalist Catholics,” “Identitarians,” and “pseudo-scientists.” This mapping shows the interconnections between individuals and groups, revealing how the same figures frequently appear within different groups in the same circles.

THE RISE OF “ALTER-FEMINIST,” MASCULINIST, AND ANTI-TRANS GROUPS

As “traditional” anti-gender actors continue to evolve, a notable recent development in anti-gender activism in France is the emergence of so called alter-feminist and masculinist groups. These groups co-opt the discourse of women’s rights to advance broader conservative agendas, often targeting feminist groups through street protests and extensive use of social media. They also use media campaigns to challenge the legitimacy of “neo-feminists”—a pejorative term used to describe contemporary feminist movements—in advocating for women’s rights.

The term alter-feminists encompass various groups—such as *Antigones*, *Némésis*, and *Les Femellistes*—claiming a feminist identity rooted in natural sex differences. Described by Della Sudda (2022) as “the new right-wing women,” these groups constitute active sub-groups within the anti-gender movement in France. They create micro-groups ostensibly defending women’s rights against perceived threats from “neo-feminists,” whom they accuse of neglecting women’s interests and downplaying gender-based violence by immigrant or non-European men (Della Sudda, 2022). Some adopt feminist terminology while emphasizing their distinctiveness, such as “féministes intégrales” (Delaporte, 2018) or “alterféministes” (Causeur, 2016). Others reject Western feminism entirely, aligning with what Farris (2017) labels as femonationalism, opposing perceived threats from foreign cultures.

Led by public figures or small collectives seeking media attention, groups and movements like *Les Antigones*, *Les Femellistes*, and *Némésis* mobilize around three main discursive themes: defending women’s rights against what they view as diluted forms of feminism, highlighting threats posed by foreigners and Islam to white women’s rights, and opposing trans rights and “gender ideology.” While adopting tactics similar to

progressive movements, these groups fundamentally promote a conservative interpretation of women's and reproductive rights.

Les Antigones, initially formed in 2013 as a women's movement emerging from protests against the legalization of same-sex marriage, initially operated as a collective. The movement arose in direct response to the feminist activism of FEMEN, known for provocative street demonstrations featuring slogans painted on their exposed chests, which garnered significant media attention during the 2010s. *Les Antigones* began with a flash action infiltrating FEMEN for several weeks before staging a deliberate confrontation. According to Labussière (2017), the movement's core ethos revolves around articulating an "alter-feminist" perspective, aimed at countering egalitarian and liberal feminist ideologies.

Les Antigones advocates for the importance of religious values, the complementarity between men and women, and alliances with men rather than what they perceive as adversarial relationships. Their public debut video, titled "Antigones: The Dissolution of the FEMEN,"³ features 25 young white women dressed in white, delivering a manifesto criticizing FEMEN as foreign-led "naked breast activists,"⁴ benefiting from institutional protection of the police. The group portrays itself as reclaiming a voice they believe has been misrepresented by feminists, asserting their sole viable platform is the Internet. They employ rhetoric emphasizing dignity against what they perceive as the degradation of women's bodies by FEMEN's actions.

In subsequent years, despite a decline in membership as documented by Della Sudda (2022) and continued presence in online "re-information" media channels, *Les Antigones* maintains support from far-right activists and political training institutions like the *Institut de Formation Politique*. Post-#MeToo and the temporary disappearance of FEMEN, their focus shifted to denouncing "neo-feminism," exemplified by Anne Trewby's critique in her 2021 book *Neofeminism: An Assault on the Internet*, which critiques #MeToo and subsequent waves of feminist thought as promoting "woke" ideas online.

³<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x10jm6s>, May 25, 2013.

⁴<https://lesantigones.fr/>, accessed March 15, 2024. The accusation that FEMEN is foreign-led refers to the fact that two founders of FEMEN were Ukrainian. The video calls for the two Ukrainian leaders of FEMEN to go back to Ukraine and for all funding to FEMEN—directly or indirectly—to be stopped.

Emerging in the post-#MeToo era, new anti-feminist entities such as *Némésis* (founded in 2019) embody a more overtly anti-Islamic stance under the guise of defending women's rights. This convergence of women's rights advocacy with Islamophobia, termed "femonationalism" (Farris, 2017), reflects a shared ideological framework between certain feminist groups and extreme right-wing ideologies, pointing out that there is a greater gender equality in Western Europe compared to Muslim-majority countries (Lépinard, 2021). This discourse leverages legislative actions against veiling in France and makes use of incidents like the 2016 Cologne sexual assaults to promote anti-feminist and anti-migrant sentiments. *Némésis*, self-described as an "identitarian feminist" collective, emphasizes a confrontational approach both online and through street activism, utilizing social media to disseminate their messages and challenge mainstream feminist narratives. In their Manifesto⁵ they claim to be the "Cologne generation" and the "the island where the castaways of feminism can take refuge." They claim that so-called feminist movements prefer to "promote a leftist ideology at the expense of women," and therefore they have "decided to take up the fight to defend Western women."

Della Sudda (2022) characterizes *Némésis* as engaged in "keyboard activism" that extends into physical spaces through street demonstrations, leveraging social media not merely for communication but as a deliberate tool for political influence. Their tactics include disruptive flash actions and symbolic protests featuring women wearing full veils, promoting a racist and identitarian agenda with an extensive use of misinformation on social media. This strategy mirrors that of non-feminist, far-right groups like *Génération Identitaire*, which was established after LMPT and is now officially dissolved.

Such a repertoire of actions and reframing of debates is also utilized by newly emerged masculinist groups in France, such as *Hoministes* or *Zéromacho*. They also reject the distinction between sex and gender, viewing "gender theory" as a primary adversary. They advocate for men's rights in what they perceive as a society favoring women. These groups employ traditional lobbying methods within policy-making arenas, alongside contemporary tactics such as flash mobs and direct online attacks on feminist movements.

The diversity within these "masculinist" movements is well documented (Bard et al., 2019b), and their evolution in France illustrates a tendency to

⁵ <https://www.collectif-nemesis.com/manifeste>, accessed March 15, 2024.

repurpose and reinterpret aspects of the feminist legacy. For instance, the group *Zéromacho* positions itself as an organization of “men against prostitution and for equality,” opposing what they describe as “transactivists, pro-prostitution, and pro-veil” groups (Montreynaud in Charlie Hebdo, 2022). Founded by Florence Montreynaud, a former member of *Chiennes de Garde* (initially a feminist organization, now openly anti-gender), *Zéromacho* exemplifies this trend.

Another French-speaking masculinist movement, *Hominisme*, distances itself from other anti-feminist discourses. Kunert (2017) notes that Hoministes advocate for the feminization and neutralization of professional titles to symbolically open access for men to jobs traditionally dominated by women, such as positions in childcare.⁶

Bard et al. (2019a) highlight how masculinist movements have successfully infiltrated institutions, organizing conferences, activities, and events during weeks dedicated to gender equality, particularly within public administrations, where their lobbying is mostly unnoticed.

Since 2017 and the introduction of the Medically Assisted Procreation for All Act, various anti-gender activists, self-described as “alter-feminists” or “femalists,” alongside masculinist movements, have gained visibility. This law, aimed at increasing access to medically assisted procreation for lesbian couples and single mothers, was a campaign promise by Emmanuel Macron in 2017 and was enacted in August 2021 following extensive public and parliamentary debates. The resulting polarized public discourse, especially concerning transgender rights, was reignited during parliamentary debates in 2024 regarding the constitutional enshrinement of abortion rights, which included discussions on the right of trans men to abortion.

A group called *Femelliste*, co-founded by former FEMEN member Marguerite Stern and media professional Dora Moutot, exemplifies the anti-trans rights stance. The *Femelliste* Manifesto explicitly challenges trans identity, arguing against what it perceives as the loss of a clear definition of womanhood:

⁶ *Hoministes* should not be confused with *Les Hommes*, a group created in reaction to FEMEN, active around 2013, known for actions such as demanding that FEMEN activists wear clothes and vandalizing the premises of ACT UP. See more: https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/actualites/article/qui-sont-les-hommes_21742.html, accessed March 15, 2024.

We are angry. We can no longer tolerate the prevailing hypocrisy. We live in an absurd time where the answer to the question “What does it mean to be a woman?” no longer seems obvious to everyone. According to certain media, academics, activists, political figures and institutions, being a woman is now a feeling and not a biological reality (...) We have moved from a universalist feminism to an Orwellian feminism subject to transgender ideology where women no longer seem to be the central subject of feminism. (Femelliste Manifesto, 2023)

This manifesto echoes themes found in the *Antigones'* video, emphasizing a need to reclaim women's rights from misguided feminism. Stern's and Moutot's media presence has amplified their message, gaining attention also from some political figures. The framing of transgender rights by Stern and Moutot aligns with socially conservative movements, positioning them as significant figures in the effort to delegitimize “neo-feminist” attempts to promote an inclusive feminist agenda. They are often categorized as Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERFs) by other feminists and in academic literature.

In conclusion, anti-gender actors, invigorated post-#MeToo, have co-opted the discourse on women's rights for an ethno-differentialist agenda, a project that emphasizes ethnic differences, linking them with cultural practices to justify racism through cultural explanations, wherein homophobia and violence against women are portrayed as inherent to the cultures of the “Other.” Lépinard (2021) suggests that this exclusionary feminist discourse involves a power struggle to determine the dominant subject of feminism, with white feminists potentially using femonationalism to maintain their centrality in the feminist movement or to marginalize non-white feminists. This dynamic results in a classification of acceptable and unacceptable feminist practices, evident in the rhetoric against “neo-feminists,” “wokes,” and “islamo-leftists.”

The French feminist movement has experienced significant setbacks, described by some observers as a “backlash phenomenon,” akin to the backlash following 1970s feminist activism. A report by the High Council for Equality between Women and Men (HCE Pierre-Brossolette et al., 2023) tracks this international backlash since the #MeToo movement and highlights the role of the Internet in the growth of masculinist movements and cyberharassment. Anti-feminist groups also use specific media outlets to discredit feminist groups and propagate anti-gender discourses. For instance, *Causeur*, a key anti-feminist publication, featured a provocative

front page in 2015 with the headline: “The feminist terror. Sexism, inequality, harassment... They have their eye on you,” supported by an image of a fifties-looking woman holding a chainsaw.

On the basis of our interviews⁷ with feminist actors in France, there are numerous examples that illustrate how false or unproven allegations by anti-gender actors are often taken at face value by political and institutional figures, resulting in long-term damage to the operational capacities of the targeted movements. For example, *Lallab*, an organization advocating against sexism, racism, and Islamophobia experienced by Muslim women, experienced unsubstantiated social media allegations, which led to the withdrawal of its civic service approval, severely impacting its functioning and working capacities.

The Lallab association had its civic service approval withdrawn simply because someone claimed that Lallab was a community faith-based organization. They argued that it was not possible for France to grant civic service approval to a faith-based association. However, Lallab was not a faith-based organization. They were doing incredible work in the neighborhoods, especially with young people and young women, whether veiled or not. This denunciation on social networks caused the civic services agency to remove the approval, just like that. (Interview 6, Lallab)

Media attacks create significant operational challenges for feminist groups, often leading to self-censorship and hindering the development of public alliances. This weakens their collective strength against anti-gender movements and exposes them to further risks of de-financing and loss of public recognition. Social media channels, in particular, have become battlegrounds for harassment and extreme violence against feminists, leading to burnout among activists and the proliferation of counter-narratives. Encrypted communication platforms like Telegram and Discord are widely used by anti-gender groups to target feminist accounts or events. Cyberattacks occur across all platforms, including YouTube, Twitter, Zoom, Instagram, and TikTok (Gallot & Pasquier, 2018).

⁷Twenty interviews were conducted with representatives of transfeminist movements in France. These interviews were coded using specialized software and subsequently analyzed. Additionally, participatory action research was conducted with feminist actors from fifteen transfeminist movements during two one-day sessions (June and December 2023), which focused on analyzing the backlash against women’s rights. This participatory research further informs the analysis.

DIRECT RESPONSES TO ANTI-GENDER ATTACKS AND LONG-TERM STRATEGIES

Despite the intensity and violence of the attacks faced by feminist movements, several strategies have been developed to both creatively respond to these attacks and continue their efforts in providing an alternative framework to the appropriation of women's rights by anti-gender actors.

Bard et al. (2019a) propose a schematic categorization of feminist reactions to anti-feminism: first, those who choose to ignore anti-feminism; second, those who respond sporadically while focusing on their primary objectives; and third, those who prioritize combating anti-gender attacks.

Although our interviewees reported instances, particularly concerning cyberviolence, where feminist actors and movements opted not to respond to avoid escalation (the first category), most reactions fall into the second and third categories. Many groups are compelled to respond to anti-feminist attacks, and some have been specifically established to combat anti-feminism, especially online.

Based on our research we propose an alternative categorization of responses to anti-gender attacks in France, grouped into two main types, "direct responses" and "long-term strategies," each encompassing sub-categories. Direct responses refer to immediate and often reactive measures taken by feminist movements to address and counteract anti-gender attacks. These responses are characterized by their promptness and focus on mitigating the immediate impact of the attacks. Long-term strategies, on the other hand, are proactive and sustained efforts aimed at building resilience and fostering a positive cultural shift. These strategies focus on systemic change and the development of sustainable frameworks to support feminist movements over time.

DIRECT RESPONSES TO ANTI-GENDER ATTACKS

Direct responses include four types of reactions: (1) Strategic visibility reduction, (2) Mirroring actions, (3) Collective defense strategy, and (4) Fake news debunking.

Strategic Visibility Reduction

This strategy involves reducing the visibility of the organization or its activities to avoid further attacks, including limiting public exposure of

alliances with other contested movements and minimizing media presence. This approach involves continuing the feminist work but with reduced public exposure, rescaling actions, and sometimes developing new types of actions and strategies to minimize vulnerability to attacks. It differs from a withdrawal strategy in that the actors continue to engage actively but must adapt and occasionally self-censor certain actions to ensure the pursuit of their long-term missions.

Mirroring Actions

Feminist groups may engage directly with the attackers on the same platforms used for the attacks. This can include counter-campaigns on social media, direct engagement in comment sections, and the use of similar digital tools to rebut or challenge the attackers.

A recent set of mirroring actions between the anti-abortion and feminist movements, involving the tagging of stickers on Vélib' bikes (the Parisian public bicycle system), illustrates the reactivity of the feminist movement to the occupation of public space by anti-gender actors. In May and June of 2023, the anti-abortion movement *Les Survivants* orchestrated a flash campaign by placing large stickers on the bikes. The stickers displayed the message "What if you let (him/her) live?" in reference to unborn children linked to abortion, accompanied by a drawing of a fetus becoming a toddler and then a child on a bike. Their campaign was a media success, widely covered by the national press.

This action sparked public outcry in the Paris municipality. In response, the movement *NousToutes*, with administrative support from the municipality in the form of authorization to place stickers on the bikes, organized a counter-campaign using the same modus operandi. Their stickers read, "A child is a choice, an abortion is a right." *NousToutes'* action employed the language of rights and led to the shutdown of the *Survivants'* organization's website following successful legal actions. However, some feminists within *NousToutes* expressed hesitations about the long-term legitimacy and effectiveness of reusing the tactics and methods of anti-gender actors, raising questions about how to bring about long-term change using the tools of patriarchal society.

Collective Defense Strategy

This strategy involves developing resources and tools that provide support and protection for individuals and groups targeted by anti-gender attacks. This can include legal aid, digital security training, and the establishment of support networks. Creating self-defense tools to combat anti-gender ideologies and tactics is a direct response to a hostile climate. The rationale behind this strategy is that understanding one's attackers, their strategies, and modes of action is a crucial first step in effectively countering them.

Identifying the strategies, actors, and discourse of anti-gender movements was employed in the creation of the map presented by C.A.R.T.E, as mentioned earlier in the chapter. This tool helps identify attackers and their connections. However, the success of this initiative is relative, as it can further expose the feminist activists. For example, in response to C.A.R.T.E, extreme right-wing media, such as *Livre Noir*, created and disseminated a map of the "extreme left," including sections on "neo-feminists" and LGBT+ movements, personalities, and influencers, with references to their social media accounts.

Another example is the creation of collectives specifically to develop self-defense tools against masculinist movements as they gained strength and visibility. For example, the *Collectif Mixte Antimasculiniste Ile-de-France-Paris*, established in 2013, organized counter-meetings, film screenings, and debates, and produced texts such as "The Myth of Beaten Men" and "Imposed Paternities: A False Problem," as well as popular education workshops. This example fits within the third category proposed by Bard et al. (2019a), prioritizing the fight against anti-gender attacks.

Creating specific organizations to better combat particular forms of attacks is a key aspect of collective defense tools. Notably, feminists have organized to denounce and neutralize damaging behaviors and protect women from online harassment. In 2016, *Féministes contre le cyberharcèlement* was one of the first collectives to act by launching the viral hashtag #TwitterAgainstWomen. *StopFisha*, created in 2020, also aims to combat cybersexism and online sexist and sexual violence. Its name refers to Snapchat accounts created to attack the reputation of young women by publishing their names and addresses on "slut shamer" accounts (also known as doxxing).

One of StopFisha's founders explains how she used social media to mobilize action: "I tried to shake people up a bit on social media, through

a video I first published on Instagram to denounce what was happening, which was widely shared.” She describes how the movement evolved from a victim support group:

On Twitter, I relayed information to help victims. We had a message group on Twitter with all the victims, providing advice. We talked to each other. And then there was the idea to create #StopFisha to share the information and centralize it for all the victims. This group became a collective, which turned into a movement, and eventually an association. (Interview 17, StopFisha)

Despite being small structures, both collectives have developed influence and institutional contacts due to the relevance of the subject. *StopFisha* cites successes such as amendments to laws and the closure of major “Fisha” accounts on platforms like Telegram: “Another small victory was shutting down a Telegram account with 233,000 members through a massive reporting effort involving 400–500 people” (Interview 17, StopFisha).

Within these movements, feminists also provide ad hoc support systems for their peers. Initially, both *Féministes contre le cyberharcèlement* and *StopFisha* offered direct support to harassed women, but this was mentally taxing, as one interviewee described: “We saw such horrible things that it fucked us up mentally.” These groups develop internal support mechanisms, often without access to professional psychological support, leading to burnout among online feminist activists. Despite their successes, the toll on activists is high, necessitating periods of recentering and self-care: “Right now, we are focused on self-care and finding solutions for sustainability, such as securing funding, hiring staff, and having health professionals on board full-time” (Interview 17, StopFisha).

Fake News Debunking

In response to direct attacks and the spread of fake news, particularly from flash actions by extreme-right movements, feminist organizations have developed strategies to counter misinformation and re-establish objective information. This involves identifying and correcting false information spread by anti-gender actors. Feminist movements may issue public statements, create informational content, and utilize fact-checking services to counter misinformation. For instance, *NousToutes* has created a reactive

social media group dedicated to formulating carefully crafted responses to attacks on social media and other platforms.

Flash actions within feminist demonstrations orchestrated by *Némésis* have presented significant challenges to *NousToutes*. As described earlier, *Némésis* shifted from overt tactics, such as displaying openly racist messages on large banners at the annual inter-movement feminist demonstration coordinated by *NousToutes*, to more subtle and rapid photo-op actions in 2022. These actions involved taking quick photographs without causing on-site disruption and then spreading false information on social media. An interviewee from *NousToutes* recounted their surprise at this change in strategy:

They did something completely different. (...) They took photos and posted them on social media, claiming that the social media posts came from *NousToutes* and that we endorsed such slogans in the procession. They also said, ‘We stayed in the procession all afternoon, and they didn’t kick us out,’ when in reality, they were there for only two minutes, and we didn’t see them. (Interview 9, *NousToutes*)

To counter such attacks, *NousToutes* has adopted a strategy focused on debunking fake news. They have developed a clear and pedagogical approach to social media, meticulously explaining all their positions. In addition to their digital efforts, *NousToutes* employs more traditional methods of defending their positions and actions, including publishing press releases and statements aimed at clarifying their stance and debunking the misinformation spread by their attackers.

LONG-TERM STRATEGIES

Feminist movements have extended their strategies beyond merely reacting to direct attacks. A primary long-term strategy is to reframe the terms of the debate, particularly to counteract the appropriation of feminist legacies by anti-gender movements. This involves building knowledge and developing alternative discourses and vocabularies related to gender, as well as training young people to critically engage with gender issues. By doing so, feminist movements aim to foster a more informed and critical understanding of gender among the youth, thereby strengthening the resilience and sustainability of feminist principles and values. Long-term

strategies include three types of reactions: (1) Joyful and humorous media engagement, (2) Narrative reconstruction, and (3) Educational outreach.

Joyful and Humorous Media Engagement

This long-term strategy utilizes humor and positive media campaigns to engage the public and counteract negative stereotypes. These actions can include satirical content, creative visuals, and public events designed to attract positive attention and build community support.

Employing humorous and joyful actions serves not only to attract media attention but also to reclaim agency in activism and develop innovative methods. Feminists have often been depicted by their detractors as aggressive and hysterical; by developing humorous and joyful responses to such attacks, they build alternative narratives around feminism. In concert with LGBT+ movements, contemporary feminist movements seek to ground themselves in love, joy, happiness, laughter, and fun. This approach raises awareness about anti-gender movements and rhetoric while enhancing access to social and print media.

Notable examples of these actions include massive LGBT+ kiss-ins designed to generate counter-news during LMPT events and images of feminists from the *Georgette Sand* group walking the streets with a giant tampon during their campaign against the overtaxation of sanitary products.

Another media-oriented action using humor was the “Everything is Going to Be Alright” awards ceremony organized by the *Observatory of Sexist and Sexual Violence in Politics* (OVSS). This event, attended by the press, featured satirical prizes such as the “Godfather” award, given to “great men who valiantly protected their friends, their ministers, their bros, ensuring them immunity from the media court, or the court in general” (website, OVSS⁸) and the “Best Hope” award for “those who succeeded in avoiding the traps set by fierce feminists, manipulating the justice system and the press to clear their unfairly tarnished reputation” (website, OVSS). This ceremony received significant coverage in the press, particularly in left-leaning outlets.

Additionally, *HandsAway* launched a campaign utilizing irony and satire to mock the masculinist perception of women. They published an

⁸ <https://observatoirevsspolitique.fr>, consulted June 2024.

oversized book titled *The Decoding of Women*,⁹ which builds on stereotypical masculinist, heterosexual codes. The book provides a recipe for decoding women, and for 1000 pages, it simply states, “If it is not yes, it means no” over and over again. This campaign was supported by the Ministry for Equality and featured on the popular dating app Tinder. The humorous initiative was well received on social media and even reported in the conservative newspaper *Figaro Madame*.

These examples illustrate how feminist movements strategically use humor and joy to challenge stereotypes, engage the public, and garner media attention, thereby advancing their causes and countering anti-gender narratives.

Narrative Reconstruction

This strategy involves proactively redefining public discourse by creating and disseminating new political vocabularies and narratives that counteract anti-gender rhetoric, thereby equipping journalists, politicians, and citizens with the tools to challenge and shift harmful narratives. By fostering a deeper understanding of gender issues and promoting inclusive language, feminist movements aim to transform societal perceptions and build long-term resilience against anti-gender attacks.

The goal of this strategy is to transform the vocabulary and narratives surrounding the groups most targeted by anti-gender actors. Building knowledge and understanding of anti-gender movements, as well as creating a new political vocabulary—such as replacing “crime of passion” with “femicide” and “pedophilia” with “pedo-criminality”—are widely shared strategies within the contemporary feminist movement. One of the most successful examples in recent decades in France is the ongoing tally of femicides compiled by *NousToutes*. This volunteer-led accounting of women killed because of their gender (now including transgender women) has had a significant impact, contributing to societal change and the wider use of the term femicide.

We saw the use of the term ‘femicide’ in the media explode between 2017 and 2022. In fact, it increased 28 times during that period. Of course, there’s no evidence of direct causation. We’re not saying that NousToutes

⁹The decoding of women, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0qIi_MS5j4, March 15, 2024.

alone managed to do this, but the introduction of the term ‘femicide’ into public debate is a significant victory. We’ve worked a lot on this subject, so we can conclude – or at least hypothesize – that our efforts have indeed played a part in this change. (Interview 9, *NousToutes*)

Similar approaches are used by other feminist groups involved in our research. *Lallab*, for example, works to counter the intersection of hate against feminism and Islam. They challenge the Western vision of Muslim women as victims of internalized misogyny in need of liberation. *Lallab* identifies as feminist, a-religious, and anti-racist. Creating new narratives about Muslim women is a core focus of their work.

It is super important to us to produce narratives that are realistic and plural, but also adapted tools, with the aim of making the experiences of Muslim women visible, reappropriating and deconstructing their stories, paying homage to the women who preceded us, and continuing to be part of a powerful story of resistance. (Interview 6, *Lallab*)

Similarly, *Outrans*, a feminist association providing trans self-support, offers a lexicon on their website to guide appropriate terminology when discussing trans people. The *Association of Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Trans, and Intersex Journalists* has published a “kit for editorial use to treat LGBT+ issues justly and with respect for individuals” (Website, AJL¹⁰). Additionally, *Toutes Des Femmes* has created an FAQ on their website titled “Myths and Lies about Trans People in Sports.” These initiatives aim to develop a positive narrative about transgender people in a political context where they face daily attacks in media and political discourse.

Educational Outreach

This long-term strategy focuses on educational initiatives that promote feminist values and counteract anti-gender rhetoric. It includes developing curricula, conducting workshops, and creating educational materials aimed at different age groups and communities to foster a more inclusive and equitable mindset.

NousToutes, for example, has extensively invested in training initiatives, developing accessible online and in-person courses on topics such as “rape

¹⁰<https://www.ajlgbt.info/informer-sans-discriminer/>, accessed June 15, 2024.

culture,” which have subsequently become more commonly used concepts. *NousToutes* also provides training on “How to Fight Against Transphobia Daily.”

Planning Familial invests significantly in creating knowledge and feminist resources. *HandsAway* also emphasizes the necessity of investing in education to bring about long-term societal change. For instance, to counter the anti-trans rights narrative propagated by organizations such as *Observatoire la Petite Sirène* and pseudo-scientists, *Planning Familial* organizes alternative debates featuring recognized local doctors to provide evidence-based knowledge and arguments. Thus, they are actively participating in the cultural battle, contributing to the broader effort to shift societal understanding and acceptance of gender-related issues.

In summary, the strategies adopted by feminist movements in response to anti-gender attacks demonstrate a sophisticated and multifaceted approach to advocacy and resilience. The direct responses employed illustrate the immediacy and adaptability required to counteract hostile environments effectively. At the same time, the long-term strategies underscore a proactive and sustainable effort to reshape public discourse and societal perceptions. By combining reactive measures with proactive cultural and educational initiatives, feminist movements not only defend against immediate threats but also build a robust foundation for enduring social change. These integrated strategies highlight the dynamic and evolving nature of feminist activism in the face of persistent anti-gender rhetoric and actions.

CONCLUSION

In France, anti-gender actors have gained significant momentum and access to public debate since 2013, building on state-led Islamophobic legislation, such as that targeting Muslim women’s veiling. Efforts to advance key legislations and issues such as same-sex marriage (LMPT), medically assisted procreation (MAP) for all, and the rise of new feminist mobilizations after #MeToo have provided a synergistic political opportunity for conservative movements. These movements have heavily invested in discussions on reproductive and women’s rights to further their agenda. A notable feature of this new constellation of anti-gender actors—particularly new right-wing women’s groups such as *Les Antigones*, *Némésis*, and *Femellistes* and masculinist groups—is their ability to infiltrate the public debate with their lexicon and concepts, utilizing media sensations and disinformation spread through social media and compliant print media.

This chapter examined how the feminist movement has mobilized to counter anti-gender attacks. These attacks have been violent, leading to the defunding and weakening of feminist actors. Ignoring these attacks has not been a viable option. Instead, feminist movements have responded either by directly confronting anti-feminist attacks or by developing long-term strategies to change the context and framework of the debate.

Our study revealed the diversity and creativity of the responses developed by feminist actors. It identified two main types of responses—direct responses and long-term strategies—that have, like anti-gender actions, capitalized on the new forms of activism enabled by the rise of social media and the increased influence of visual content in public debates. Additionally, these responses have included the development of collective care practices, such as creating specific organizations to combat cyber-attacks and fostering internal practices to prevent activist burnout and mitigate the long-term emotional impact of anti-gender attacks. Long-term responses aim to change the terms of the debates by using joy and humor and providing educational resources for journalists, politicians, and the public.

Lépinard (2020) argues that the convergence of feminist ideals with right-wing populism and xenophobic political agendas endangers the future of feminism as a political utopia. She suggests that instead of viewing feminism as a social project addressing the needs of “vulnerable” and marginalized women—which enables exclusionary discourse—feminism should be reconceived as a collective political project. By reworking the narrative around transgender people, Muslim women, LGBT+ issues, and sexist and sexual violence, the movements analyzed in this chapter strive to recenter feminism as an inclusive, respectful, and care-oriented political project. Trans-feminist movements, in particular, have mobilized to provide alternative discourse and societal visions, thereby laying the groundwork for this new collective political project. In doing so, they not only challenge existing power structures but also offer a transformative vision for the future of feminism.

REFERENCES

- Avanza, M., & Della Sudda, M. (2017). Ripostes catholiques. *Genre, Sexualité & Société*, 18.
- Bard, C., Blais, M., & Dupuis-Déri, F. (2019a). *Antiféminismes et masculinismes d’hier et d’aujourd’hui*. PUF.

- Bard, C., Dupuis-Déri, F., & Blais, M. (2019b). Conclusion: Lutter contre le masculinisme. In C. Bard, M. Blais, & F. Dupuis-Déri (Eds.), *Antiféminismes et masculinismes d'hier et d'aujourd'hui* (pp. 299–315). PUF.
- Béraud, C. (2021). *La bataille du genre: Du mariage pour tous à la PMA*. Fayard.
- Blézat, M. (2022, August 8). Les ABCD de l'égalité: Récit d'un fiasco. *La Déferlante*. Retrieved June 18, 2024, from <https://revueladeferlante.fr/abcd-de-l-egalite-recit-d-un-fiasco/>
- Brustier, G. (2014). *Le mai 68 conservateur*. Éditions du Cerf.
- Causeur.fr. (2016, August 23). Osez l'alterféminisme! Causeur. <https://www.causeur.fr/eugenie-bastie-therese-hargot-antigones-peggy-sastre-139722>
- Delaporte, L. (2018, February 12). Entre alterféminisme et antiféminisme, la droite tatonne. *Mediapart*. Retrieved June 18, 2024, from <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/120218/entre-alterfeminisme-et-antifeminisme-la-droite-tatonne>
- Della Sudda, M. (2022). *Les nouvelles femmes de droite*. Édition Hors d'Atteinte.
- Della Sudda, M., & Paoletti, M. (2022). Excluante, l'écriture inclusive? *Travail, Genre et Sociétés*, 47(1), 149–152. <https://doi.org/10.3917/tgs.047.0149>
- Deveux, A.-M., & Lamoureux, D. (2012). Les antiféminismes: Une nébuleuse aux manifestations tangibles. *Cahiers du Genre*, 52(1), 7–22.
- Farris, S. R. (2017). *In the name of women's rights: The rise of femonationalism*. Duke University Press.
- Gallot, F., & Pasquier, G. (2018). L'école à l'épreuve de la 'théorie du genre': Les effets d'une polémique. *Cahiers du Genre*, 65(2), 5–16. <https://doi.org/10.3917/cdgc.065.0005>
- Fassin, É. (2001). Same sex, different politics: "Gay marriage" debates in France and the United States. *Public Culture*, 13(2), 215–232. <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-13-2-215>
- Harsin, J. (2018). Tactical connecting and (im-)mobilizing in the French boycott school day campaign and anti-gender theory movement. In E. Peeren, R. Celikates, J. de Kloet, & T. Poell (Eds.), *Global cultures of contestation: Mobility, sustainability, aesthetics & connectivity* (pp. 193–214). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hugonnier, C. (2021). *Étude ethnographique et argumentative d'un mouvement contestataire à la "PMA pour toutes": Entre revendication et dissimulation* (Doctoral dissertation, Université de Grenoble Alpes).
- Kuhar, R., & Paternotte, D. (Eds.). (2017). *Anti-gender campaigns in Europe*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Kunert, S. (2017). Stratégies de légitimation et configurations discursives de la "cause des hommes". *Études de Communication: Langages, Information, Médiations*, 48, 91–110. <https://doi.org/10.4000/edc.6802>

- Labussière, M. (2017). Le féminisme comme “héritage à dépasser”: Les Antigones, un militantisme féminin à la frontière de l’espace de la cause des femmes. *Genre, Sexualité & Société*, 18.
- Le Monde. (2020, March 8). Des associations féministes dénoncent des « violences policières » en marge d’une manifestation samedi à Paris. Le Monde.fr. https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2020/03/08/des-associations-feministes-denoncent-des-violences-policieres-en-marge-d-une-manifestation-samedi-a-paris_6032250_3224.html
- Lépinard, É. (2020). *Feminist trouble: Intersectional politics in postsecular times*. Oxford University Press.
- Lépinard, É., & Mazouz, S. (2021). Pour l’intersectionnalité. Hors collection.
- Picq, F. (2014). Féminisme-antiféminisme: La ligne de partage. *Travail, Genre et Sociétés*, 32(2), 145–150. <https://doi.org/10.3917/tgs.032.0145>
- Pierre-Brossolette, S., Alberti, X., Bernard, M.-A., Chaudouët-Delmas, M., Prado de Oliveira, A., & Arnaud, M. (2023). *Rapport annuel 2023 sur l’état des lieux du sexisme en France* (No. 2023-01-23-STER-55; p. 40). Haut Conseil à l’Egalité entre les femmes et les hommes. Retrieved June 18, 2024, from https://www.haut-conseil-egalite.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/hce_-_rapport_annuel_2023_etat_du_sexisme_en_france.pdf
- Sénat. (2024). *Rapport la Transidentification des Mineurs*. Retrieved June 18, 2024, from <https://lesrepublicains-senat.fr/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/RAPPORT-SUR-LA-TRANSIDENTIFICATION-DES-MINEURS-18.03.2024-avec-compression.pdf>
- Simovic, Y. (2022, November 21). Des féministes islamistes? Le collectif d’extrême droite Némésis piège #NousToutes en manif. *Marianne*. Retrieved June 18, 2024, from <https://www.marianne.net/societe/laicite-et-religions/des-feministes-islamistes-le-collectif-d-extreme-droite-nemesis-piege-noustoutes-en-manif>
- Stambolis-Ruhstorfer, M., & Tricou, J. (2018). La lutte contre la “théorie du genre” en France: Pivot d’une mobilisation religieuse dans un pays sécularisé. In R. Kuhar & D. Paternotte (Eds.), *Campagnes anti-genre en Europe* (pp. 143–166). Presses universitaires de Lyon.
- Sueur, G., & Prigent, P.-G. (2022). Mères « aliénantes » ou pères violents? *Empan*, 128, 69–76. <https://doi.org/10.3917/empa.128.0069>

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if you modified the licensed material. You do not have permission under this license to share adapted material derived from this chapter or parts of it.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.





From Confrontation to Avoidance: Feminist Responses to Anti-Gender Mobilization in Spain

*Inés Campillo, Eduardo Romanos, Igor Sádaba,
and Guillermo Fernández-Vázquez*

INTRODUCTION

In 2018, Spain could be defined as “an increasingly feminist country” (Barreiro, 2018). The Barometer on Feminism conducted by the research agency 40db showed that more than half of the Spanish population considered themselves as feminists and that an overwhelming majority recognized the inequality between women and men with respect to their social, political, and/or economic rights. Only 6% disagreed with this statement (Barreiro, 2018). More recent surveys illustrate, however, a very different

I. Campillo (✉) • E. Romanos • I. Sádaba
Universidad Complutense de Madrid - TRANSOC, Madrid, Spain
e-mail: ines.campillo@ucm.es; eromanos@ucm.es; Igor.sadaba@cps.ucm.es

G. Fernández-Vázquez
Universidad Carlos III de Madrid, Getafe, Spain
e-mail: guillfer@clio.uc3m.es

© The Author(s) 2025

R. Smrdelj, R. Kuhar (eds.), *Anti-Gender Mobilizations in Europe and the Feminist Response*, Palgrave Studies in European Political Sociology, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-87693-6_5

107

picture, at least among the younger generation. In January 2024, the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS) published a study showing the rise of anti-feminist and anti-gender positions among young men between 16 and 24, stating that 51% of them believe that feminism has gone too far, unfairly discriminating against men (CIS, 2024). Another survey by 40db highlighted the gap in how young women and men identify themselves in terms of gender equality. Among the oldest (59 and over), 47% of men and 55% of women consider themselves to be very or fairly feminist. Among Generation Z, the range is much wider: 35% of young men between 18 and 26 consider themselves feminist, while among women this figure rises to 66% (Valdes, 2024). What lies behind such a divide?

In this chapter we aim to explain the dynamic interactions between the feminist movement and the anti-gender mobilization. While in other surrounding countries (see the chapter on Italy in this book) the recent rise of the feminist movement can be understood as a reaction to the influence of anti-gender actors in the social and political system, the Spanish case somehow reverses the pattern. In other words, the emergence and consolidation of anti-gender actors in recent years can be explained as a reaction to the approval of certain laws, rules, and regulations related to gender equality and LGBT+ rights, as well as to the growing strength and visibility of feminism in the struggle to maintain and extend these advances.

Social movement action is not always directed against the state or corporations, but sometimes emerges in opposition to other social movements. Researchers have highlighted the importance of this interaction between movements and counter-movements as a fundamental aspect of the political process and democratization (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996; Dillard, 2013). Social movements often create the conditions for the emergence of counter-movements, whose bases see their interests threatened by the results of the opposing party's actions. Thus, some authors have suggested that the rise of the radical right since the 1990s can be understood as a backlash against the cultural changes promoted by the New Left movements that arose in the 1960s (Oesch, 2012). The movement and its counter-movement maintain a dynamic that influences the elaboration of tactics and strategies, the making of frames and ideologies, and the success or failure of each side. Political authorities often mediate these interactions. This mediation varies according to the issues and goals of the actors involved, the type and structure of government, and the

interaction with other levels of governance through scale shifts brought about by the movements or their counter-movements.

Research has contributed to a better understanding of movement/counter-movement dynamics, including longitudinal analyses that focus on the evolution of each side's mobilization patterns (see, e.g., McCright & Dunlap, 2000; Blais & Dupuis-Déri, 2012; Ayoub & Chetaille, 2020). However, this type of analysis is scarce in the Spanish case.¹ This chapter aims to contribute to filling this gap through an in-depth study of the development of the anti-gender mobilization in recent years in Spain, the evolution of the patterns of interaction that this counter-movement has maintained with the feminist movement, and the relationship between both actors with the state. In analyzing these issues, we will use concepts and approaches from social movement studies, such as the political opportunity structure (della Porta, 2024), collective action frames (Snow et al., 2019), and tactical repertoires (Tilly, 2008).

The chapter is divided into two main sections. The first provides an overview of anti-gender mobilization in twenty-first-century Spain, distinguishing two waves with different characteristics. The analysis of these contentious waves focuses on, namely, their main actors, the conflicts around which they mobilize, and the forms of action they use in their mobilization. The second section looks at the responses that feminists have articulated to confront the mobilization of anti-gender actors, separating them into two main groups: confrontational and non-confrontational actions.² The chapter ends with a final section of conclusions, which summarizes the main findings and discusses the relevance of the Spanish case in understanding movement/counter-movement dynamics.

¹Exceptions are, for example, Alonso and Paleo (2017), Cornejo-Valle and Pichardo (2017), and Bonet-Martí et al. (2023).

²The analysis of the feminist responses incorporates materials extracted from secondary data sources and the field work of the project FIERCE, Feminist Movements Revitalizing Democracy in Europe, in the framework of which 30 in-depth semi structured interviews (20 with feminist activists with different stances toward institutions, and 10 with feminist political representatives from center-left and left-wing parties) were conducted between March and July 2024. This chapter is part of the development of FIERCE as well as the project ECOPOL, Evolution of Political Contention in Spain, which is supported by the Spanish State Research Agency [grant number PID2019-104078GB-I00/AEI/10.13039/501100011033].

THE ANTI-GENDER MOBILIZATION: A TALE OF TWO WAVES

In recent decades, the anti-gender mobilization in Spain has developed in two waves, each with its own characteristics. The first wave arose in 2004 in opposition to the laws passed by the government of the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) and the then president, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, lasting well into the following decade. This wave was driven by the Catholic Church and allied organizations, with abortion and same-sex marriage as battle horses (Aguilar, 2012). The second wave involves the secularization of the movement around Vox, a recently created far-right political party that has led the opposition to the PSOE-Unidas Podemos (UP) coalition government since 2019 on issues of gender identity, gender-based violence, and abortion.

The initial surge of the anti-gender movement between 2004 and 2010 followed the legal recognition of gender-based violence (2004), same-sex marriage (2005), electoral parity (2007), gender identity (2007), and abortion (2010) rights by the Socialist governments of the time (Blázquez et al., 2018). It also coincided with the repositioning in the political landscape of a revitalized and LGBT+-sensitive feminist movement (Platero & Ortega-Arjonilla, 2016). At the time, the LGBT+ movement's support of the new PSOE—and its leader Rodríguez Zapatero—was reciprocated by a more sympathetic attitude of the Socialists to their demands (Calvo, 2007). Women were also instrumental in the passage of new reforms and legislation. Driven by women's activism within the Socialist Party as well as pressure from the feminist movement, the Zapatero government institutionally promoted and consolidated gender equality policies. One example is the 2004 law on integral protection measures against gender-based violence, which responded to a demand from the Spanish feminist movement, which had been mobilizing since the late 1990s to put the fight against gender-based violence as a priority on the political agenda (Lombardo & León, 2014).

Catholic actors were prominent in the reaction to these legal changes. The adversarial role played by the Catholic Church in the anti-gender mobilization and the diffusion of “gender ideology” as a master frame allied this institution with the more conservative churches but distanced it from mainstream religious institutions in Europe (Aguilar, 2011, 2012). The Bishops' Conference, which initially played a dominant role in anti-gender contention, gradually gave way to a “lay Catholic activism” (Cornejo-Valle & Pichardo, 2018, p. 524) composed of a network of

organizations led by Hazte Oír and Foro de la Familia. These actors used strategies such as lobbying through political connections—especially with the right-wing Partido Popular (PP)—engaging with public opinion and the media, and organizing demonstrations and protests. During this period, the PP government of Esperanza Aguirre in the region of Madrid (2003–2012) became “the great laboratory of the neocon,” financing “profusely anti-abortion or religious organizations linked to the most fundamentalist sectors of the Church and the media close to it with public money” (Alabao, 2021, p. 506).

The anti-gender mobilization that emerged in the 2000s facilitated the push by then PP president Mariano Rajoy (2011–2016) to abolish the abortion law of 2010. In late 2013, his party put forth a new bill entitled for the *Protection of the Life of the Conceived Child and the Rights of Pregnant Women*.³ The bill allowed for abortion up to the 22nd week of pregnancy in only two circumstances: rape or in the case of “significant and lasting impairment” to the physical and mental health of the woman or the fetus. To proceed with an abortion, women first needed the consent of at least three doctors, then had to be given verbal information about alternative options, and finally had to consider and wait for seven days—rather than three—before the procedure could be carried out. Unlike the 2010 law, the new bill made it illegal for minors between 16 and 18 years old to have an abortion without the consent of their parents or legal guardian(s). The bill allowed for the criminal prosecution of women and doctors who did not meet these requirements and banned any medical facility from advertising the provision of abortion procedures. As we will see, the introduction of this bill triggered widespread feminist organizing, leading to a series of massive mobilizations that persisted for months. It is important to note that polls showed that a majority of citizens, including PP voters, were opposed to the proposal (Campillo, 2019). As a result, the Minister of Justice, who had championed the bill, eventually resigned, and the conservative government amended the 2010 abortion law instead. The amendment, which was finally introduced in 2015, included a requirement for parental consent for abortions for minors between the ages of 16 and 18. In a similar fashion, although the government did not proceed with the repeal of same-sex marriage as originally announced, it did grant the anti-gender organization Hazte Oír the status of a public utility

³ <https://www.lamoncloa.gob.es/consejodeministros/paginas/enlaces/201213enlaceaborto.aspx/>.

association. This entitled the organization to tax benefits, economic advantages, and free legal aid.

The failure of Mariano Rajoy's conservative government to take decisive action against the perceived threat of "gender ideology" led to a rift between the Partido Popular and the lay Catholic activists that has been allied with them in the past, namely organizations such as Hazte Oír and Foro de la Familia. Since 2014, the anti-gender organization Foro de la Familia has organized demonstrations under slogans such as "Every Life Matters," mainly targeting abortion and, more recently, euthanasia. However, the turnout for these demonstrations has been lower than it was in the period of 2004–2010. In 2014, Hazte Oír launched the #YoRompoConRajoy campaign, a telephone harassment initiative aimed at both disrupting phone lines and flooding the PP headquarters with complaints about the government's tolerance of gender laws enacted by the previous Socialist government.

In this context, the far-right party Vox was founded in 2013 by former members of PP, with significant financial support from CitizenGo, an international anti-gender lobby founded by the president of Hazte Oír. Vox effectively attracted disillusioned neoconservative and anti-gender factions within PP, thereby contributing to the growth of the anti-gender movement in Spain. The emergence of Vox marked a significant turning point in the development of the anti-gender movement, as it emerged as its most prominent representative, successfully expanding its audience and gaining legitimacy (Espacio Público, 2021; Rivas, 2021; Alcaide, 2022; Cabezas Fernández, 2022a, 2022b; Bernárdez-Rodal et al., 2022).

Vox was at the forefront of a new, more recent wave of anti-gender mobilization in Spain which, like the previous one, was motivated by certain institutional advances in gender and equality that had been vigorously promoted and defended by the feminist movement. The austerity policies initiated by the Socialist government of Rodríguez Zapatero in 2010 and continued and expanded by successive conservative governments from the following year marked a significant break in what had until then been a clear upward trajectory of equality policies (Lombardo & León, 2014). These policies received a new impetus in 2019 with the first coalition government in Spanish history, formed by PSOE-UP, which re-established the Ministry of Equality.⁴ Under the leadership of Irene Montero (UP),

⁴The first Ministry of Equality was created in 2008 during the second legislature of the social democratic government of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero. In 2010, during a government restructuring, it was integrated into the new Ministry of Health, Social Policy and Equality.

this ministry drafted three major laws that marked the government: the law of *Comprehensive Guarantee of Sexual Freedom* (also known as the “Only yes is yes” law) (2022), a new law on *Sexual and Reproductive Health and Voluntary Interruption of Pregnancy* (2023), and the law for *the Real and Effective Equality of Trans People and for the Guarantee of LGTBI rights* (popularly known as the “Trans law”) (2023).

While Spanish ultranationalism played a key role in Vox’s entry into the electoral sphere—coinciding with the creation of the coalition government of PSOE-UP and their emphasis on equality policies—, anti-gender activities have become the party’s main focus: “For Vox, feminism represents the core of the evils of modern society and the decadence of a Spain in conflict. Therefore, its anti-feminist stance and opposition to ‘gender ideology’ are intertwined with ultra-nationalism, anti-immigration rhetoric, the defense of traditional values, and anything that questions the territorial, identity, and ideological unity of its Spanish ‘essence.’” (Álvarez-Benavides & Jiménez, 2021, p. 2).

The new anti-gender wave led by Vox implies in some way the secularization of mobilization (Álvarez-Benavides & Jiménez, 2021) and to a large extent also its institutionalization. Through various means, and making use of its position in political institutions, Vox fostered an anti-gender environment and disseminated criticism of feminism and feminist movements and policies. The party led the “opposition to public policies that address the phenomenon of violence against women” and the “direct delegitimization of the feminist movement as blind, authoritarian and supremacist” (Cabezas Fernández, 2022a, p. 320). Certain local and regional governments where Vox participates or provides external support, such as the Andalusian Parliament, the government of Castilla y León, the autonomous region of Madrid, or Murcia, have attempted, sometimes successfully, to repeal or dismantle certain LGBT+ or gender-related laws.

However, the clash between governments at different levels over gender and equality policies is not new. In the previous anti-gender wave, anti-abortion organizations such as Red Madre (which emerged from Foro de la Familia and aims at supporting mothers with unplanned, unwanted, or problematic pregnancies) mobilized to pressure conservative regional governments to approve regulations restricting women’s rights to freely terminate their pregnancy. They did so “taking advantage of the political opportunity structure offered by the Spanish quasi-federal model, thanks to which the advances promoted [in sexual and

reproductive health] by the Socialist government at the national level could be counteracted at the regional one, where the PP still had an overt dominance” (Alonso & Paleo, 2017, p. 66).

Without abandoning the master frame of gender ideology, Vox has disseminated another core idea: the so-called “demographic winter”, which presents the culturally Spanish society as incapable of sustaining itself over time and under threat of being demographically substituted or replaced by a culturally different social composition. The term was introduced long ago by transnational anti-gender groups to denounce that sexuality and gender-related rights were provoking a “societal suicide” in the Global North (McEwen & Narayanaswamy, 2023, p. 21). Those responsible for this state of social, cultural, and biological decadence are basically immigrants (especially Muslims), feminists (who defend abortion rights), and progressive politicians (who allow and encourage illegal immigration). In electoral campaigns, Vox has employed the discourse of the “Reconquest of Spain” against these and other enemies, in a frame that “reveals how nativism, authoritarianism and masculism are intertwined in [a] de-democratizing project” (Cabezas Fernández, 2022b, p. 209). Gender “has allowed Vox to establish its identity, markedly masculinist, and differentiate itself from competing center-right parties” while “defining feminism as the enemy of the nation, with unprecedented virulence” (Cabezas Fernández, 2022b, p. 210). Some of Vox’s solutions to the “demographic winter” are similar to those advocated against “gender ideology,” such as the defense of life (repealing abortion laws to make the procedure more restrictive) and the defense of the traditional family (promoting a State pact for the family that implies the protection of large families, increases in bonuses for children, and the creation of a universal benefit of 100 euros for each child, similar to the policies of Law and Justice in Poland).

The second wave of anti-gender mobilization has incorporated more institutional forms of action into its tactical repertoire, with Vox using counter-actions and boycotts of institutional actions to express their rejection of feminist demands and of the general consensus against gender-based violence. For example, during the 8M protest in 2020, Vox organized a rally at the Palacio de Vistalegre in Madrid, where its leaders labeled the feminist demonstrations of that day a “coven.” On several occasions, Vox representatives have opposed the realization of a moment of silence or the acts of homage to the victims of gender-based violence, even counteracting with homages to “all victims.” Another one of their mobilization strategies has been the attempt to appropriate (or even

redefine) feminism. Vox has developed a “parasitic-opportunistic appropriation of feminism: parasitic because it aims to damage feminism by appropriating its legitimacy; opportunistic because this appropriation was used to counterattack feminism at a moment of recent support and legitimacy” (Cabezas Fernández, 2022b, pp. 206–207). However, in comparison with other countries such as France or Germany, anti-gender political actors in Spain (particularly Vox) have made little use of this strategic resource (Franzé & Fernández-Vázquez, 2021: p. 179; Sprengholz, 2021, pp. 491–496; Shurts, 2024, pp. 73–75).

The second anti-gender wave has utilized two additional arenas of mobilization: digital communities and the judiciary. The use of these spheres in terms of social movements is not new, but they have been employed more often in recent years, especially for anti-gender groups. The growth of anti-gender sentiments has been facilitated by digital communication, specifically through the establishment of new ultraconservative media outlets, the visibility of anti-gender influencers and YouTubers, and the presence of online channels, forums, and discussion groups where misogynistic and anti-gender discourses have proliferated (Idoiaga Mondragon et al., 2020; Núñez Puente et al., 2021; Villar-Aguilés & Pecourt, 2021). Misogynist Internet communities—the so-called Spanish manosphere—have contributed to disseminating frames and concepts among the younger population, especially in relation to gender violence: ideas such as that violence has no gender, that gender violence is an ideological invention, or that feminism has gone too far (García-Mingo & Díaz Fernández, 2022).

Finally, as a lawyer and feminist activist underlined in our interview, the reach of the anti-gender movement pervades into state institutions, including the judiciary (II1). Indeed, certain judges have made controversial decisions that the feminist movement has understood as expressions of “judicial misogyny” (Gimeno, 2022): a form of institutional violence against women that takes multiple forms, including the way in which crimes against women are considered. This can be observed in the vote and ruling of the Court of Justice of Navarra in the case of La Manada,⁵

⁵The case refers to the gang rape of an 18-year-old girl by five men on 7 July 2016 in Pamplona during the San Fermín festival. The rapists were members of a WhatsApp group called “La Manada.” The case, which was considered as sexual abuse in two courts (at provincial and regional level), had significant media and social media coverage. At the provincial court, one of the three judges issued a separate ruling in favor of the acquittal of the defendants. The case was finally reviewed and sentenced by the Supreme Court on 21 June 2019, which considered it a rape.

which provoked “a feminist social outburst related to sexual violence and its legislative and judicial handling” (Gimeno, 2022, p. 208). Legal changes related to the issue of consent, such as the approval of the “Only yes is yes” law, cannot be understood without this mobilization. At the same time, the implementation of the aforementioned law itself has been strongly contested, namely, some judges have downwardly appealed the sentences of some convicted sex offenders as a result of their interpretation of the law. The policy’s leading advocate, Minister of Equality Irene Montero, accused these judges of being sexist and of not enforcing the law correctly. The far-right organization Manos Limpias denounced the Minister (and the Government Delegate against Gender Violence) for her criticism. The complaint was eventually dismissed by the Supreme Court.

FEMINIST RESPONSES TO ANTI-GENDER MOBILIZATION

The reaction to anti-gender mobilizations is considered as one of the triggers for the resurgence of feminist movements on a global scale. In this sense, it is important to mention the Argentine Ni Una Menos movement against gender-based violence in 2015, as well as the feminist mobilizations in Poland in 2016 and Argentina in 2018 against the attacks on abortion rights, as the key global episodes of this feminist upsurge. However, the resurgence of feminist politics in Spain predates those mobilizations and can be considered as one of the reasons for the development of the anti-gender movement in the period 2004–2011, which served as an example to other anti-gender movements in Europe (Paternotte, 2015, cited in Cornejo-Valle & Pichardo, 2017).

As we have seen above, the first wave of the anti-gender movement managed to “hybridize” the PP as some of its members were anti-gender actors (Tarrow, 2021). PP filed an appeal of unconstitutionality against the same-sex marriage law in 2005 and, when it came to government in 2011, put forth a very restrictive abortion bill, for the *Protection of the Life of the Conceived Child and the Rights of Pregnant Women*. The bill triggered a huge response from the feminist movement as soon as it was announced in 2012, intensifying all over Spain throughout 2013 and 2014, when the bill was finally approved by the Council of Ministers. This mobilization marked the beginning of a new cycle of feminist-led protest (Campillo, 2019; Romanos et al., 2022), which was somewhat institutionalized through the local governments of the so-called cities of change

(2015–2019) and especially through the national government of PSOE-UP (2019–2023):

I believe that the arrival of the coalition government cannot be understood without the continuity of the feminist movement. The feminist movement in the streets is very, very, very powerful, but also in political and parliamentary terms. It is the movement and the axis that has achieved the most agreements. The State Pact against male violence is the only State Pact [...] The feminist laws that we have brought out – the abortion law, the law ‘Only yes is yes’ – were the laws with more consensus within the Parliament, [and] they are thanks, not to the Ministry of Equality, but to the feminist movement and its ability to place itself in the center. (I8, political advisor)

In this sense, the Spanish case deserves particular attention, as it offers a longer trajectory of movement/counter-movement interactions, their fluidity, and how each movement adjusts and adapts its strategies and tactics as the other succeeds or fails.

Today, although anti-gender actors are not in the national government and do not hold central positions in regional administrations, their role and influence appear to be much greater than in the past. Most feminist activists and political representatives interviewed in the framework of our project identify the anti-gender backlash or “denialist obstructionism” (I4, autonomous feminist)⁶ as one of the main and more pressing problems facing feminism in Spain:

Right now there is an unprecedented reaction. There are consensuses that we believed were already [established], the consensus of the human rights framework and so on, which are like absolutely minimal consensuses. And that is no longer there. (I7, political advisor)

The main problem we face today [is] the reactionary turn, the feeling among our kids and also among some of our comrades in the neighborhoods and among the popular classes, that feminism was coming to take something away from them and that it was necessary for them to take its place. (I9, political representative)

⁶ Respondents are numbered sequentially according to when the interviews were conducted (Interviewee 1 [I1], Interviewee 2 [I2], etc.) and by adding the type to which they correspond within the sample.

Besides, some of our interviewees underline that the extreme-right anti-gender actors are, in fact, those who have the best insight into what the feminist movement really defends:

The extreme right [...] has identified feminism as its main enemy in recent times, and I think they do that because they are able to understand precisely the transforming power of feminism. In fact, the extreme right or the right understands it better than the left in some occasions [...] the extreme right has, let's say, the capacity of leadership, the ideological hegemony, to point out the feminist movement, but especially also the Ministry of Equality as their main enemy. But in this offensive they are accompanied, of course, by the judiciary, not all, but a good part, and the media, which have dedicated themselves to make a permanent offensive against feminist advances. (I8, political advisor)

In this section, we will focus on the different strategies that the Spanish feminist movements have adopted in reaction to anti-gender mobilization in the course of the last 15 years. Following the analytical scheme laid out by Lavizzari, Barone, and Bonu (in this volume), we identify two main types of strategies, confrontational and non-confrontational, which may have varying degrees of structure and organization. Confrontational tactics include public protests and counter-actions, whereas non-confrontational tactics consist of avoidance, cultural initiatives, and the use of institutional channels. The choice of strategy depends on the type of attack, the networks involved, the context, the goal of the mobilization, and the character of the collective or organization (Tarrow, 1993; Taylor & Van Dyke, 2004; Jasper, 2004; McAdam & Tarrow, 2018).

Confrontational Tactics

As Lavizzari, Barone, and Bonu stress in this volume, “Confrontational tactics are actions oriented to directly address, denounce, and attack claims, events, and protests of the anti-gender movement.” They can adopt different forms, both spatially and temporally. The dimension of space refers to the setting where the confrontational action takes place (neighborhood, city, region, country, online) and the dynamics of the interactions between movements (from direct face-to-face interaction to action at a distance). By contrast, the dimension of time refers to the fact that some actions are more immediate or taken at short notice (e.g.,

making graffiti, boycotting a public event, rallying in reaction to court rulings), while others are organized over a much longer period of time and therefore usually involve more organization, resources, and coalition-building work (e.g., statewide demonstrations in Madrid, coordinated protests).

Broad Alliances Take to the Streets

Over the last 15 years, most feminist groups and organizations have developed more structured, organized, and sustained confrontational actions when faced with the anti-gender movement's new access to power (whether at the state, regional, or local level) and their subsequent promotion (or ability to promote) anti-rights legislation. These actions taken by feminist groups include the organization of coordinated and thoroughly planned nationwide public protests, mainly in the form of demonstrations, marches, and rallies. To carry out this repertoire, which requires a significant amount of resources and a high level of planning, the feminist movement has needed to coordinate both internally and with external actors to form broad, strong alliances.

The feminist response to the law for the *Protection of the Life of the Conceived Child and the Rights of Pregnant Women* illustrates the alliance-building dynamic. In 2012, 135 feminist groups and organizations all over the country created the *Decidir nos hace libres – Plataforma Estatal en Defensa de los Derechos Sexuales y Reproductivos* (Deciding makes us free – State Platform in Defence of Sexual and Reproductive Rights), which earned the support of left-wing parties, trade unions, and progressive organizations. From 2012 to 2014, the protests held on 28 September—“which are usually attended by far fewer people (than the 8 March celebrations), reached its peak when the [Ruiz-]Gallardón affair” (15, institutional feminist) – while the 8 March were mainly dedicated to maintaining the right to choose. Indeed, in 2013, for the first time since its emergence in the 1970s, the feminist movement decided to change the traditional itinerary of the 8 March demonstration in Madrid—from Jacinto Benavente Square to Atocha—and march through the main boulevards of the city (Puerta del Sol, Calle Alcalá), an action usually reserved for major social mobilizations (First of May, 15M movement). Since then, there has been no turning back, and the 8M demonstrations in this city have always filled its central avenues.

In December 2013, after almost two years of centralized lobbying and decentralized—but coordinated—protests in several Spanish cities, two

Asturian feminist associations close to PSOE organized a nationwide demonstration in Madrid for 1 February 2014, under the title *El tren de la libertad* (The Freedom Train). Their initial plan was to pay for 150 train seats to help Asturian women travel to Madrid. However, as their call to action was joined by the above-mentioned State Platform and women's organizations in general—as well as supported by left-wing parties and trade unions—they realized that they had to increase seats. According to police sources, the demonstration gathered around 100,000 people (Quintanal, 2024), ending at the Congress of Deputies, where a group of feminist activists read the manifesto *Porque yo decido* (Because I decide). At the time, *El tren de la libertad* was the most significant feminist protest ever recorded in Spain, and motivated feminist activists to call for other ambitious nationwide mobilizations, which would turn out to be even more successful (7N; feminist strikes).

On the other hand, during the most recent wave of anti-gender activism, which started in 2019, the broadest confrontational actions in terms of coalition-building and organization have been more limited in terms of space and time investment. The key reason for this is the transformation of the political context: since 2019, the national government is in the hands of a progressive, self-defined feminist coalition (PSOE-UP until 2023, and PSOE-Sumar since 2023) that has passed several laws based, to some extent, on the demands of the feminist and LGBT+ movements (reproductive rights and abortion, sexual violence and LGBT+ rights, especially trans rights).

Faced with the loss of influence in the central government, anti-gender actors have capitalized on the structure of Spain's quasi-federal system to exert pressure on (or from) governments at the local and regional levels—a clear political opportunity for these entities. Vox has implemented the following strategy: first, externally supporting PP regional or local governments (as in the autonomous communities of Andalucía, Murcia, and Madrid since 2018) and, since the 2019 elections, forcing their entrance into regional governments, which has happened in places such as Castilla y León, Comunidad Valenciana, and Aragón. The feminist movement, in coalition with other actors (mainly the LGBT+ movement), has organized public protests against Vox's new influence in regional administrations and its anti-feminist policies. One of our interviewees explained the urgency of convening these actions and the positive response they received in terms of participation:

Shortly after entering the Parliament of Andalusia [in 2018], Vox began to ask for the names of the people who worked in the services related to gender violence, meaning that they had this objective [the persecution of feminism] from the very beginning. [From the] Forum [of Feminist Politics] we said: we spread the word, we notify the government delegation and whoever wants to go [to the demonstration]. We filled Puerta del Sol, [...] we found a lot of people who thought the same, that what was happening was really serious. (15, institutional feminist)

More recently, in Castilla y León, the feminists in the region organized a march in Valladolid against the Vox proposals in their regional government under the slogan “Ni un paso atrás en nuestros derechos” (Not one step backwards for our rights) (De la Calle Fernández, 2022). In 2023, Castilla y León’s administration presented a plan on “birth promotion and support for families” which forced doctors to offer counseling, access to fetal heartbeat monitoring, and 4D ultrasound scans to women seeking abortions. Feminist activists deemed the plan a patriarchal reaction to the recent approval of the *Law on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, which gave back the right to choose to have an abortion for women between the ages of 16 and 17, eliminated the three days of reflection, and promoted the creation of a register of objecting doctors in each autonomous community in order to guarantee that voluntary terminations of pregnancy were offered in public centers. The feminist reaction against the birth promotion plan in Castilla y León led the national government to modify Article 24 on “institutional responsibility” of the above-mentioned law to prevent any public administration from implementing actions that alter the choice of women. Another example of regional feminist movements organizing confrontational actions against their regional administration can be found in Valencia, where the Coordinadora Feminista called for a protest against PP and Vox’s 2023 regional government pact (Martínez, 2023).

Occasionally, the feminist movement has joined forces with the LGBT+ movement in its fight against anti-gender actors and reforms, with some protests being led by the latter. For example, this is the case of the mobilizations against the most conservative PP regional governments, such as that of Isabel Díaz Ayuso in Madrid, which has been the first regional government to curtail LGBT+ and trans laws (passed in 2016 by PP itself). After the announcement of a proposal in this sense, which was finally approved in November 2023, 35 regional organizations of the LGBT+ movement created the platform *Ni un paso atrás Madrid* (Not one step

backwards Madrid), which later organized a rally (Honorato, 2023) and a demonstration (Puentes, 2023). According to one of our interviewees, it is no coincidence that this cutback in the regional law was passed when the national trans law was already approved and established a series of obligations and rights that could not be contravened by regional governments:

Look at Madrid, which suddenly goes and reverses what it had already approved, or intends to reverse it, because there is also a lot of posturing going on there, because you look it up in detailed and there is probably less repealed than it seems. (17, political advisor)

Boycotts, Escraches, and Counter-Protests

Throughout the two waves of anti-gender mobilization, the feminist movement has combined more structured confrontational actions with other more loose, immediate, and local ones. These actions have generally focused on disrupting events staged by anti-gender actors, in order to draw public attention to the curtailment of rights, and to name and shame those who support such curtailment. During the campaign against Ruiz-Gallardón's abortion bill (2012–2014), coalition-building, lobbying, and nationwide coordinated or unitary protests were combined with other smaller-scale but more disruptive confrontational actions, such as the boycotting of public anti-gender events. The Spanish section of the transnational feminist organization FEMEN, which practices direct confrontational action, was created in 2013, amid that campaign. Their first action consisted in five activists, naked from the waist up and with their faces made up like skulls, bursting into a march called “For life, women and motherhood,” which was led in March 2013 by the Foro de la Familia, Fundación Red Madre, and Hazte Oír and counted on the support of hundreds of pro-life organizations (EFE, 2014a). Later that year, FEMEN activists broke into the Congress of Deputies during a session in which Minister Ruiz-Gallardón was present and shouted “abortion is sacred,” a slogan that was also painted on their bodies (Díez, 2013). In 2014, two of them chained themselves to a crucifix in the Almudena Cathedral in Madrid (EFE, 2014b).

The choice of a confrontational, direct action by FEMEN activists is linked to its own character as an organization and the profile of the actors that they target, but other feminist groups have also employed direct actions, on certain occasions to name and shame their enemies. For

example, in May 2013, after a rally in front of the national headquarters of PP, some 300 activists carried out an *escrache* against Ruiz-Gallardón in his own house. The *escrache* is a form of protest which consists of the public condemnation of those responsible for an injustice with the objective of exposing and upsetting them (Romanos, 2014).⁷ Other disruptive and signaling actions include the group Feministas Autónomas' collective boycott of a public event of the Minister of Health (Europa Press, 2015); similarly, on different occasions graffiti with feminist slogans has appeared in university chapels (Ollero & Durán, 2016) and churches (De Buján, 2018).

Another less structured and immediate confrontational action deployed by the feminist movements has been to use social media to organize rallies to react to court rulings. Indeed, before the #MeToo global movement, a large-scale movement of support emerged in 2017 regarding the treatment that victims are given both by the judge and the media during trials for sexual assault and rape. On the day of the judgment against La Manada, in which the gang was found guilty only of sexual abuse and not of rape, there were massive, public protests in every Spanish city under the slogan #yosítecreo (#Idobelieveyou). The “Only yes is yes” law on sexual violence, which put women’s consent at the core of the law, can be seen as a result of the success of those mobilizations.

As for the most recent wave of anti-gender mobilization since the late 2010s, less structured actions at the local level have also taken different forms. An example is the counterprotests organized on the occasion of vigils held by anti-gender actors in clinics where abortions are performed. Groups and platforms such as Feminismos Tetuán, Comisión por el Derecho al Aborto de Madrid, and the Asociación de Clínicas Acreditadas para la Interrupción del Embarazo lobbied the Ministry of Equality to

⁷The word “escrache” comes from the popular slang of Buenos Aires, and refers to a kind of public protest that shows a person up for who they really are. Although similar forms of protest have occurred in other places, the first “escraches” recognized as such date from the 1990s, a period when impunity reigned regarding crimes that had been carried out during the 1976–1983 dictatorship in Argentina. Families of the “desaparecidos” would demonstrate outside the homes or the workplaces of some of those responsible for crimes during the dictatorship, so that their neighbors and workmates would come to know who they really were and what they had done. Later the range of objectives for this kind of protest broadened to include those responsible for the crisis which swept the country after the “corralito” (the economic measures to stop a bank run which implicated a limit of cash withdrawals) of 2001, and in a process of transnational diffusion, being used during the cycle of anti-austerity mobilization in Spain to blame those responsible for the economic crisis.

sanction the harassment practiced in front of these clinics; this type of harassment was finally introduced into the Penal Code in April 2022. However, according to the testimony of an activist from Feminismos Tetuán, the prospect of that reform being implemented provoked the creation of what Hazte Oír called a Pro-Life Shelter right in front of one of these clinics, where “they convince you to get into a mobile ambulance, have an ultrasound and give you a coffee so that, if that day you have an abortion planned, you can no longer do it because you are not fasting” (I2, autonomous feminist).

This and other anti-abortion infrastructures have become the target of FEMEN protests (Albarrán Méndez, 2023) and other more prompt confrontational actions, such as graffiting (Ruiz, 2024).

More recently, the anti-gender reaction against the right to gender self-determination, recognized by the Trans law, which has included impacting political decisions by conservative regional governments to cut LGBT+ rights, has also motivated immediate and less structured confrontational reactions. For example, in November 2023, FEMEN protested against the Madrid government’s decision to change its regional Trans law by boycotting a PP public event in Madrid, in which Alberto Núñez Feijoo (its national leader) and Isabel Díaz Ayuso (president of the Community of Madrid) participated.

Non-Confrontational Tactics

While confrontation and public protest were the main strategies adopted by the feminist movement during PP’s rule in government from 2011 to 2018, activists also resorted to promoting media and cultural campaigns aimed at disseminating information, preserving the collective memory of the movement, and countering anti-gender narratives. As one activist from the Comisión 8M Madrid explained:

I think we see our work more as building mass, rather than pointing fingers [...] When I start writing manifestos, what I try to do is to visualize what we want [...] and the strength we have, and who we are with [...] Not to take for granted the shit we have, but what can be. That germ of the world that is constructed within an assembly and within a collective or within safe spaces and so on, is an idea of the world and then (what we have to do is) to open it up. (I4, autonomous feminist)

From Raising Voices...

Feminists have raised their voices not only to protest against the anti-gender agenda but also to explain the “germ of the world” the movement intends to carry out, to use the activist’s expression from the quote above. The explanation of the movement’s goals is also an exercise in memory, in which different moments in time are bridged to show how current struggles connect with others in the past, building a collective identity (Sommers, 1994). This endeavor includes the production of diverse documentaries that have commemorated past protests and demonstrations in the face of the new reactionary offensive (*Yo decido. El tren de la libertad; ¿Qué coño está pasando?; No estás sola: La lucha contra La Manada*), as well as publications on the recent cycle of the feminist movement and its demands (Fórum de Política Feminista, 2017; Comisión Feminista 8M de Madrid, 2019; Suárez Suárez, 2020).

Another major strategy employed by feminist activists involves gaining access to institutional channels and monitoring and evaluating gender policies implemented by public administrations. These initiatives have succeeded in exposing (and redressing) the drain of resources by conservative governments on gender-related social policies. The *Plataforma Impacto de Género Ya* (Gender Impact Now Platform) is an umbrella organization that aims to monitor, review, and analyze annual general state budgets to make sure that they comply with the legal obligation to include a gender impact report, as well as with other political commitments. In 2018, among other things, this platform identified a breach of the State Pact Against Gender-based Violence signed by all political forces at the end of 2017:

The State Pact against Gender-based Violence had been approved to increase by 200 million euros [...] but when the government presented the draft budget, the 200 million were not there. They were in the yellow book, which is one of the volumes, but it is not binding. We made a lot of demonstrations all over Spain, in 60 cities, [...] The fact is that we achieved it. In the end [the liberal party] Ciudadanos and even the PP rectified and the 200 million were [finally] approved. (I5, institutional feminist)

... to a Controversial Silence

However, in the most recent wave of anti-gender mobilization (since 2019), the main strategy adopted by the feminist movement against anti-gender actors in the country is probably avoidance or silence, which aims

at disempowering and delegitimizing these entities by keeping media and social attention away from them. Most of the time, this is a deliberate strategy:

One of the things that the Platform (Gender Impact Now) does is that we present the manifesto within the deadline for the presentation of amendments by the deputies and we present it to all the parliamentary groups. [...] We do not invite Vox because they are masters at using the efforts of others to turn them against you. We have already seen them practice this on several occasions with other feminist organizations or in other institutional matters and we do not want to deal with them as far as we can, because we know that they are against it, but also that they are going to distort it, that they are going to turn one of our actions into their own news and we do not want that. (I5, institutional feminist)

The avoidance strategy seems to be the most common strategy when looking at the communicative and social media initiatives of feminist activists. Indeed, when some feminists have engaged in public debate with anti-gender opinion leaders, they have been widely criticized. This was, for example, the general reaction toward the association Mala Feminista (Bad Feminist) as a result of their organizing a debate in November 2019 between the philosopher Clara Serra, a feminist intellectual and activist, and the anti-gender influencer and YouTuber *Un tío blanco hetero* (A Straight White Guy). Despite the relative success of the debate (which got almost 500,000 views on YouTube), the very decision to debate in public with anti-gender actors generated a huge controversy within the feminist movement, on whether or not it was appropriate to grant visibility and an audience to anti-feminist discourses (Serra, 2019, 2022).

The strategy of avoidance is also used by autonomous trans-inclusive feminists against gender-critical feminists, who have grown in number and been very active in their campaign against the recognition of the right to gender self-determination by the Trans law. As one of our interviewees said to us: in the face of anti-gender feminists' provocations or of the media trying to delve into divisions within the movement, "our strategy is rather not to answer, not to go in there" (I4, autonomous feminist).

However, the avoidance strategy seems to be seen as increasingly problematic, fundamentally among feminist activists who have held institutional positions:

What we have to do is to clearly address how to combat anti-feminism [...] but now it is up to us not to make it easy for them. This means thinking concretely about how we combat the anti-feminist discourse in the most intelligent and effective way possible. [At some point] we did not want to debate with anti-feminism and neo-machism, [...], but I am a high school teacher and I notice that at this point it is necessary to articulate a discourse and concrete debates to respond to the questions that anti-feminism and neo-machism are raising. (I9, political representative)

CONCLUSIONS

Since the turn of the millennium, feminist and anti-gender movements have played a fundamental role in the Spanish political process, especially in relation to gender policies such as LGBT+ rights, sexual and reproductive rights, and gender-based violence. Within this framework, both movements have developed, over the years, a dynamic of action and reaction that has influenced their strategies and tactics, the making of frames, and the success or failure of each of their goals. While the study of the anti-gender movement has become a growing field of research in Spain in the last decade, attention has focused on the political, economic, and cultural causes for its development (Alonso & Paleo, 2017; Cornejo-Valle & Pichardo, 2017, 2018; Alabao, 2021; Álvarez-Benavides & Jiménez, 2021; Cabezas Fernández, 2022a, 2022b) and on the new arenas in which anti-genderism is displayed (Núñez Puente et al., 2021; Villar-Aguilés & Pecourt, 2021; Bernárdez-Rodal et al., 2022). Nevertheless, research on movement/counter-movement dynamics between feminist and anti-gender movements has been limited. This chapter serves as an attempt to fill this gap by exploring the different waves of feminist and anti-gender mobilization in Spain, the evolution of the patterns of interaction between the two movements, and the role of political institutions in mediating, facilitating, or accelerating this interaction.

Two recent waves of anti-gender mobilization can be distinguished in Spain. The first wave arose in 2004, led by the Catholic Church and allied organizations against the gender-related laws (essentially, same-sex marriage and abortion) passed by the Socialist government of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero. It was only when this wave of the anti-gender movement became partially institutionalized with the arrival of PP in government and its plan to roll back key gender rights that feminist movements adopted stronger, more organized, and more extensive (in terms of both

time and space) confrontational tactics. The feminist response to anti-gender politics was so massive that it even impacted feminist activists, who from then on felt empowered to organize more ambitious mobilizations. Thus, feminism boomed in Spain from 2012–2013 to 2020 and, for a few years, it seemed to have built up hegemony, winning the cultural battle and taking the streets. With strong support in public opinion as expressed in various polls (see the introduction to this chapter), the feminist movements managed to get all political parties represented in the Congress of Deputies to sign a State Pact on Gender-based Violence in 2017, as well as prompting all political parties, except for Vox, to declare themselves to be feminist in the months leading up to the 8M feminist strike in 2018. Indeed, feminism is considered one of the key factors of the success of the pact between center-left and left-wing parties ahead of the 2019 general elections. However, feminist outcry and the partial institutionalization of the movement through a Ministry of Equality led by UP leaders and former feminist activists is also at the root of the strong anti-gender backlash Spain has experienced in the last four years. As we have seen, this second wave of anti-gender unrest has been fundamentally led by Vox and has developed in opposition to the legal advances in gender policies (especially, sexual and reproductive rights, gender self-determination, and gender-based violence) introduced by the national government of Pedro Sánchez between 2019 and 2023. The main feminist strategy employed with regard to this latest cycle of the anti-gender mobilization has been avoidance or silence. This strategy is clearly a response to what seems the main strategy of the anti-gender forces: victimization and the desire for media attention.

In this sense, we have observed how the nature and characteristics of the feminist responses to the anti-gender mobilization have adapted over time, depending, to a large extent, on the role of state institutions. When the national government adopts an anti-gender agenda, feminist movements coordinate and organize stronger forms of confrontational tactics, seeking support in regional or local governments. Conversely, when the national government implements an accelerated feminist agenda, anti-gender forces respond by shifting the sites of contention to the judiciary and conservative regional governments. This, in turn, motivates limited and less organized responses from feminist activists. In this respect, the

diversity of feminist responses and the adaptability of the movement cannot be understood without seeing them in continuity with the actions of their opponents. The Spanish case provides an example of how closely coupled these two movements are, in the sense that “one movement’s agenda, tactics and the venues in which it operates (is) determined by its opposition” (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996, p. 1647).

At the same time, it is crucial to emphasize that Spanish feminist movements are diverse and that different types of feminist responses coexist and are combined all the time. The reason for this is that the political context is not the only factor explaining why individual feminist organizations and groups opt for more or less confrontational tactics. Feminist groups have different attitudes toward who is/are the main target(s) of their actions and, therefore, they have different approaches toward their interaction with political institutions. In this sense, we have seen that groups such as FEMEN focus on direct action and tend to use unconventional, immediate tactics in the face of anti-gender forces, while other organizations, such as the *Plataforma de Impacto de Género Ya* (Impact Gender Now Platform), are by nature much more interested in monitoring institutional measures and engaging in political advocacy. In any case, as some activists pointed out in our interviews, feminist movements are doing what they can to counter anti-gender movements, but

We cannot ignore the fact that on the other side there is a lot of organisation, a lot of interests and a lot of money. And so, of course, if the feminist movement had the structures and funding that the anti-rights movement has, we would make revolution in 24 hours [laughs]. But we are in a very asymmetrical situation. (111, autonomous feminist)

REFERENCES

- Aguilar, S. (2011). El movimiento antiabortista en la España del siglo XXI: El protagonismo de grupos sociales laicos y la alianza de facto con la Iglesia Católica. *Revista de Estudios Políticos*, 154, 11–39.
- Aguilar, S. (2012). Fighting against the moral agenda of Zapatero’s Socialist Government (2004–2011): The Spanish Catholic Church as a political contender. *Politics and Religion*, 5(3), 671–694. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048312000351>

- Alabao, N. (2021). Las guerras de género: La extrema derecha contra el feminismo. In M. Ramos (Ed.), *De los neocon a los neonazis: La derecha radical en el estado español* (pp. 501–530). Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung—Oficina de Enlace Madrid.
- Albarrán Méndez, S. (2023, June 2). Femen responde a Hazte Oír en la oficina de la plataforma ultra. *El Salto*. Retrieved September 12, 2024, from <https://osalto.gal/aborto/respuesta-rezos-hazte-oir-organizacion-femen-realiza-accion-frente-sede>
- Alcaide, E. (2022). La imagen de la mujer en VOX: el discurso antifeminista de la “derecha radical” en España. *Discurso & Sociedad*, 2, 275–302.
- Alonso, A., & Paleo, N. (2017). Políticas de salud sexual y reproductiva en España: Contra-movimientos y marcos interpretativos en conflicto. *Revista Española de Sociología*, 26(3), 59–76. <https://doi.org/10.22325/fes/res.2017.35>
- Álvarez-Benavides, A., & Jiménez, F. (2021). Vox’s cultural counter-programming: Secularisation, gender and anti-feminism. *Política y Sociedad*, 58(2), e7427. <https://doi.org/10.5209/poso.74486>
- Ayoub, P., & Chetaille, A. (2020). Movement/countermovement interaction and instrumental framing in a multi-level world: Rooting Polish lesbian and gay activism. *Social Movement Studies*, 19(1), 21–37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/014742837.2017.1338941>
- Barreiro, B. (2018, November 8). Un país cada vez más feminista. *Ctxt*. Retrieved September 12, 2024, from <https://ctxt.es/es/20181107/Política/22757/ctxt-barometro-feminismo-40dB.htm>
- Bernárdez-Rodal, A., Rey, P. R., & Franco, Y. G. (2022). Radical right parties and anti-feminist speech on Instagram: Vox and the 2019 Spanish general election. *Party Politics*, 28(2), 272–283. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068820968839>
- Blais, M., & Dupuis-Déri, F. (2012). Masculinism and the antifeminist counter-movement. *Social Movement Studies*, 11(1), 21–39. <https://doi.org/10.1080/014742837.2012.640532>
- Blázquez, M. I., Cornejo, M., & Pichardo, J. I. (2018). La disputa del género en el Estado español desde el análisis del activismo católico. *Ex Aequo*, 37, 47–61.
- Bonet-Martí, J., Biglia, B., & Cagliero, S. (2023). De la movilización antiabortista a Vox: La incorporación del antifeminismo en la agenda política de la derecha populista española. *Estudios Ibero-Americanos*, 49(19), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.15448/1980-864X.2023.1.44030>
- Cabezas Fernández, M. (2022a). Silencing feminism? Gender and the rise of the nationalist far right in Spain. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 47(2), 319–345. <https://doi.org/10.1086/716858>
- Cabezas Fernández, M. (2022b). Silenciar el feminismo: La emergencia electoral de Vox. In M. Cabezas Fernández & C. Vega Solís (Eds.), *La reacción patriar-*

- cal: *Neoliberalismo autoritario, politización religiosa y nuevas derechas* (pp. 189–217). Bellaterra.
- Calvo, K. (2007). Sacrifices that pay: Polity membership, political opportunities and the recognition of same-sex marriage in Spain. *South European Society and Politics*, 12(3), 295–314. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608740701495152>
- Campillo, I. (2019). ‘If we stop, the world stops’: The 2018 feminist strike in Spain. *Social Movement Studies*, 18(2), 252–258. <https://doi.org/10.1080/014742837.2018.1556092>
- CIS [Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas]. (2024). *Estudio 3428: Percepciones sobre la igualdad entre hombres y mujeres y estereotipos de género*.
- Comisión Feminista 8M de Madrid. (2019). *¿Qué quiere el movimiento feminista? Reivindicaciones y razones*. Traficantes de Sueños.
- Cornejo-Valle, M., & Pichardo, J. I. (2017). From the pulpit to the streets: Ultra-conservative religious positions against gender in Spain. In R. Kuhar & D. Paternotte (Eds.), *Anti-gender campaigns in Europe. Mobilizations against equality* (pp. 233–252). Rowman and Littlefield.
- Cornejo-Valle, M., & Pichardo, J. I. (2018). Actores y estrategias en la movilización anti-género en España: El desplazamiento de una política de iglesia al activismo laico. *Revista Psicología Política*, 18(43), 524–542.
- De Buján, R. F. (2018, March 8). Profanan una Iglesia en Madrid con pintadas a favor del feminismo radical. *ABC*. Retrieved September 12, 2024, from https://www.abc.es/espana/madrid/abci-ultrajan-iglesia-madrid-pintadas-favor-feminismo-radical-201803081336_noticia.html
- De la Calle Fernández, I. (2022, March 31). El feminismo de Castilla y León se manifiesta contra Vox por el retroceso en igualdad. *Público*. Retrieved September 12, 2024, from <https://www.publico.es/politica/castilla-leon-feminismo-castilla-leon-manifiesta-vox-retroceso-igualdad-queremos-decirles.html>
- della Porta, D. (2024). Political opportunity/political opportunity structure. In D. A. Snow, D. Porta, B. Klandermans, & D. McAdam (Eds.), *The Wiley-Blackwell encyclopedia of social and political movements*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Díez, A. (2013, October 9). Activistas de Femen irrumpen en el Congreso: “El aborto es sagrado”. *El País*. Retrieved September 12, 2024, from https://elpais.com/politica/2013/10/09/actualidad/1381304240_913874.html
- Dillard, M. K. (2013). Movement/countermovement dynamics. In D. A. Snow, D. della Porta, B. Klandermans, & D. McAdam (Eds.), *The Wiley-Blackwell encyclopedia of social and political movements*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- EFE. (2014a, March 23). Manifiestantes antiabortistas reclaman más medidas de apoyo a la maternidad. *El País*. Retrieved September 12, 2024, from https://elpais.com/sociedad/2014/03/23/actualidad/1395596180_409477.html

- EFE. (2014b, June 13). Detenidas dos activistas de Femen por encadenarse a crucifijo en La Almodena. *La Vanguardia*. Retrieved September 12, 2024, from <https://www.lavanguardia.com/vida/20140613/54408966253/detenidas-dos-activistas-de-femen-por-encadenarse-a-crucifijo-en-la-almudena.html>
- Espacio Público. (2021). *La extrema derecha y el antifeminismo en Europa: Ideas clave*. Fundación Espacio Público.
- Europa Press. (2015, March 5). Una decena de feministas irrumpe en un acto del ministro de Sanidad al grito de: ‘Vuestras políticas nos matan’. *El Mundo*. Retrieved September 12, 2024, from <https://www.elmundo.es/espana/2015/03/05/54f81629268e3ef3248b4571.html>
- Fórum de Política Feminista. (2017). *Las organizaciones feministas ante el cambio generacional y político, 2011–2016*. Fórum de Política Feminista.
- Franzé, J., & Fernández-Vázquez, G. (2021). The Spanish post-fascist right: The unique case of Vox. In G. Pereyra & G. Souroujon (Eds.), *Global resurgence of the right: Conceptual and regional perspectives* (pp. 173–197). Routledge.
- García-Mingo, E., & Díaz Fernández, S. (2022). *Jóvenes en la manofera: Influencia de la misoginia digital en la percepción que tienen los hombres jóvenes de la violencia sexual*. Centro Reina Sofía sobre Adolescencia y Juventud, Fundación Fad Juventud.
- Gimeno, B. (2022). *Misoginia judicial. La guerra jurídica contra el feminismo*. La Catarata.
- Honorato, V. (2023, November 13). El colectivo LGTBI clama en la calle contra los recortes de derechos en Madrid: “Esta era la libertad de Ayuso”. *eldiario.es*. Retrieved September 12, 2024, from https://www.eldiario.es/madrid/colectivo-lgtbi-clama-recortes-derechos-madrid-libertad-ayuso_1_10682415.html
- Idoiaga Mondragon, N., de Montes, G., Echaide, L., Asla Alcibar, N., & Larrañaga Eguileor, M. (2020). “La Manada” in the digital sphere: Coping with a sexual aggression case through Twitter. *Feminist Media Studies*, 20(7), 926–943. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2019.1643387>
- Jasper, J. (2004). A strategic approach to collective action: Looking for agency in social-movement choices. *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, 9(1), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.17813/maiq.9.1.m112677546p63361>
- Lombardo, E., & León, M. (2014). Políticas de igualdad de género y sociales en España: Origen, desarrollo y desmantelamiento en un contexto de crisis económica. *Investigaciones Feministas*, 5, 13–35. https://doi.org/10.5209/rev_INFE.2014.v5.47986
- Martínez, L. (2023, July 22). El movimiento feminista valenciano llama a la movilización tras el pacto PP-Vox. *Eldiario.es*. Retrieved September 12, 2024, from <https://www.eldiario.es/comunitat-valenciana/politica/movimiento->

- feminista-valenciano-llama-movilizacion-pacto-pp-vox-pone-riesgo-derechos-mujeres_1_10317367.html
- McAdam, D., & Tarrow, S. (2018). The political context of social movements. In D. A. Snow, S. A. Soule, H. Kriesi, & H. J. McCammon (Eds.), *The Wiley Blackwell companion to social movements* (pp. 17–42). Blackwell.
- McCright, A. M., & Dunlap, R. E. (2000). Challenging global warming as a social problem: A movement/countermovement dynamics analysis of the conservative movement's counterclaims. *Social Problems*, 47(4), 499–522. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3097132>
- McEwen, H., & Narayanaswamy, L. (2023). *The international anti-gender movement: Understanding the rise of anti-gender discourses in the context of development, human rights and social protection* (UNRISD Working Paper No. 2023-06). United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD).
- Meyer, D. S., & Staggenborg, S. (1996). Movements, countermovements, and the structure of political opportunity. *American Journal of Sociology*, 101(6), 1628–1660. <https://doi.org/10.1086/230869>
- Núñez Puente, S., Fernández, D., & D'Antonio Maceiras, S. (2021). New discourses of masculinity in the context of online misogyny in Spain: The use of the “feminazi” and “gender ideology” concepts on Twitter. *Sociální Studia/Social Studies*, 18(2), 49–66. <https://doi.org/10.5817/SOC2021-2-49>
- Oesch, D. (2012). The class basis of the cleavage between the New Left and the Radical Right: An analysis for Austria, Denmark, Norway, and Switzerland. In J. Rydgren (Ed.), *Class politics and the radical right* (pp. 31–52). Routledge.
- Ollero, D., & Durán, L. F. (2016, June 15). La Policía investiga a grupos feministas por el asalto a la capilla de la Universidad Autónoma de Madrid. *El Mundo*. Retrieved September 12, 2024, from <https://www.elmundo.es/madrid/2016/06/15/57613185ca474115678b458e.html>
- Paternotte, D. (2015). Blessing the crowds: Catholic mobilizations against gender in Europe. In H. Sabine & P. I. Villa (Eds.), *Anti-Genderismus* (pp. 129–146). Bielefeld Transcript Verlag.
- Platero, L. R., & Ortega-Arjonilla, E. (2016). Building coalitions: The interconnections between feminism and trans* activism in Spain. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 20(1), 46–64. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2015.1076235>
- Puentes, A. (2023, December 17). Furia y colores en Madrid contra la reforma de las leyes trans y LGTBI impulsada por Ayuso. *El País*. Retrieved September 12, 2024, from <https://elpais.com/espana/madrid/2023-12-17/furia-y-colores-en-madrid-contra-la-reforma-de-las-leyes-trans-y-lgtbi-impulsada-por-ayuso.html>
- Quintanal, L. (2024, January 31). El Tren de la Libertad, la primera gran movilización feminista del siglo XXI, cumple diez años. *eldiario.es*. Retrieved

- September 12, 2024, from https://www.eldiario.es/asturias/tren-libertad-primera-gran-movilizacion-feminista-siglo-xxi-cumple-diez-anos_1_10878669.html
- Rivas, M. (2021). Contra las mujeres: El discurso misógino de Vox. “Palabras gruñido” del nacional-populismo español. *Investigaciones Feministas*, 12(1), 67–77. <https://doi.org/10.5209/infe.69585>
- Romanos, E. (2014). Evictions, petitions and escraches: Contentious housing in austerity Spain. *Social Movement Studies*, 13(2), 296–302. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2013.830567>
- Romanos, E., Sádaba, I., & Campillo, I. (2022). La protesta en tiempos de COVID. *Revista Española de Sociología*, 31(4), a140. <https://doi.org/10.22325/fes/res.2022.140>
- Ruiz, L. L. (2024, February 8). Absueltas las activistas de Feminismos Tetuán acusadas por Hazteoir. *El Salto*. Retrieved September 12, 2024, from <https://www.elsalto-diario.com/aborto/absueltas-activistas-feministas-tetuan-acusadas-hazteoir>
- Serra, C. (2019, September 11). Prohibido debatir. *Ctxt*. Retrieved September 12, 2024, from <https://ctxt.es/es/20190911/Firmas/28259/Clara-Serra-debate-universidad-A-Coru%C3%B1a-prostitucion-libertad-de-expresi%C3%B3n.htm>
- Serra, C. (2022, February 9). Contra la extrema derecha: Un feminismo para todo el mundo. *El País*. Retrieved September 12, 2024, from <https://elpais.com/opinion/2022-02-09/contra-la-extrema-derecha-un-feminismo-para-todo-el-mundo.html>
- Shurts, S. (2024). We are looking for a new feminism. Marine Le Pen’s reappropriation of the liberal language of women’s rights and gender equality. In A. J. McAdams & S. Piccolo (Eds.), *Far right newspeak and the future of liberal democracy* (pp. 68–85). Routledge.
- Snow, D. A., Vliegenthart, R., & Ketelaars, P. (2019). The framing perspective on social movements: Its conceptual roots and architecture. In D. A. Snow, S. A. Soule, H. Kriesi, & H. McCammon (Eds.), *The Wiley Blackwell companion to social movements* (2nd ed., pp. 392–410). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Sommers, M. R. (1994). The narrative constitution of identity: A relational and network approach. *Theory and Society*, 23, 605–649. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00992905>
- Sprengholz, M. (2021). Post-feminist German heartland: On the women’s rights narrative of the radical right populist party Alternative für Deutschland in the Bundestag. *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, 28(4), 486–501. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13505068211007509>
- Suárez Suárez, C. (2020). *El tren de la libertad: Las mujeres decidimos*. Almud.
- Tarrow, S. (1993). Cycles of collective action: Between moments of madness and the repertoire of contention. *Social Science History*, 17(2), 281–307. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1171283>

- Tarrow, S. (2021). *Movements and parties: Critical connections in American political development*. Cambridge University Press.
- Taylor, V., & Van Dyke, N. (2004). “Get up, stand up”: Tactical repertoires of social movements. In D. A. Snow, S. A. Soule, & H. Kriesi (Eds.), *The Blackwell companion to social movements* (pp. 262–293). Blackwell.
- Tilly, C. (2008). *Contentious performances*. Cambridge University Press.
- Valdes, I. (2024, March 8). La generación Z se parte en extremos: Ellos son los más machistas y ellas, las más feministas. *El País*. Retrieved September 12, 2024, from <https://elpais.com/sociedad/dia-de-la-mujer/2024-03-08/la-generacion-z-se-parte-en-extremos-ellos-son-los-mas-machistas-y-ellas-las-mas-feministas.html>
- Villar-Aguilés, A., & Pecourt, J. (2021). Antifeminismo y troleo de género en Twitter: Estudio de la subcultura trol a través de #STOPfeminazis. *Teknokultura*, 18(1), 33–44. <https://doi.org/10.5209/tekn.70225>

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if you modified the licensed material. You do not have permission under this license to share adapted material derived from this chapter or parts of it.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter’s Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter’s Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copy-right holder.





Anti-Feminist and Anti-Gender Coalitions and Feminist Resilience in Turkey

Ayşe Almaçık and Özlem Altan-Olcay

INTRODUCTION

In September 2022, a network of anti-feminist and anti-gender actors organized a protest called “the Big Family Gathering,” in Saraçhane, a public park in Istanbul. The organizers explained that their aim was “to protect our families, children and the future generations against the threat of LGBT propaganda and imposition” (Büyük Aile Platformu, 2022). Although the protest was organized by a coalition of non-governmental associations, their video inviting the public to the protest was aired on public TV under the banner of public announcements. This anti-gender protest is one of the first of its kind in Turkey in terms of the number of participating organizations and the audacity with which hate speech was voiced in it.

And yet the way it played out is a culmination of how the anti-feminist and anti-gender movements have emerged and gained force over the last

A. Almaçık (✉) • Ö. Altan-Olcay
Koç University, Istanbul, Turkey
e-mail: aalniacik@ku.edu.tr; ozaltan@ku.edu.tr

decade. In Turkey, the spread of anti-gender and anti-feminist discourses, and the formation of such non-governmental organizations, is a relatively new phenomenon (Eslen-Ziya & Bjørnholt, 2023). In fact, until the late 2010s, the AKP government was often considered in the literature as the sole producer of anti-feminist and anti-gender equality action and discourse (Kourou, 2021; Özkazanç, 2020).¹ In this chapter we show that the current anti-gender and anti-feminist mobilization has found fertile ground in and built on existing right-wing state policies and discourses regarding gender equality, women's rights, and LGBT+ rights. This recent gathering of forces can also be attributed to the spread of backlash movements elsewhere in the world. While there are certain themes and issues that are unique to Turkey, the strategies and the discourses developed by Turkish anti-feminist and anti-gender actors show significant similarities to their counterparts elsewhere.

In 2023, at the same time as the anti-gender coalition Big Family Platform (*Büyük Aile Platformu*) staged its second rally in Saraçhane, feminist and LGBT+ groups organized their own online gathering, named Big Life Gathering (*Büyük Hayat Buluşması*) (Bianet, 2023). The aim of this counter-protest, as the organizers explained later, was first to challenge the hate speech that anti-gender actors wished to normalize under the rationale of protecting the family, and second to create a space for collective presence, mutual support, and a chance to rise above the threatening atmosphere. After this gathering, many activists talked about the speed with which they were able to organize, the creative ways in which they debunked the rhetoric emanating from the anti-feminist and anti-gender coalition, and the affective impact it had on activists. They were, in a sense, discussing the new strategies that feminists and LGBT+ activists have had to develop in this political context.

We argue that these new strategies have played an important role in countering the backlash movement and resisting its attempts to make anti-feminist and anti-gender discourses hegemonic. We also propose that it is important to study backlash movements without invisibilizing the progressive reaction to them. In the case of Turkey, such a juxtaposition reminds us that the societal divisions are far too complex to be captured by

¹While anti-feminist and anti-gender groups are largely overlapping, there are some distinctions, with certain groups more focused on protesting the terminology of gender, with the argument that there are two “natural” sexes. These latter are likely to be more vocal on anti-LGBT+ rights advocacy, claiming that they are not opposed to women's rights.

ahistorical, orientalist generalizations about a “conservative society,” an “Eastern culture,” and so on. Furthermore, it is politically essential to continuously shine a light on progressive activists, not just in Turkey, but in any political context in order to prevent their erasure by right-wing claims of representing the “authentic masses.”

In the rest of this chapter, we first discuss the origins and the contemporary state of anti-feminist and anti-gender mobilization in Turkey, paying attention to the political context in which it has become more vocal. We delineate the issues that the movement centralizes and the ways in which its discourses and repertoires of action feed off one another. We then analyze how feminist and LGBT+ groups have countered this right-wing mobilization, specifically the new discourses and strategies they have invented for this purpose. We conclude our chapter with the analytical and political implications of these encounters.²

ANTI-FEMINIST AND ANTI-GENDER MOBILIZATION: CURRENT WAVE AND ITS HISTORY

Political Context: The AKP Government as the Original Anti-Feminist Actor

Many authors agree that, until 2019, AKP was the sole actor of anti-gender politics in Turkey (Eslen-Ziya & Bjørnholt, 2023; Kourou, 2021; Özkazanç, 2020). A number of studies argue that the 2007 elections, the 2010 referendum which resulted in significant changes to the constitution, the 2011 and 2015 elections, and the 2017 transition to a presidential system were landmark moments, after which the government became increasingly authoritarian while also intensifying its anti-feminist and anti-gender stance (Candaş, 2021; Çalışkan, 2018; Göztepe, 2021; Gülel, 2021; Kandiyoti, 2016; Özbudun, 2014). This stance has revealed itself in particular discourses, policy shifts, and state-level institutional changes,

²This chapter is based on the following research: We have conducted an extensive desk study of existing scholarship on anti-gender and anti-feminist movements in Turkey as well as feminist mobilizations. The broader research also includes critical frame analysis on documents of anti-gender and anti-feminist mobilization campaigns attacking the Istanbul Convention and the secular elements in the public education system and 21 interviews with feminist activists. This chapter draws on all of this research while also being informed by two co-creation labs with feminist activists, facilitating discussions on challenges they are facing and the strategies they develop to counter them.

laying the groundwork for the current emergence of audacious anti-feminist and anti-gender groups.

In terms of discourses, one of the speech acts most frequently cited in the literature is the speech made by then-Prime Minister Erdoğan in 2008, suggesting that every family should have at least three children. Coupled with warnings about the dangers of an aging population, this idea has since been repeated frequently by multiple political actors (Akkan, 2018; Yazıcı, 2012). A corollary of this discourse is the AKP government's anti-abortion stance. In 2012, Erdoğan, who had by then become the president, compared abortion to a massacre carried out by the Turkish Armed Forces near the border based on faulty intelligence (Korkut & Eslen-Ziya, 2016). This discourse was soon followed by a policy proposal to restrict and/or ban abortion, which was ultimately withdrawn after widescale feminist mobilization.

Scholars note that these discourses are not isolated speech acts; rather, they have been connected to various policy initiatives over the years, posing as solutions to these “dangers” (Korkut & Eslen-Ziya, 2016). Çavdar and Yaşar's (2019) examination of the history of anti-abortion policy-making shows the incremental regressions over the years. For example, shortly after taking power in 2002, the AKP government declared that women would have to pay for their own abortions in public hospitals. Then, in 2007, a communique announced that the social security system would no longer reimburse abortion-related procedures. In 2009, The Mother-Child Health and Family Planning Clinics were transformed into Family Health Clinics, which made contraception less accessible. In addition, a funding regulation passed in 2014 lowered the coefficient/score for abortion procedures, which lowers the public reimbursement the hospitals receive for each procedure, in order to disincentivize doctors from performing them (Çavdar & Yaşar, 2019). Finally, while abortion is still technically legal, the majority of Turkey's public hospitals no longer perform it (O'Neil et al., 2020).

We can consider these discourses and their policy repercussions in terms of attempts to hegemonize particular ideas of a desirable family and the naturalization of control over women's bodies through a growing demographic fear (Günaydın, 2021; Güneş-Ayata & Doğangün, 2017; Korkut & Eslen-Ziya, 2016). They are all part of a political agenda that emphasizes women's familial roles and only empowers them within the confines of the family (Arat, 2021; Güneş-Ayata & Doğangün, 2017). Tabak et al. (2022) identify two shifts in AKP's gender politics in this regard: the first is a move

away from the concept of gender equality toward gender justice (equity), which promotes the idea that men and women are complementary, have different roles and rights in the family, and that their different roles justify “difference” (read: unequal). Tabak et al. argue that this first shift reflected a moderate conservatism aiming to challenge what right-wing actors define as the “secular normative status quo.” In contrast, the second, the more recent shift, replaces this moderate conservatism with a form that deploys radical conservative discourses (rejectionism). In particular, this second shift further emboldens men’s rights groups in their challenges to current legislation on gender-based violence specifically and the Civil Code more generally.

Another key moment of government-produced anti-gender discourse and decision making was the banning of the annual Pride Parade in 2015 on the grounds that it would conflict with heightened “religious sensitivities” during the holy month of Ramadan (Mutluer, 2019; Savcı, 2020). Pride parades, held annually in Istanbul since 2003, have drawn up to 50,000 participants in years leading up to 2015 (Savcı, 2020). For Mutluer (2019), the government’s decision indicates the completion of AKP’s transformation from a party that was pragmatically inclusive of LGBT+ people in its earlier days in power to one that is openly conservative, underlining heterosexuality as the basis of the family, speaking against LGBT+, and including ideas like traditional family values, nationalism, and religiosity in its discourses. During the most recent election campaign in 2023, the government strengthened its anti-LGBT+ discourse, criminalized queer activists, and provided fertile ground for the hate speech by right-wing non-governmental organizations.

These discourses and acts are also connected to institutional changes. As AKP won successive elections during the 2000s and strengthened its grip on state institutions, there was a growing convergence between state policies and party doctrines. This convergence has contributed to making certain state institutions the locus of anti-feminist and anti-gender mobilization (Adak, 2021; Çavdar & Yaşar, 2019; Coşar, 2021; Günaydın, 2021; Hülagü, 2021; Uğur-Cinar, 2017). For instance, what used to be the State Ministry Responsible for Women and Family Affairs, which has experienced several rounds of institutional (re/de)structuring, has most recently been refashioned as the Ministry of Family and Social Services. Currently, it describes its first objective as developing national-level social policies, while its second objective is protecting the family against social and cultural erosion (Çavdar & Yaşar, 2019). In contrast, work against gender-based

discrimination and inequality has been deprioritized while protecting women's rights has dropped off its agenda entirely (Sancar et al., 2021).

Another state institution, the Presidency of Religious Affairs, has intensified its collaborations with the Ministry of Family and Social Services to promote a religiously sanctioned heteronormative conceptualization of the family (Adak, 2021; Coşar, 2021; Mutluer, 2019). The Presidency has also been expanding its reach through counseling services offered through Family Spiritual Guidance and Counseling Desks, first established in 2003 (Adak, 2021; Kocamaner, 2019). Meanwhile, it has further increased its influence through changes to the national education system, aiming to increase the influence of religious education, producing and sanctioning educational materials that promote traditional gender roles, and signing controversial protocols with religious organizations despite protests from secular groups (Çelik & Özdemir, 2022; Kandiyoti & Emanet, 2017).

There have also been two international institutional shifts. First, there are the international conferences organized or promoted by state institutions like the Human Rights and Equality Institution of Turkey (TİHEK). Günaydın (2021) argues that these conferences amplified anti-gender discourses throughout the 2010s. According to Hülagü (2021), institutions like TİHEK have also enabled some of the anti-feminist rhetoric adopted by men's groups to be taken up by the state bureaucracy, thereby gaining a semblance of political legitimacy that it otherwise would not have. Second, the partial suspension of EU accession negotiations has contributed to the intensification of a conservative gender climate because of the loss of external pressure to democratize (Güneş-Ayata & Doğangün, 2017; Ugur-Cinar, 2017).

Overall, these discursive moves and policy changes prompt many scholars to argue that the current anti-feminist and anti-gender mobilizations in Turkey emerged in the second half of the 2010s, emboldened by the particular political context (Eslen-Ziya & Bjørnholt, 2023; Kourou, 2021; Özkazanç, 2020).

The Emergence of Anti-Gender Mobilization: Issues, Discourses, and Repertoires of Action

Since 2010, various organizations, think tanks, and websites have been established, including *Turkey Family Council*, *Divorced Fathers Platform*, *Divorced People and Family Platform*, *Victims of Unlimited Alimony Platform*, *National Will Platform*, *Turkish Thought Platform*, *Family*

Academy Association, Unity in Idea and Struggle Platform, and Big Family Platform. These organizations also have connections with the right-wing media while many of their ideas have become the bread and butter of radical right-wing intellectuals writing about “cultural values,” “traditions,” “men and women’s complementary roles,” criminalizing feminist and LGBT+ activists’ demands, and denigrating existing legal protections (Kadioğlu & Sözeri Özdal, 2023).

The first thing that can be said about the issues these organizations prioritize is that they have intensified their demands to withdraw from all international conventions, beginning with the Istanbul Convention. The demand for withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, which accelerated with a campaign in 2019, was tied from the beginning to counteracting LGBT+ rights and reinterpreting legislation on gender-based violence as a threat to the family (Eslen-Ziya, 2020, 2022; Kütük-Kuriş, 2022; Tabak et al., 2022). Scholars have shown how the anti-gender movement has been calling LGBT+ groups “abnormalities” and “perverts,” while constantly reproducing the frame “homosexuality as sin” (Ozduzen & Korkut 2020; Özkazanç, 2019a, 2019b). The campaign claimed that the convention was a Trojan Horse for sneaking LGBT+ rights into the country, thereby threatening “our families,” “our culture,” and “our traditions.” The campaign even argued that the convention increased violence against women. More specifically, the convention and Law 6284 on domestic violence, which went into effect after Turkey’s ratification of the convention, supposedly created the conditions for intensifying family dissolution, contributed to rising divorce rates, and victimized men because they could be banned from their family residence for little or no reason. The campaigners went so far as to argue that this practice actually led to more violence because men were more likely to kill their wives out of “frustration” at being driven away from their homes (Hülagü, 2021; Eslen-Ziya, 2022). Accordingly, the campaign’s social media slogan was #istanbulconvention-kills (Eslen-Ziya, 2022; Ünal, 2021), appropriating and reversing the feminist slogan #istanbulsözleşmesiyadır (#The Istanbul Convention Saves Lives) (Yüksel-Kaptanoğlu, 2020).

The campaign also marked a turning point in the intra-conservative competition because the campaigners were emboldened enough to attack the Islamic women’s government-organized non-governmental organization (GONGO) *Women and Democracy Association* (KADEM) (*Kadın ve Demokrasi Derneği*), established by President Erdogan’s daughter in 2013 (Kütük-Kuriş, 2022; Tabak et al., 2022). Positioning itself as a women’s

rights advocate, KADEM initially embraced a limited conceptualization of gender, adopting sex role theory and a socialization approach, while it rejected the idea of equality, denigrated as “sameness.” Its alternative to “gender equality” terminology was “gender equity,” advocating for women’s increased visibility in the public realm while respecting complementary gender roles in the family. Despite its anti-feminist positioning, dislocating pro-feminist women’s organizations from the process of policy-making, KADEM’s embrace of the concept of gender, albeit ambivalently, and support for the Istanbul Convention, have made KADEM a target for anti-gender actors (Çelebi, 2022; Diner, 2018; Kütük-Kuriş, 2022). Hence, the fact that Turkey’s ultra-conservative forces were able to attack KADEM in this instance can be read as a signal of who, between moderates and radicals, is winning the struggle within the conservative bloc (Tabak et al., 2022; Ünal, 2021). The President’s announcement of a decree withdrawing from the Istanbul Convention in March 2021 was the anti-gender bloc’s greatest achievement between 2010 and 2021.

There is not much scholarship on the purchase of this mobilization at the general societal level, however. Limited survey data suggest that supporters of Turkey’s withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention were a minority both before and after the President’s decision (KONDA, 2020; O’Neil & Çarkoğlu, 2022). Nevertheless, the movement is now demanding that Turkey withdraw from other international conventions, such as the CEDAW and the UN Beijing Declaration, and repeal all national legislation inspired by them, specifically the Civil Code, Penal Code, and Law 6284 against domestic violence.

A second relevant issue is the challenge to the existing law on alimony rights, which stipulates that the ex-spouse who is deemed more at fault and with more economic resources must pay alimony to the other for an indefinite period following the divorce. This legislation resulted from amendments in 1988 to make the Turkish Civil Code align with its inspiration, the Swiss Civil Code. To make divorce easier, this change introduced conditions like “irretrievable breakdown” and “mutual consent.” Furthermore, to account for women’s widespread economic vulnerability, it removed the previous one-year limitation on alimony payments (Miller, 2000; Örucü, 1991). Men’s rights activists and religious-leaning newspapers and intellectuals have been attacking this legislation in the last decade (Telseren, 2020; Kadioğlu & Sözeri Özdal, 2023), arguing that alimony payments make divorce more likely and therefore break up marriages (Hülagü, 2021; Ünal, 2021). The more radical discourses blame “evil” women for abusing

alimony to divorce husbands, who are the “real victims” (Özcan, 2020; Özkazanç, 2020). Some right-wing writers also argue that the current legislation burdens the poor to take care of the poor and demand that the welfare state step in (Özcan, 2020). Many of the organizations mentioned above have been formed specifically to get the legislation repealed. In response, feminists argue that it is not justifiable to go back on these stipulations unless the government meaningfully addresses and resolves widespread gender inequalities in family and working life (Özcan, 2020). They stress that if alimony is not a legal right, then women will have little chance of escaping from abusive marriages.

In addition, anti-feminist actors have been demanding a series of policy changes to entrench unequal gender roles within (heterosexual) families. They have campaigned to bring back the notion of the head of household, to have it reintroduced into the Civil Code as well as daily practice. They also call for allowing and even encouraging underage marriage, arguing that this would prevent “uncontrolled” and “unwarranted” cross-sex intimacies between young people, *and* boost the fertility rate to avert the “demographic threat” of an aging population. Also, on the issue of divorce, they demand that the procedure of conciliation be enforced before divorce proceedings and the rule of joint custody be universalized regardless of divorce circumstances.

Several scholars observe policy shifts in line with these justifications and demands. The Presidency of Religious Affairs has been intensely advising women to keep the family together by carrying out their “duties” as efficiently as possible while also emphasizing the “perils of divorce” (Çavdar & Yaşar, 2019). Telseren (2020) and Özar and Yakut-Çakar (2013) discuss how women’s marital status has been used as a criterion for exclusion from social assistance schemes. Others refer to the report of the Divorce Commission, a parliamentary investigative committee tasked with research on the impact of existing legislation on the dissolution of family unity. This committee included a number of men’s rights groups in its proceedings and finally proposed a series of reversals from previous pro-feminist changes in the Civil Code and Penal Code (Ayata & Candaş, 2018; Coşar, 2021; Kandıyoti, 2019). These proposals include limiting the restraining order in cases of domestic violence to 15 days, enforcing of negotiation and arbitration before divorce proceedings can start, a five-year surveillance period for child abusers if the marriage is “unproblematic,” and the introduction of theologians in family counseling services (Coşar, 2021). Özcan (2020) adds that the President’s Executive Program published in August 2018 has

already recognized some of the anti-alimony campaigners' demands. There was also a legislative proposal in 2016 to bring back the law that absolved a rapist of his crime if he married the victim and there was the "consent" of the child (Gülel, 2021). The government initially tried to justify this proposal with the rationale that it was protecting the family and children, who remain fatherless when the rapists go to jail (Ünal, 2022). The bill was withdrawn following a massive objection against it (Altan-Olcay & Oder, 2021; Ertan, 2020).

Health and reproductive rights is the third issue, including at its core the escalating attempts by the government to revise existing laws or change how laws are interpreted so that access to contraception and abortion is limited (Ünal, 2019). The justification for more restriction in this policy area is to be found in discourses emphasizing motherhood as the God-given role of women, how it is necessary to have three children per family in order to avoid the demographic dangers facing the country, how family is the backbone of the country, and the societal dangers posed by those who threaten it, i.e., feminists and LGBT+ actors (Akkan, 2018; Diner, 2018; Günaydın, 2021; Güneş-Ayata & Doğangün, 2017; Yazıcı, 2012).

A final issue worth mentioning is education, which has long been a "battleground" between secular and Islamic actors in Turkey (Kandiyoti & Emanet, 2017). While Islamist actors have always tried to shape the schooling system and curriculum in terms of what they see as national and Islamic values, it is only recently that anti-gender elements have become prominent in their agenda. Kandiyoti and Emanet (2017) and Telseren (2020) explain how AKP governments have incorporated many of these actors' demands in the education system. Özkazanç (2019b) focuses on the Gender Equality Project, adopted by the Ministry of National Education, with funding from the EU: when anti-feminist and anti-gender actors began attacking the project, several state institutions disavowed their own years of activity under this banner and deleted the relevant content from institutional websites. Emboldened by this quick win, the same actors immediately targeted the Higher Education Council's Gender Equality Position Paper and they, again, won: the position paper was removed from the Council's website. The president of the Council explained this retreat with the justification that the paper citing "gender equality" went against social values and did not find widespread acceptance in society (Bilim Akademisi, 2019; Göker & Polatdemir, 2022). He went on to proclaim that women's studies classes would be now organized through the

principle of gender equity/justice instead of gender equality (Özkazanç, 2019a, 2019b).

Researchers disagree about the toll of these developments on gender equality in education. According to Özkazanç (2020), women and gender studies centers at universities have not yet experienced a comparable attack, although like Çağatay (2019), she notes that AKP's overall strategy of dismissing dissident academics and replacing them with pro-government cadres has affected these research centers. Göker and Polatdemir (2022) draw attention to several recent developments at universities such as “familialisation of gender studies, politically charged appointments of people without expertise to gender studies centres, and sexual harassment units or the dismissal of existing experts.” There are already some cases where women's and gender studies centers were renamed as women's and family studies centers (Özüğurlu & Dayan, 2020).

One of the distinguishing characteristics of anti-gender actors in the European context is their frequent use of terms such as “gender ideology” and “gender theory.” These terms have recently started making inroads in the Turkish case as well, introduced by radical right-wing intellectuals with access to transnational discourses. The attack against the use of the term gender and gender equality in official documents, university centre names, educational programs, and so on does have connections with the inroads “gender ideology” and “gender theory” might make in the near future. However, the terms themselves are not currently as widespread in the Turkish context.

In sum, as this overview shows, in the current political climate, feminist and LGBT+ activists are feeling pressure from multiple directions, in particular from the fusion of the ideologies promoted by the dominant right-wing party and the state bureaucracy's policies. This means that their views are almost completely absent from policy and law debates, and that the judicial system is less inclined to interpret and implement the letter of the law to further gender equality objectives. These activists are also confronted by a new and growing amalgamation of anti-feminist and anti-gender non-governmental actors. Seeing an increasingly receptive government, these actors have been emboldened in their demands to repeal gender-progressive laws and policies and Turkey's participation in related conventions. This power also translates into increasingly violent attacks against progressive activists that border hate crimes, especially when it comes to feminists and LGBT+ groups.

MULTILAYERED FEMINIST RESPONSES

In this political moment, feminists and LGBT+ activists are less focused on pushing through progressive changes to the law and opening up more space for participation in policy-making than protecting existing achievements and the collectives established so far. It is an exercise in sustaining the movement in the face of multiple attacks *and* an attempt to create new spaces for maneuver, possibly unanticipated by the backlash forces, to gain more vocal societal support. While these strategies are a testament to the activists' impressive resilience and creativity, they also reveal the movement's current limits. This is a political environment where progressive activists are facing multiple threats. At one level, there are the attacks against existing laws and policies and the need to defend already gained rights in terms of gender equality. At another level, there is the near impossibility of advocating for new, more progressive laws and regulations when the government is unlikely to include these activists in policy discussions. On top of all this, there is the dire fact that they are being attacked in the right-wing media, and the government is not just criminalizing them discursively, but also using court cases to subject them to threats of closure. Given this political climate, the activists' time and resources can easily be consumed with reactive organizing.

We can categorize these repertoires of action and strategies into three groups. One group of strategies involves multilayered coalition building and targeting different constituencies. These efforts aim to expand the reach of the activists' messages and build a thicker protective shield against attacks as organizations support one another and they garner a more favorable public opinion. The second group of strategies responds to the restrictive political setting that has made many of the classical repertoires used by movement actors (petitions, lobbying, etc.) not just less effective but increasingly unavailable because the government simply does not include progressive activists in policy-making processes. In this context, activists come up with new, unexpected protest strategies and build activist repertoires in institutional spaces where none existed before. Finally, the confrontation between feminist and LGBT+ activists, on the one hand, and the backlash movement, on the other, is one over normative frameworks and knowledge production on gender, gender norms, and individual rights. In this vein, feminist and LGBT+ groups engage in a variety of knowledge and discourse production strategies which also utilize the digital media.

Coalitions: From Inside the Movement to Outreach, from the Local to the Transnational

A salient observation in recent scholarship on the feminist movement concerns the alliances that different organizations and collectives have been building. These alliances are a means to survive while trying to protect the achievements of past eras (Günel, 2021). They also strategically bring together activist groups with different political stances on issues over which there is less disagreement.

This is especially true regarding the issue of gender-based violence and relatedly the Istanbul Convention (Çağatay, 2019; Dinçer, 2020). The most recent examples include the *Stop Violence Platform (Şiddete Son Platformu)*, which was formed after Turkey signed the Istanbul Convention in May 2011. This platform was instrumental in lobbying for new legislation on domestic violence (Aksoy, 2018). Three other groups used both conventional and confrontational forms of action to campaign against deadly violence: *We Revolt Against Femicide (Kadın Cinayetlerine Karşı İsyandayız)* and *We Will Stop Femicide Platform (Kadın Cinayetlerini Durduracağız Platformu)*, both established in 2010; and the *Group for Immediate Prevention of Femicide (Kadın Cinayetlerine Karşı Acil Önlem Grubu)*, established in 2014 (Altuntaş, 2019). Another group, the *Istanbul Convention Monitoring Platform*, bringing together 81 women's and LGBT+ organizations, reported on problems in implementing the Istanbul Convention (Altıok & Somersan, 2015; Baytok, 2021; Günel, 2021).

Since the summer of 2020, feminists and their allies have responded to the anti-gender campaign against the Istanbul Convention with a broader campaign of their own called *Implement the Istanbul Convention (İstanbul Sözleşmesini Uygula)*. Although they failed to prevent Turkey's withdrawal, the group successfully united a diverse set of actors to defend this single cause. In addition to the expected mobilizers, such as individual feminists and women's organizations, this campaign won support from 77 bar associations, almost all opposition political parties, two union confederations (Confederation of Public Employees Trade Unions, *Kamu Emekçileri Sendikaları Konfederasyonu*, and Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions of Turkey, *Türkiye Devrimci İşçi Sendikaları Konfederasyonu*), important business and professional organizations, and various non-governmental organizations that had not previously focused on gender equality or gender-based violence (Kancı et al., 2023).

In recent years, multi-issue platforms have been added to coalition-building strategies to respond to increasing attacks. For example, the *Women's Platform for Equality* (EŞİK, *Eşitlik için Kadın Platformu*) was established in 2020 with the participation of over 300 women's and LGBT+ groups after government actors began signaling that Turkey might withdraw from the Istanbul Convention (Arat, 2021; The Advocates for Human Rights, 2021). Another such platform, *Women are Strong Together* (*Kadınlar Birlikte Güçlü*), has challenged attempts to institutionalize a gender politics based on Islamist notions, the lack of meaningful political action to prevent increasing gender-based violence, the gendered outcomes of the Kurdish conflict, and the neoliberalism and heterosexism permeating state discourse and policy-making (Çağatay, 2019; Çağatay et al., 2022). Another important example is the way in which an ad hoc committee of individual feminists organizes the annual March 8 Feminist Night March. This committee, due to its intersectional and inclusive nature, and its success in organizing the protest among diverse groups, getting people onto the streets despite severe police violence, can also be seen as a dynamic example of multi-issue coalition-building (Al-Ali & Taş, 2019; Çağatay et al., 2022).

Relevantly, an interesting point of consensus among the activists with whom we talked was that feminist and LGBT+ groups are now more likely to stand together against anti-feminist and anti-gender forces (Baytok, 2021). In addition, there is more political will among activists to learn from each other's framing strategies and support each other's creative protests. In 2023, for example, one of Turkey's oldest LGBT+ organizations, KAOS GL, produced a public video challenging discrimination and hate speech against queer groups. After this video, shot in Istanbul's subway system, aired on Twitter, the actors and the producers received death threats and the video was removed (Yükler, 2023). In support of KAOS GL, however, a group of feminists shot a similar video set on the subway system, which they then circulated on social media (KAOS GL, 2023). While activists acknowledge that divisions remain between and within feminist and LGBT+ groups, they also consider these coalitions and acts of mutual support as important achievements of solidarity against anti-feminist and anti-gender groups.

A different but related strategy of coalition-building concerns the networks that feminist groups attempt to establish internationally. It is still important to reach out to international institutions of governance, such as

the EU, the UN, or the CEDAW committee experts, although Turkey's EU accession talks can no longer be said to be proceeding meaningfully. These efforts include seeking opportunities to gain representation in policy discussions via any pressure that international institutions can exert on Turkish government actors and providing alternative reporting on policies that impact the possibilities for gender equality in the country (Yükler, 2022). As a result of these initiatives, the CEDAW Committee, in its 8th Periodic Report of 2022, criticized Turkish state representatives for their legal repression of civil society organizations working to promote women's rights and gender equality. They referred specifically to the court case initiated by the public prosecutor to shut down the *We Will Stop Femicide Platform* on the grounds that it "acted against the law and morality" (United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, 2022).

Feminist groups also attempt to stay connected to transnational feminist networks (Çağatay et al., 2022). In particular, professional organizations try hard to reach out to their counterparts in political contexts with similar gender inequality problems and backlash movements. This strategy is adopted for two reasons. First, it allows activists to learn from other cases, as people mentioned in our interviews. For instance, EŞİK's *International Feminist Meeting*, organized online in October 2020, involved speakers from Eastern European countries like Poland, Croatia, Hungary, and Bulgaria, all of whom shared their observations about anti-feminist actors' attacks on the Istanbul Convention in their own contexts (EŞİK, 2020). Second, this strategy enables national campaigns to be picked up in other countries so that dissemination is more powerful. In the summer of 2020, for example, activists in Turkey refashioned the #ChallengeAccepted campaign to defend the Istanbul Convention and protest against femicides in Turkey. International networks provided useful support, with women from around the world sharing black and white pictures of themselves on social media accounts after Turkish activists complemented the original hashtag with #IstanbulConventionLetsYouLive and #pinargultekin. The latter hashtag memorialized the name of a woman whose brutal murder led to nationwide protests (Comeforo & Görgülü, 2022). Although the campaign did not stop President Erdoğan from withdrawing from the Istanbul Convention, activists told us that the campaign made the Convention much more widely known among the lay public than previously.

Changing Contours of Activism: Creative Repertoires of Action

The currently increasing level of repression and criminalization of feminist and LGBT+ activists means that traditional repertoires of action face myriad difficulties and threats. Street protests are often outlawed, as with Pride parades since 2015, or criminalized as with Feminist Night Marches since 2019, which face increasing police violence and inordinate arrests every March 8 (Çağatay et al., 2022). In addition, these groups are excluded from the simple act of lobbying because the government does not include them in policy discussions. Instead, it deploys GONGOs as a display of citizen engagement (Eslen-Ziya & Kazanoğlu, 2020; Gülel, 2021). Turkey's very restrictive law on formal organizations means that they can be subject to backbreaking surveillance and auditing (Az, 2022) or even face court cases in which public prosecutors demand they be shut down (Kancı et al., 2023). This is not to mention the threat of concerted social media attacks and defamation campaigns organized by men's rights groups, anti-LGBT+ groups, and right-wing newspapers (Eslen-Ziya, 2022). Activists have responded to this political context by tweaking their traditional strategies, developing novel forms of protest, and using new spaces to communicate their messages and make their presence felt.

Hence, as indicated before, this is not a period in which effective lobbying to achieve progressive policy changes nationally is likely. However, when the opposition bloc won in a majority of Turkey's largest city municipalities in the 2019 local elections, this presented activists with a new arena to participate in making and implementing policies. They started working with local political actors to implement gender equality projects and tried to institutionalize pro-feminist policy-making in local governments (Çağatay et al., 2022; Ehrhart, 2022).

As political repression increases, it has become more perilous to organize street protests. During the early 2010s, thousands marched in Feminist Night Marches and Pride parades despite violent police interventions (Çağatay et al., 2022; Mutluer, 2019; Özbay & Öktem, 2021; Savcı, 2020). Since the banning of Pride parades in 2015 and criminalization of Feminist Night Marches in 2019, however, it has become harder to maintain these numbers. As everywhere else, this lack of political opportunity was exacerbated by the pandemic-related restrictions which made public spaces even less accessible. Nevertheless, our interviewees and discussions with activists reveal that there is constant effort to come up with strategies to retain street presence. These include organizing marches in which the

participants remain anonymous; changing meeting places and times to counter police surveillance and increase the likelihood of participation; and finding ways to record police brutality. Interesting examples of retaining public presence include divers who opened a banner supporting the Istanbul Convention under water and the use of holograms in streets where protests are banned.

Ironically (or maybe not), the authorities allow protests organized by men's rights groups, such as the aforementioned Big Family Gathering. It is important to emphasize once again the creativity of the response of feminist and LGBT+ groups to this backlash protest. The Big Life Gathering, organized by KAOS GL as a simultaneous alternative to the anti-gender gathering, enabled people from all walks of life to participate in a collective show of support for the activists (Bianet, 2023). The digital event disseminated their messages among people who might have been reluctant to go out on the streets lest they face police violence. It enabled the creation of a joyful atmosphere to resist the threat coming from the backlash actors (Bianet, 2023).

Yet another unconventional spatial intervention has been the transformation of court cases into venues for activist presence. Litigation follow-ups, a decades-old practice in the feminists' repertoire (Almıcaık, 2022), have become larger, more organized, and more systematic in recent years, transforming courtrooms into spaces of protest and public access. In addition to publicizing cases of femicide and child sexual abuse, and thereby galvanizing social protests (Çaltekin, 2022; Cayli Messina, 2022; Ogan & Bas, 2020), feminist activists have followed hearings, issued press releases before and after court cases to demand full implementation of the law (or protest lenient sentencing), and officially applied to courts to become interveners on the ground that cases of gendered violence harm their activities (Çaltekin, 2022).

One recent and unexpectedly successful example of this courtroom activism happened when the public prosecutor, based on complaints by men's rights groups, took the We Will Stop Femicides Platform to trial and demanded that it be shut down on the grounds that its activism was against the law and general morality. The lawyers of the platform called survivors of violence and relatives of deceased women to testify on behalf of the collective. As one activist noted, this strategy not only enabled their testimonials to become public record but also empowered survivors and their relatives to become political subjects. The feminist movement and its allies also responded with legal activism to the presidential decree withdrawing

from the Istanbul Convention. More specifically, they applied to the Council of the State to overturn the decree on the grounds that it was unlawful because an international human rights treaty can only be annulled by parliament. At the hearings, the participation of approximately one thousand lawyers and activists turned the Council of the State courtroom into a space of protest, with the public prosecutor announcing that the withdrawal decree was unconstitutional (Kepenek, 2022). Nevertheless, two months later, the Council of State dismissed the case to annul the presidential decree. Currently, there is intense discussion among activists to find ways to overcome the technicalization that legal procedures and spaces like courtrooms induce while using them to create new opportunities for political activism.

Knowledge Production: New Spaces, New Stories

In the last decade, feminist groups have also begun using digital tools more intensively to produce counter-hegemonic knowledge, raise public awareness on the extent of problems of gender inequality, and disseminate individual stories to reveal lived experiences of inequality and violence.

In this regard, activists' websites have become significant places of knowledge production and sharing, despite increasing repression of digital media by the AKP governments (Dinçer, 2023). Two such websites run by feminists are Cracked Ground (*Çatlak Zemin*) and Five-lettered (*5 Harfliler*). The latter signifies the five letters comprising the word for woman in Turkish (*kadın*) (Şenol Cantek & Bora, 2015; Göker, 2019). Other websites publish writing by Muslim women activists, some of whom call themselves feminists. *Reçel Blog*, for instance, is the tongue-in-cheek name for the blog produced by young pious women. The name, which means jam, is a sarcastic reference to an essay entitled "Muslim women who do not make jam," in which an Islamist male writer laments the loss of traditional gender roles (Şenol Cantek & Bora, 2015; Göker, 2019). Muslim women also share their stories of the imposition of Islamic dictates on their everyday lives on the website *You Won't Walk Alone (Yalnız Yürümeyeceksin)* (Arda & Akdemir, 2021; Gülel, 2022). A website established by several secular feminists, *Equality, Justice, Woman Platform (Eşitlik, Adalet, Kadın Platformu)*, publishes feminist writing, news, and debates (Çağatay, 2019). A recent addition is *Woman Worker (Kadın İşçi)*, which focuses on women's labor "in every form" and "everywhere" (Arı, 2023).

These websites are remarkable sources documenting the feminist movement's past achievements, thereby enabling a generational transfer of knowledge (Göker, 2019). They also allow activists to establish their own agenda as opposed to what others deem worthy or appropriate for women (Şenol Cantek & Bora, 2015). By articulating the feminist agenda and increasing the visibility of feminist concerns, these websites have the potential to form feminist "counterpublics" in opposition to Turkey's conventional media, which is increasingly controlled by the government (Cayli Messina, 2022; Dinçer, 2023).

Besides these websites that construct various issues as part of the feminist agenda, activists have used digital media to focus attention on particular issues, most importantly gender-based violence, but also issues like alimony rights. For instance, *The Monument Counter* (*Anıt Sayaç*) provides a digital archive of all femicide cases in recent years, including the names of every woman who has been murdered, the time and place of the murder, and the rationale each perpetrator gave during their trial (Cayli Messina, 2022). Monthly and annual data on femicides is also published on the We Will Stop Femicides Platform and by feminist journalists at *Bianet*, an independent online media outlet (Bianet, 2024; Çaltekin, 2022). The Twitter page of *Alimony Story* (*Nafaka Hikayesi*), launched in April 2019, directly opposes men's rights activists' claims of victimhood through social media and conventional media campaigns (Kadıoğlu & Sözeri Özdal, 2023). The individual stories and testimonies shared on the *Alimony Story* aim to reveal the extent of victimization that women can be exposed to because of uncollected alimony debts, years of unpaid domestic work, limited access to employment, and the impossibility of leaving an abusive marriage without guaranteed alimony payments (Özcan, 2020).

These digital knowledge production venues build on the increased use of digital media campaigns mentioned in the previous section. They are powerful for several reasons: they enable access into the life worlds of diverse groups of women through their own testimonials; they produce information on issues like gender-based violence, for which the data produced by public institutions is choppy at best; they provide alternative analyses of policy changes and explain their implications for citizens; and they keep feminist debate alive by inviting outsiders to see them. At the same time, however, more analysis is needed regarding their effect on society at large.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we studied the current rise of anti-feminist and anti-gender mobilization in Turkey, situating its emergence against the backdrop of the country's changing political regime and juxtaposing its discourses and actions with feminist and LGBT+ responses. In doing so, it becomes possible to show and make sense of the constant flux that characterizes Turkish politics. It also becomes possible to reveal where the anti-gender and anti-feminist movement gets its power from and highlight the resilience of feminist and LGBT+ activism in opposing it.

There are two unique aspects of Turkey's anti-feminist and anti-gender movement. The first is that it originated in government discourses and policies, which have shifted increasingly rightward since 2010. Therefore, despite being relatively new, the anti-feminist and anti-gender movement has had a high level of access to policy debates, attempting to familialize women's rights and to erase possibilities of codifying the rights of LGBT+ people. Given that government actors have often been the ones to incite, support, and (literally) sponsor the movement, it is doubtful whether these radical right-wing actors would have even become a movement had there been no government support. Following discussions of other cases, it could perhaps be argued that there is a flipside to this convergence with mainstream politics: in time, it may become harder for the movement actors to generate new demands and maintain a durable and a decisive presence in the political arena (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996). The second unique aspect is the emergence of certain issues that are specific to Turkish anti-gender actors' agenda. These include current debates on alimony and child sexual abuse (which the anti-feminist Islamist lobby frames as early marriage) as well as the introduction of the gender equity concept to delegitimize gender equality.

Other demands, however, are very similar to the demands and discourses of anti-feminist counterparts elsewhere, such as repealing legislation on gender-based violence, withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, and an anti-LGBT+ agenda. Awash in arguments of cultural difference, binarization of West versus East (very similar to rhetoric pitting the so-called European elite and European Union against the masses), Turkish anti-gender actors ironically repeat the arguments of anti-feminist and anti-gender actors across Europe (Case, 2019; Gökarıksel et al., 2019). Their reliance on religious terminology, such as divine disposition (*fitrat*),

parallels the use of what their Christian counterparts elsewhere consider “natural law” (Korolczuk & Graff, 2018).

The uniqueness of the feminist response to these groups in Turkey also stems from the current political context. Feminist and LGBT+ activists, who have a long history of public presence and pushing for progressive policy and legislative change, currently face a state system that is not only closed off to their demands but also uses legal repression against movement organizations to criminalize their activism. Although the presidential decision to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention was certainly the biggest defeat the feminist movement endured in the last decade, its overall effect on the movement is open to discussion. In many activists’ narratives, this decision and its aftermath was seen as strengthening the feminist and LGBT+ movements and expanding activists’ reach to the wider public and different institutional arenas (local governments) because it increased the sense of threat to existing rights among supporters. Furthermore, this fear is not an unrealistic sentiment because anti-feminist and anti-gender groups can reasonably assume that they can spew threats and even act on them with impunity. Ironically, the only guarantee that this bleak scenario will not come true is that the movement and the state overlap so much.

Given this dramatic change in political opportunities, feminist and LGBT+ activists have focused on developing various strategies to cope with the current repressive conditions, open up new spaces for activist agendas, and, while doing so, build coalitions that are more diverse and inclusive. These strategies, which aim to face down anti-feminist and anti-gender discourses, reveal the activists’ tremendous creativity and innovativeness. Therefore, a comprehensive account of the confrontations between feminist and anti-feminist groups in Turkey offers much from which a transnational audience can learn.

On the other hand, the same political reality that pushes the boundaries of creativity also points to its limits. A major challenge for Turkey’s feminist and LGBT+ activists is the dizzying speed with which political events unfold, and therefore require a reaction (Dinçer, 2020; Ünal, 2019). This risks trapping activism within a reactive mode. It also means that activists focus more on protecting feminist gains of previous decades to ensure their survival against attacks than making existing laws more progressive (Gülel, 2021). Nevertheless, these encounters show that feminist mobilization strives to continue to be an important force even in a repressive political context.

We propose that it is important to study these encounters together—exploring the rise of backlash movements but also the activists that

challenge them. In Turkey, the backlash actors would like everyone to be convinced that they are merely demanding a return to and an acknowledgment of a supposedly authentic Turkish-Islamic culture. And seeing how things look, it is easy to make such ahistorical overgeneralizations about the state of affairs in Turkey (or any other country), and its so-called culture or regime, and insist on claims that this is how things have always been. However, by paying attention to the very specific ways in which the anti-feminist and anti-gender movement makes inroads and the resilience of the progressive forces facing backlash movements, we can gain a more accurate picture of the current state of de-democratizing patterns and their constant flux. Furthermore, from a more political vantage point, highlighting feminist and LGBT+ activism resists the attempts of right-wing actors to erase progressive activists from visibility in any political context.

REFERENCES

- Adak, S. (2021). Expansion of the Diyanet and the politics of family in Turkey under AKP rule. *Turkish Studies*, 22(2), 200–221. <https://doi.org/10.1080/014683849.2020.1813579>
- Akkan, B. (2018). The politics of care in Turkey: Sacred familialism in a changing political context. *Social Politics*, 25(1), 72–91. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxx011>
- Aksoy, H. A. (2018). Gendered strategies between democratization and democratic reversal: The curious case of Turkey. *Politics and Governance*, 6(3), 101–111. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v6i3.1423>
- Al-Ali, N., & Taş, L. (2019). Clashes, collaborations and convergences: Evolving relations of Turkish and Kurdish women’s rights activists. *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 21(3), 304–318. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2018.1497754>
- Alnaçık, A. (2022). *The politics of discourse on gendered violence in Turkey, 1980–2005: From family disaster to honor killings* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Pittsburgh).
- Altan-Olcay, Ö., & Oder, B. E. (2021). Why Turkey’s withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention is a global problem. *openDemocracy*. Retrieved September 12, 2024, from <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/why-turkeys-withdrawal-from-the-istanbul-convention-is-a-global-problem/>
- Altıok, Ö., & Somersan, B. (2015). Building “a new Turkey”: Gender politics and the future of democracy. *openDemocracy*. Retrieved September 12, 2024, from <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/building-new-turkey-gender-politics-and-future-of-democracy/>

- Altuntaş, D. (2019). *Collective subjectivity in feminist activism against femicide in Turkey* (Master's thesis, University of Gothenburg).
- Arat, Y. (2021). Democratic backsliding and the instrumentalization of women's rights in Turkey. *Politics and Gender*, 18(4), 911–941. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X21000192>
- Arda, B., & Akdemir, A. (2021). Activist communication design on social media: The case of online solidarity against forced Islamic lifestyle. *Media, Culture & Society*, 43(6), 1078–1094. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443720986002>
- Arı, S. (2023). Kadın emeğinin örgütlenmesini feminist bir mesele olarak yeniden düşünmek. *Mülkiye Dergisi*, 47(1), 325–360.
- Ayata, G., & Candaş, A. (2018). Turkey. In M. Akhemi, Y. Ertürk, & A. E. Mayer (Eds.), *Feminist advocacy, family law and violence against women* (pp. 178–197). Routledge.
- Az, E. I. (2022). Little prayer: Ambiguous grief in the LGBTQIA+ movement in Turkey. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 29(4), 523–541. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13505068221125726>
- Baytok, C. (2021). *The Istanbul Convention, gender politics and beyond: Poland and Turkey*. Hafıza Merkezi.
- Bianet. (2023, September 17). LGBTİ karşıtı mitinge karşı Büyük Hayat Buluşması. *Bianet*. Retrieved September 12, 2024, from <https://bianet.org/haber/lgbti-karsiti-mitinge-karsi-buyuk-hayat-bulusmasi-284119>
- Bianet. (2024, January 22). Men killed at least 333 women in 2023. *Bianet*. Retrieved September 12, 2024, from <https://bianet.org/haber/men-killed-at-least-333-women-in-2023-290848>
- Bilim Akademisi. (2019). *Bilim Akademisi Akademik Özgürlükler Raporu (2018–2019)*. Retrieved September 12, 2024, from <https://bilimakademisi.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/2018-19-bilim-akademisi-akademik-ozgurluk-raporu-23-eylul-2019.pdf>
- Büyük Aile Platformu. (2022). *Basın Açıklaması*. Retrieved September 12, 2024, from <https://www.buyukailleplatformu.org/basin-aciklamasi/>
- Çağatay, S. (2019). Varieties of anti-gender mobilizations. Is Turkey a case? *LSE Blogs*. Retrieved September 12, 2024, from <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/gender/2019/01/09/varieties-of-anti-gender-mobilizations-is-turkey-a-case/>
- Çağatay, S., Liinason, M., & Sasunkevich, O. (2022). *Feminist and LGBTI+ activism across Russia, Scandinavia and Turkey*. Palgrave.
- Çalışkan, K. (2018). Toward a new political regime in Turkey: From competitive toward full authoritarianism. *New Perspectives on Turkey*, 58, 5–33. <https://doi.org/10.1017/npt.2018.10>
- Çaltekin, D. A. (2022). Women's organisations' role in (Re)constructing the narratives in femicide cases: Şule Çet's case. *Laws*, 11(1), 12. <https://doi.org/10.3390/laws11010012>

- Candaş, A. (2021). From dual republic to totalitarian state: The counterrevolution in Turkey 2007–2021. *Social Research*, 88(2), 381–412. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/836662>
- Case, M. A. (2019). Transformations in the Vatican’s war on “gender ideology”. *Signs*, 44(3), 639–664. <https://doi.org/10.1086/701498>
- Çavdar, G., & Yaşar, Y. (2019). *Women in Turkey: Silent consensus in the age of neo-liberalism and Islamic conservatism*. Routledge.
- Çaylı Messina, B. (2022). Breaking the silence on femicide: How women challenge epistemic injustice and male violence. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 73(4), 859–884. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12968>
- Çelebi, E. (2022). How do women’s GONGOs influence policymaking processes in Turkey? *Journal of Civil Society*, 18(3), 326–348. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17448689.2022.2125417>
- Çelik, Ç., & Özdemir, T. (2022). When downward mobility haunts: Reproduction crisis and educational strategies of Turkish middle class under the AK Party rule. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 43(2), 260–277. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2021.2018652>
- Comeforo, K., & Görgülü, B. (2022). Negotiating the challenge of #Challenge Accepted: Transnational digital flows, networked feminism, and the case of femicide in Turkey. *Review of Communication*, 22(3), 213–230. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15358593.2022.2096414>
- Coşar, S. (2021). Regime change in Turkey: Old symbols into new settings. In E. Babacan, M. Kutun, E. Pinar, & Z. Yılmaz (Eds.), *Regime change in Turkey: Neoliberal authoritarianism, Islamism and hegemony* (pp. 143–159). Routledge.
- Dinçer, P. (2020). The potential for dialogical transversal politics and coalitional solidarities in the contemporary women’s movement in Turkey. *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 80, 102366. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2020.102366>
- Dinçer, P. (2023). Digital feminist activism in Turkey: Has long-awaited fourth wave feminism arrived? *Akdeniz Kadın Çalışmaları ve Toplumsal Cinsiyet Dergisi*, 6(1), 282–303. <https://doi.org/10.33708/ktc.1175381>
- Diner, Ç. (2018). Gender politics and GONGOs in Turkey. *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, 16(4), 101–108.
- Ehrhart, A. (2022). Women’s rights vs. gender justice? Exploring oppositional women’s organizations and the reshaping of feminist engagement in democratizing Turkey. *Zeitschrift für Mittelmeerstudien*, 2, 1–27. <https://doi.org/10.46586/ZfM.v2022.1-27>
- Ertan, G. (2020). Collective action, civil society, and public policy in Turkey. *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice*, 22(1), 66–81. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13876988.2019.1617958>
- EŞİK. (2020). *Uluslararası feminist buluşma*. Retrieved September 12, 2024, from <https://esikplatform.net/kategori/etkinlikler/71866/uluslararası-feminist-bulusma>

- Eslen-Ziya, H. (2020). Right-wing populism in new Turkey: Leading to all new grounds for troll science in gender theory. *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 76(3), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i3.6005>
- Eslen-Ziya, H. (2022). Establishing networked misogyny as a counter movement: The analysis of the online anti-Istanbul convention presence. *Convergence*, 28(6), 1737–1753. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565221089218>
- Eslen-Ziya, H., & Bjørnholt, M. (2023). Men's rights activism and anti-feminist resistance in Turkey and Norway. *Social Politics*, 30(1), 213–238. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxac011>
- Eslen-Ziya, H., & Kazanoğlu, N. (2020). De-democratization under the New Turkey? Challenges for women's organizations. *Mediterranean Politics*, 27(1), 101–122. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2020.1765524>
- Gökarkınel, B., Neubert, C., & Smith, S. (2019). Demographic fever dreams: Fragile masculinity and population politics in the rise of the global right. *Signs*, 44(3), 561–587. <https://doi.org/10.1086/701154>
- Göker, Z. G. (2019). Memories, stories and deliberation: Digital sisterhood on feminist websites in Turkey. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 26(3), 313–328. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506819855414>
- Göker, Z. G., & Polatdemir, A. (2022). The quest for gender equality in universities at the crossroads of neoliberal and anti-gender pressures: The case of Turkey. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 22(5), 954–966. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2022.2121690>
- Göztepe, E. (2021). How to lose a war through small defeats: The case of Turkey's democratic backsliding. *Social Research*, 88(2), 413–443. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/836663>
- Gülel, D. (2021). Feminist movement and law-making in Turkey: A critical appraisal from 1998 to 2018. *Women's History Review*, 30(1), 2–27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2019.1695357>
- Gülel, D. (2022). 'I want to break free!' A study on women who seek freedom from religion and the Islamic veil in Turkey. *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society*, 8(2), 487–528. <https://doi.org/10.30965/23642807-bja10046>
- Günaydın, A. (2021). Türkiye'de toplumsal cinsiyet karşıtlığı: Uluslararası Aile Konferansları örneği. *Kültür ve Siyasette Feminist Yaklaşımlar*, 42, 40–53.
- Güneş-Ayata, A., & Doğançün, G. (2017). Gender politics of the AKP: Restoration of a religioconservative gender climate. *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 19(6), 610–627. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2017.1328887>
- Hülagü, F. (2021). Anti-feminism in Turkey: A critical political economy perspective. In A. Henninger, D. Bergold-Caldwell, S. Grenz, B. Grubner, H. Krüger-Kirn, S. Maurer, M. Näser-Lather, & S. Beaufays (Eds.), *Mobilisierungen gegen feminismus und 'gender'* (pp. 25–41). Verlag Barbara Budrich.

- Kadıoğlu, D. S., & Sözeri Özdal, C. (2023). Echo chambers, or “the will of the people”: The case of alimony contesters and antifeminist countermovement in Turkey. *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 122(4), 713–728. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-10779478>
- Kancı, T., Çelik, B., Bekki, Y. B., & Tarcan, U. (2023). The anti-gender movement in Turkey: An analysis of its reciprocal aspects. *Turkish Studies*, 24(5), 882–904. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2022.2164189>
- Kandiyoti, D. (2016). Locating the politics of gender: Patriarchy, neo-liberal governance and violence in Turkey. *Research and Policy on Turkey*, 1(2), 103–118. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23760818.2016.1201242>
- Kandiyoti, D. (2019). Against all odds: The resilience and fragility of women’s gender activism in Turkey. In D. Kandiyoti, N. Al-Ali, & K. Spellman Poots (Eds.), *Gender, governance and Islam* (pp. 80–100). Edinburgh University Press.
- Kandiyoti, D., & Emanet, Z. (2017). Education as battleground: The capture of minds in Turkey. *Globalizations*, 14(6), 869–876. <https://doi.org/10.1080/014747731.2017.1325170>
- KAOS GL. (2023). *Feminist Gündem’den “Nefrete inat, yaşasın hayat” videosu*. Retrieved September 12, 2024, from <https://kaosgl.org/haber/feminist-gundem-den-nefrete-inat-yasasin-hayat-videosu>
- Kepenek, E. (2022, 28 April). Danıştay’daki İstanbul Sözleşmesi duruşmasından detaylar. *Bianet*. Retrieved September 12, 2024 from <https://bianet.org/haber/danistay-daki-istanbul-sozlesmesi-durusmasindan-detaylar-261174>
- Kocamaner, H. (2019). Regulating the family through religion: Secularism, Islam, and the politics of the family in contemporary Turkey. *American Ethnologist*, 46(4), 495–508. <https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12836>
- KONDA. (2020). *İstanbul Sözleşmesi*. Retrieved September 12, 2024, from <https://konda.com.tr/rapor/11/istanbul-sozlesmesi>
- Korkut, U., & Eslen-Ziya, H. (2016). The discursive governance of population politics: The evolution of a pro-birth regime in Turkey. *Social Politics*, 23(4), 555–575. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxw003>
- Korolczuk, E., & Graff, A. (2018). Gender as “Ebola from Brussels”: The anticolonial frame and the rise of illiberal populism. *Signs*, 43(4), 797–821. <https://doi.org/10.1086/696691>
- Kourou, N. S. (2021). Sağ popülizm ve toplumsal cinsiyet karşıtı hareketlerin birlikteliğinde AKP hükümetlerinin aile siyaseti ve popülist siyasal mobilizasyonu. *Feminist Tahayyül*, 2(2), 207–241.
- Kütük-Kuriş, M. (2022). The rise and fall of support for the Istanbul Convention: Understanding the case of KADEM. *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 93, 102601. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2022.102601>
- Meyer, D. S., & Staggenborg, S. (1996). Movements, countermovements, and the structure of political opportunity. *American Journal of Sociology*, 101(6), 1628–1660. <https://doi.org/10.1086/230869>

- Miller, R. A. (2000). The Ottoman and Islamic substratum of Turkey's Swiss Civil Code. *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 11(3), 335–361. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jis/11.3.335>
- Mutluer, N. (2019). The intersectionality of gender, sexuality, and religion: Novelties and continuities in Turkey during the AKP era. *Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 19(1), 99–118. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2019.1578049>
- O'Neil, M. L., & Çarkoğlu, A. (2022). *Türkiye'de toplumsal cinsiyet ve kadın algısı araştırması*. Retrieved September 12, 2024, from https://gender.khas.edu.tr/sites/gender.khas.edu.tr/files/inline-files/TTCKAA2022_4.pdf
- O'Neil, M. L., Altuntaş, D., & Keskin, A. Ş. (2020). *Türkiye'deki kamu hastanelerinde (eğitim ve araştırma hastaneleri, devlet hastaneleri, ilçe hastaneleri ve şehir hastaneleri) kürtaj hizmetleri araştırması raporu*. Retrieved September 12, 2024, from <https://gender.khas.edu.tr/sites/gender.khas.edu.tr/files/docs/2020-12/2020-kurtaj-arastirmasi-raporu.pdf>
- Ogan, C. L., & Bas, O. (2020). Use of social media in the struggle surrounding violence against Turkish women. *International Journal of Communication*, 14, 5556–5574. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/12035>
- Örücü, E. (1991). Turkish family law: New phase. *Journal of Family Law*, 30(2), 431–438.
- Özar, Ş., & Yakut-Çakar, B. (2013). Unfolding the invisibility of women without men in the case of Turkey. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 41, 24–34. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2013.03.010>
- Özbay, C., & Öktem, K. (2021). Turkey's queer times. *New Perspectives on Turkey*, 64, 117–130. <https://doi.org/10.1017/npt.2021.4>
- Özbudun, E. (2014). AKP at the crossroads: Erdoğan's majoritarian drift. *South European Society and Politics*, 19(2), 155–167. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2014.920571>
- Özcan, E. (2020). Framing the alimony debates in Turkey: Struggle between feminist and antifeminist discourses to represent “women's rights”. *International Journal of Communication*, 14, 5597–5615. Retrieved September 12, 2024, from <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/12032/3264>
- Ozduzen, O., & Korkut, U. (2020). Enmeshing the mundane and the political: Twitter, LGBTI+ outing and macro-political polarisation in Turkey. *Contemporary Politics*, 26(5), 493–511. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2020.1759883>
- Özkazanç, A. (2019a, August 5). ‘Global gay conspiracy’ and misogyny in Turkish anti-gender narratives. *LSE Gender Blog*. Retrieved September 12, 2024, from <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/gender/2019/08/05/turkish-anti-gender-narratives/>
- Özkazanç, A. (2019b, May 20). The new episode of anti-gender politics in Turkey. *LSE Gender Blog*. Retrieved September 12, 2024, from <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/gender/2019/05/20/new-episode-anti-gender-turkey/>

- Özkazañç, A. (2020). Anti-gender movements in Europe and the case of Turkey. *Baltic Worlds*, 8(1), 45–55.
- Özuğurlu, A., & Dayan, C. (2020). Toplumsal cinsiyet karşıtlığı ve akademik özgürlükler. *Toplum ve Hekim*, 35(6), 456–465.
- Sancar, S., Toksöz, G., Yüksel-Kaptanoğlu, İ., Memiş, E., Arslan, H., Kabadayı, A., Akyıldırım, O., & İnanç, B. (2021). *Gender equality monitoring report of Turkey 2019–2020 executive summary*. Retrieved September 12, 2024, from <https://dspace.ceid.org.tr/xmlui/bitstream/handle/1/1855/CEI%CC%87D%20Annual%20Report%20ES.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>
- Savcı, E. (2020). *Queer in translation: Sexual politics under neoliberal Islam*. Duke University Press.
- Şenol Canteke, F., & Bora, A. (2015). Akacak mecra bulmak 5harfiler.com ve Reçel-blog.com. In A. Bora (Ed.), *İradenin iyimserliği 2000’lerde Türkiye’de kadınlar* (pp. 215–244). Ayizi.
- Tabak, H., Erdogan, S., & Bodur Ün, M. (2022). Intra-conservative bloc contestations on gender equality in Turkey—Norm reception in fragmented normative orders. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 58(8), 1375–1392. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002190962211076109>
- Telseren, A. (2020). Changing gender politics in Turkey throughout the 2000s: A feminist analysis of gender policies pursued by Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi—AKP) governments. *Interdisciplinary Political Studies*, 6(2), 357–395. <https://doi.org/10.1285/i20398573v6n2p357>
- The Advocates for Human Rights. (2021). *Turkey’s withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention*. Retrieved September 12, 2024 from <https://www.theadvocates-forhumanrights.org/Res/Turkey%20Step%20Back%20FINAL.pdf>
- Ugur-Cinar, M. (2017). Embedded neopatrimonialism: Patriarchy and democracy in Turkey. *Social Politics*, 24(3), 324–343. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxx009>
- Ünal, D. (2019). The abortion debate and profeminist coalition politics in contemporary Turkey. *Politics & Gender*, 15(4), 801–825. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X18000703>
- Ünal, D. (2021). The masculinist restoration project in the rhetoric of anti-gender movements. In O. Hakola, J. Salminen, J. Turopoinen, & O. Winberg (Eds.), *The culture and politics of populist masculinities* (pp. 67–88). Lexington Books.
- Ünal, D. (2022). “Are you god? Damn your family!”: The Islam–gender nexus in right-wing populism and the new generation of Muslim feminist activism in Turkey. *Religions*, 13(4), 372. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13040372>
- United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. (2022). *Concluding observations on the eighth periodic report of Türkiye* (CEDAW/C/TUR/CO/8). Retrieved September 12, 2024, from https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW%2FC%2FTUR%2FCO%2F8&Lang=en

- YAZICI, B. (2012). The return to the family: Welfare, state, and politics of the family in Turkey. *Anthropological Quarterly*, 85(1), 103–140. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41427090>
- Yükler, S. (2022, July 14). CEDAW’ın Türkiye’yi gözden geçirme raporuna İstanbul Sözleşmesi damgasını vurdu. *Bianet*. Retrieved September 12, 2024, from <https://bianet.org/haber/cedaw-in-turkiye-yi-gozden-gecirme-raporuna-istanbul-sozlesmesi-damgasini-vurdu-267203>
- Yükler, S. (2023, July 21). O el havada kalmadı, Kaos GL’nin kısa filmi 5 milyondan fazla izlendi. *T24*. Retrieved September 12, 2024, from <https://t24.com.tr/haber/o-el-havada-kalmadi-kaos-gl-nin-kisa-filmi-5-milyondan-fazla-izlendi-toplumsal-destegin-onuncu-gecemeyeceklerini-fark-edenler-tren-uzerinden-yeni-bir-kutsal-yaratti,1132077>
- Yüksel-Kaptanoğlu, İ. (2020). *Kadınlara yönelik şiddet ve toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliği*. CEİD Yayınları.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if you modified the licensed material. You do not have permission under this license to share adapted material derived from this chapter or parts of it.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter’s Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter’s Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copy-right holder.





Not Just Ranting in the Streets, but Also Concrete Actions: Polish Feminist and LGBT+ Responses to Anti-Gender Politics

Magdalena Muszel

INTRODUCTION

When analyzing the complex landscape of anti-gender mobilizations and the evolving responses of feminist and LGBT+ communities in Poland, it becomes clear that this dynamic represents a multifaceted confrontation between conservative, nationalist, and religious actors and discourses and diverse feminist and LGBT+ activism. Central to the anti-gender movements are entities such as the Law and Justice Party (PiS), the hierarchy of the Catholic Church in Poland and various ultra-conservative organizations. Together, these actors seek to defend traditional family values and national identity, positioning themselves against gender equality and LGBT+ rights through legislative and media strategies. The initial phase of feminist and LGBT+ activism, particularly after 2016, was characterized

M. Muszel (✉)

Faculty of Social Sciences, Institute of Sociology, University of Gdańsk,
Gdańsk, Poland

e-mail: magdalena.muszel@gmail.com

© The Author(s) 2025

R. Smrdelj, R. Kuhar (eds.), *Anti-Gender Mobilizations in Europe
and the Feminist Response*, Palgrave Studies in European Political
Sociology, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-87693-6_7

167

by a reactive stance to legislative attempts to further restrict reproductive rights, culminating in widespread protests. However, in the aftermath of the 2020 Constitutional Court ruling that imposed a near-total ban on abortion, once the wave of street protests subsided, there was a strategic shift toward more proactive and systematic activism aimed at legislative, social, and political change. Activists have increasingly diversified their tactics, moving beyond street protests to include legal activities (i.e., litigation), educational campaigns, and active political participation, including running in local and parliamentary elections. This complex interplay between anti-gender mobilizations and feminist and LGBT+ activism in Poland highlights a critical juncture in the struggle for gender equality and LGBT+ rights. It shows the evolving strategies of these movements, from reactive responses to a more integrated approach that seeks to influence public policy and discourse from within the system.

Since 2016, Poland has witnessed a significant resurgence of feminist activism, primarily focused on women's reproductive rights, marked by a series of public demonstrations and protests that have played a pivotal role in the feminist movement in Poland. The catalyst for this renewed wave of activism was the government's repeated attempts to impose stricter abortion laws. The most critical moment came in October 2020, when Poland's Constitutional Tribunal (referred to by the opposition as the "pseudo-tribunal of Julia Przyłębska" due to legal doubts surrounding the process of appointing judges from the ruling party) ruled that abortion due to fetal abnormalities was unconstitutional, effectively imposing a near-total ban on abortion. This decision sparked outrage and led to a new wave of protests, even larger and more widespread than those in 2016. Despite the challenges posed by COVID-19, including restrictions on public gatherings, thousands of women and their allies protested across the country, showing remarkable resilience and determination. The protests were inclusive, attracting support from a broad spectrum of society, including men, the LGBT+ community, and different political factions. The protests attracted significant media attention both in Poland and internationally. In addition to the continuing street protests against stricter abortion laws, the ongoing need to respond to and correct misinformation spread on the Internet by anti-gender movements remained equally crucial.

A kind of turning point for both the anti-gender and feminist and LGBT+ movements in Poland was the pre-election campaign and parliamentary elections in the autumn of 2023. During this period, opposition politicians, including the Civic Coalition (PO), made promises to stand up

for women's rights, with a particular focus on reforming reproductive legislation, especially the legalization of abortion up to the 12th week of pregnancy. The feminist activist community, while cautiously welcoming these pledges, engaged in extensive campaigning. Despite a record turnout in the October elections, driven largely by mobilized young women, the subsequent change of government has not yet translated into significant progress for reproductive rights. This dynamic extends to other critical issues, such as combating sexual violence against women.

This chapter outlines the specific strategies adopted by both the anti-gender movements and the feminist and LGBT+ communities in response to the aforementioned developments. The first part of the chapter describes activists' initial responses to legislative attempts to restrict reproductive rights, highlighting the nationwide protests and public demonstrations that marked early resistance efforts. Subsequent sections explore the transformation of the feminist and LGBT+ movements in Poland, highlighting a strategic shift toward more sustained and constructive engagement. The text details how activists have increasingly turned to legal avenues, educational initiatives, and direct political engagement to advance their causes. This includes forming alliances with sympathetic politicians and participating in legislative processes, illustrating a maturation of tactics beyond mere protest. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the impact of these strategies, including both their successes and their setbacks.¹

THE RISE OF ANTI-GENDER SENTIMENT IN POLAND: A COMPLEX NEXUS OF POLITICS, RELIGION, AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Poland's post-communist transition after 1989 has been marked by rapid social and economic change, which has often led to a sense of loss and insecurity among certain sections of the population, especially those who have lost out in this transformation, whether materially or socially. This transition has also seen the strengthening of conservative and nationalist

¹The empirical data analysis presented in this chapter is based on 30 in-depth individual interviews conducted with feminist and LGBT+ activists (20) and politically engaged individuals (10) who are allies of the feminist and LGBT+ movement, providing a rich and nuanced understanding of the perspectives and experiences of those at the forefront of advocacy for gender equality and LGBT+ rights. The interviews were conducted between October 2023 and February 2024.

sentiments, often anchored in a deeply rooted Catholic identity. In this context, the anti-gender movement has found fertile ground, framing its narratives around the protection of traditional family values and national identity against “Ebola from Brussels,” i.e., the European Union’s progressive policies on gender and sexuality (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). The anti-gender backlash in Poland has to be considered in the broader framework of a growing transnational **movement** made of numerous actors, including the Catholic Church, governments formed by the PiS party since 2015, right-wing think tanks, and other far-right groups (Graff & Korolczuk 2022; Suchanow, 2020). As suggested also by Izabela Desperak (2019), Polish anti-gender movements are part of a broader phenomenon in Central and Eastern Europe, metaphorically described by Desperak as a ‘new Iron Curtain’ or even a ‘new Middle Ages’, highlighting that these anti-gender and anti-abortion actions extend beyond national conservatism and represent a transnational conservative backlash against liberal values, feminism, and LGBTQ+ rights (Desperak, 2019).

The Catholic Church in Poland plays a key role in mobilizing against LGBT+ rights. Its support strengthens the credibility and influence of the anti-gender movement by advocating for the preservation of conservative values and norms as a counterweight to gender equality, reproductive rights, and LGBT+ rights (Segers & Eslen-Ziya, 2023; Žuk & Žuk, 2020). Key figures in this effort are Archbishop Marek Jędraszewski, Father Tadeusz Rydzyk, and Father Dariusz Oko, who have been vocal opponents of “gender ideology.” Father Oko’s quote sums up the Church’s position: “Gender is a classic example of ideology, as it becomes a tool of ruthless struggle for the benefit of the atheist gender and homosexual lobbies.” It is supported in particular by:

fighting homosexuals who want to promote their perverted way of life as the best by attaching a theory that justifies their behavior. There are also feminists—often lesbians—who, under the guise of slogans about women’s liberation, want to ‘liberate’ them from marriage, motherhood, the family and men. (Oko, 2013, pp. 40–43)

As the Catholic Church’s influential stance strengthens the anti-gender movement in Poland, its alignment with prominent political entities amplifies its impact. Moving from the religious to the political sphere, the Law and Justice Party (PiS) emerges as a formidable ally, extending the Church’s conservative crusade into the wider arena of national governance

and policy-making. The PiS party, which was in power in Poland from 2015 until autumn 2023, has used and promoted anti-gender rhetoric as part of its broader populist agenda. The PiS is part of a broader conservative alliance known as the United Right, whose members exhibit varying degrees of opposition to women's and LGBT+ rights. Notable figures from the Law and Justice party who support the anti-gender movement include, among many others, former Education Minister Przemysław Czarnek and President Andrzej Duda, for whom "the family is the foundation of the nation" (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Suchanow, 2020). The PiS government has portrayed itself as the defender of Polish families and traditional values, using anti-gender sentiment to marginalize the opposition and mobilize its base against feminism and "gender ideology," a pejorative term which they use to condemn a wide range of issues from gender equality and LGBT+ rights to sex education and reproductive rights. In this area, PiS is also supported by Confederation, a coalition of far-right, nationalist, and ultra-conservative parties known for their links to neo-fascist organizations and events characterized by violence and anti-Semitism (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Suchanow, 2020).

Political actors in the anti-gender crusade have received enormous support from organizations such as the Pro—Right to Life Foundation, the Life and Family Foundation, and the Ordo Iuris Institute for Legal Culture Foundation, which are at the forefront of actions against reproductive and LGBT+ rights, arguing that "abortion kills children and LGBT+ is an ideology that threatens life, health and society" (Suchanow, 2020). In addition, Ordo Iuris stands out for its extensive lobbying and strategic litigation aimed at consolidating conservative values in Polish public life and the legal system. It is also behind the preparation of bills that would limit the rights of LGBT+ communities and reproductive rights. Its main field of activity (as stated on its website) is "the protection [...] of human and civil rights," stemming from the "inherent and inalienable dignity of the human being." It participates in national and international legal proceedings. While it operates mainly in Poland, it has international ambitions. As the co-author of Agenda Europe's manifesto, "Restoring the Natural Order," the foundation aims to change the language and create its own vocabulary. According to this agenda, the word "sodomy" should replace "homosexuality"; "health care" or "pregnancy prevention" should not be mentioned, because pregnancy is not a disease; "patchwork families" should be referred to as "broken families," "equal treatment for homosexuals" should be labeled as "privileges for homosexuals," and

“reproductive rights” should be termed “free access to abortion” (Suchanow, 2020). Therefore, like other anti-gender organizations, Ordo Iuris’ communicative approach is manifested through manipulative and exclusionary rhetoric that discriminates against and marginalizes social minorities. Their language categorically declares that “abortion is killing,” portrays “sex education as the sexualization of children” and denigrates LGBT+ people by associating them with pedophilia and deviance.

Polish ultra-conservative organizations have played a key role in forming regional coalitions and spreading anti-gender ideologies, with the Ordo Iuris Institute emerging as a leading figure in this transnational conservative movement. Highlighting the importance of international cooperation, Aleksander Stepkowski, a founding member of Ordo Iuris and a legal scholar, emphasized the need for a network to counter progressive agendas during Tradfest in Zagreb in 2016. The establishment of Ordo Iuris Hrvatska in Croatia signifies Ordo Iuris’ commitment to expanding its influence beyond Poland’s borders, facilitating a wider network of ultra-conservative organizations across Eastern Europe. This expansion is further exemplified by the close ideological and operational partnership between Poland and Hungary, particularly through the cooperation between Ordo Iuris and the Hungarian Center for Fundamental Rights. Together, these organizations have launched initiatives against the Istanbul Convention.

The founding of the Alliance for the Common Good, an international network of conservative organizations, and the Collegium Intermarium, a conservative university established by Ordo Iuris in 2021, marked a significant milestone in the consolidation of a pan-European conservative network. The influence of Polish anti-gender ideologies extends to right-wing populist parties across Eastern Europe, with political formations such as the Lithuanian-Polish Union of Lithuania and Latvia’s conservative leaders drawing inspiration from Polish anti-gender rhetoric. This diffusion of ideas is facilitated by political links and collaborations, including the sponsorship of anti-gender events by the European Conservative Reform Group. Ordo Iuris is also heavily involved in international organizations, including the UN Economic and Social Council and the UN Refugee Agency. The involvement of the Piotr Skarga Institute, a founding organization of Ordo Iuris, in the events of the World Congress of Families, including the Moscow meeting opened by Vladimir Putin, raises concerns about the influence of Russian conservative agendas on Polish organizations (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Suchanow, 2020).

In amplifying anti-gender messages, right-wing media has played a key role. These include conservative media outlets such as *W Sieci*, *Do Rzeczy*, and *Gazeta Polska*, as well as the religious media empire of Father Tadeusz Rydzyk. These platforms are known for disseminating homophobic and anti-Semitic content, reinforcing the conservative and religious base of the anti-gender movement. In terms of social media, Facebook plays a crucial role, acting as a central platform for organization and communication, while TikTok, Instagram, and Telegram complement this by enabling wider dissemination of messages. Both the terminology and the messages used by anti-gender actors have been reinforced by the Catholic Church, which began using the terms “gender ideology” and “genderism” as early as 2013, describing them as promoting “principles that are totally contrary to reality and the integral understanding of human nature” (Episkopat Polski, 2013).

The construction of “moral panic” is fundamental to the anti-gender movement, in which “gender ideology” is portrayed as an imminent threat to Polish national identity, the traditional family structure, and the well-being of children. Protecting children from “gender ideology” and linking homosexuality with pedophilia justified civil bills against sex education and campaigns like “Stop pedophilia,” “Stop LGBT,” and the establishment of “LGBT-free zones” (Korolczuk & Graff, 2018). This sense of panic is reinforced by claims that such “ideologies” aim to undermine heteronormative and conservative family models, which are seen as the bedrock of “authentic Polish cultural identity” (Muszel, 2023).

Framing the conflict in binary terms creates a stark division between the protectors of Polish tradition and alleged foreign agents or moral corrupters. The “us versus them” framing pits the anti-gender movement as defenders of Polish nationhood and traditional values against opponents characterized as purveyors of “gender and LGBT propaganda” (Graff, 2021). Such a narrative not only unites different conservative actors, but also exploits collective fears of cultural and identity loss. The movement also uses religious discourses to frame its opposition to gender equality and LGBT+ rights as a defense of Christian values against secularism and moral relativism. This alignment with religious narratives serves to legitimize the anti-gender stance, presenting it as a moral imperative rather than a mere political or ideological choice. The involvement of the Catholic Church allows anti-gender actors to position themselves as those on a crusade against the “dehumanization” caused by gender ideology,

which is equated with Marxism and presented as an existential threat to the Christian way of life (Pokorna-Ignatowicz, 2014; Duda, 2016).

Finally, there is the sovereignty and anti-globalism narrative, which positions the anti-gender movement as a bulwark against the encroachment of liberal values by international organizations and foreign powers. This narrative frames feminism and LGBT+ rights as foreign imports from Western Europe, derisively referred to as “Ebola from Brussels,” and juxtaposes them with Polish and Christian traditions that are purportedly under siege (Korolczuk & Graff, 2018; Graff & Korolczuk, 2022, pp. 88–89).

This kind of discourse, constructed around gender and feminist issues, obviously serves to legitimize any action taken by the anti-gender movement, such as legislative initiatives, public demonstrations, and visual campaigns, supported by a robust presence on social media platforms. A primary tactic has been strategic litigation, with several bills proposed to restrict abortion and limit LGBT+ rights. Notable among these were several attempts to enact a total ban on abortion through the “Stop Abortion” initiatives in 2010, 2013, 2016, 2017, and 2021, with varying degrees of parliamentary progress but meeting with ultimate rejection. The “Stop pedophilia” bill in 2019 sought to criminalize the public endorsement of sexual activity by minors, particularly in educational settings, reflecting a broader strategy of conflating LGBT+ identities with moral depravity. Similarly, the “Stop LGBT” bill proposed for 2021 sought to ban equality marches and the promotion of non-heteronormative relationships, citing concerns about traditional family structures. The “Abortion is Murder” initiative in 2022 was another attempt to severely restrict discussion and action on abortion. Visual campaigns and public demonstrations have also been crucial in mobilizing support and spreading the movement’s messages. Since 2005, anti-abortion street exhibitions (featuring photographs of damaged fetuses) have been a provocative and highly controversial method of protest, while the “Stop Pedophilia” campaign used vans with loudspeakers to link homosexuality with pedophilia, a vivid example of a tactic designed to spark an episode of moral panic. Annual “Marches for the Family” in over 120 cities and towns serve both as a platform for collecting signatures for initiatives and as a support mechanism for conservative politicians. Throughout these actions, organizations such as *Ordo Iuris* have played a significant role, not only in legal advocacy, but also in influencing public discourse and local policy through initiatives such as the Local Government Charter of Family Rights, which, while not legally

binding, suggests a strong push for conservative values at the local level. The publication of materials such as guides linking pedophilia to homosexuality and challenging sex education reflects a deliberate effort to influence societal norms and values.

FEMINIST AND LGBT+ RESPONSES TO ANTI-GENDER MOBILIZATIONS

In the face of Poland's virulent anti-gender mobilization, characterized by a fierce defense of "traditional" values, using a mix of legal and media strategies, a counter-movement has been steadily growing. This section of the chapter explores the strategic responses developed by feminist and LGBT+ movements to effectively counter these anti-gender mobilizations. These responses include direct action with digital campaigns as well as the strategic use of mainstream and social media; shifting from reactive to proactive communication; balancing public demonstrations with education and advocacy campaigns; engaging in political processes through legislative initiatives; mapping and auditing the socio-political landscape; putting pressure on "gray zone" actors; expanding activism into non-traditional spaces; building coalitions and collaborations; and moving from external advocacy to internal policy-making.

In the period from 2016 to 2021, the character of actions carried out by feminist circles in Poland was predominantly reactive. During this period, in addition to street protests against stricter abortion laws, which spread across the whole of Poland, including small towns and sometimes even villages (Muszel & Piotrowski, 2018), feminist activists responded directly also to the provocative actions of anti-choice organizations, such as the public display of graphic images of damaged fetuses and sound trucks broadcasting extreme homophobic content. Nevertheless, this reactive character, mainly driven by successive political and social events and actions, did not allow activists the space for systematic work. As one of the leading activists from Strajk Kobiet (Women's Strike) described:

We couldn't really plan anything because all the forces were engaged in reacting, because something was always happening. Maybe there's about 10% of the energy left to do some education or to organize some training, meetings, workshops, because we were always on standby, we just finished

one protest and we were waiting for something else to explode. (FA, Women's Strike)²

The constant need to mobilize in response to immediate threats or regressive policies consumed much of their resources and energy. The cycle of action and reaction made proactive, long-term planning extremely difficult. Instead of being able to focus on building educational programs, running workshops or organizing for systematic change, activists found themselves in a constant state of vigilance, preparing for the next issue that required their attention. The focus on reactive actions, although necessary when they happened, consumed much of the feminist movement's energy and resources, leaving little room for proactive initiatives.

An apparent significant change in the nature of the feminist movement's engagement in Poland did not occur until 2021 (after the wave of demonstrations related to the October 2020 Constitutional Tribunal ruling subsided), and even more so after the parliamentary elections in the autumn of 2023. In response to the changing political landscape, activists have moved from being mainly reactive to being more proactive and planned, nevertheless closely monitoring current events and being ready to react immediately if necessary.

There was always something to comment on immediately, whereas now this planned communication really prevails. We now plan this communication, we publish these posts on social media well in advance. This does not mean that we are completely insensitive to what is happening in Poland. (FA, *Dziewuchy Dziewuchom*)

²The Polish chapter draws on detailed insights from 20 interviews with feminist and LGBT+ activists. The activists were not directly asked about their age in the interview, but they represented different age groups, from people in their 20s to people in their 60s. The chapter aims to encapsulate different feminist collectives, both large and formalised, such as associations and foundations, and small, local, and non-formalized, selected for their particular expertise and historical significance in the Polish feminist context. All participating groups aim for non-hierarchical structures. For reasons of confidentiality, the identities of the interviewees have been anonymized and they are referred to by the initials FA (feminist activist) and the name of their group. The interviews were conducted between 2023 and 2024. The activists discussed the organizational framework of their groups, the key issues addressed by their activism, and the tactics and strategies they use. In addition, two collaborative workshops were held in June and September 2023, bringing together activists from different organizations to explore the dynamics of the movement and innovative approaches to activism.

There is also a recognition that while public demonstrations and noisy protests are important tools for visibility and immediate impact, the sustainability and depth of a movement's impact also depends on engagement in tangible, concrete actions.

Because we said to ourselves, after 2020, maybe we should show that the 'Toruńska Brygada Feministyczna' is not just—pardon the expression—ranting in the streets, but also some concrete actions. (FA, Toruńska Brygada Feministyczna)

The phrase “not just—pardon the expression—ranting in the streets, but also some concrete actions” captures this duality; it recognizes the value of emotional and spontaneous expressions of dissent, while also emphasizing the need for strategic, targeted initiatives. To illustrate this change in approach with concrete examples, the Feminist Brigade of Toruń drew attention to a critical local health problem: the unavailability of IUD services in Toruń, despite the fact that the National Health Fund (NFZ) covers the cost. The organization has launched an awareness campaign on the issue and taken steps to ensure that the necessary medical equipment (e.g., ultrasound scanners) is available in gynecological surgeries operating under the NFZ. By focusing on the tangible outcome of providing IUD services and highlighting the lack of essential medical equipment, the Brigade addressed broader systemic inadequacies affecting women's health services. This campaign aimed not only to raise awareness, but also to ensure the actual availability and accessibility of public health services, illustrating a more nuanced and focused effort to dismantle structural barriers to women's health rights. This model of combining public protest with targeted action to influence institutional practices and policies represents a significant evolution in the strategies used by feminist movements to directly influence the improvement of women's lives and achieve tangible social change.

On the other hand, the social campaigns organized by *Dziewuchy Dziewuchom Łódź* in 2023, “You have the power—stop the violence” (“Masz tę moc—zatrzymaj przemoc”), targeting young men and fathers to mobilize them against domestic violence, and the earlier campaign “Pregnancy only by choice, never by force” (“Ciąża zawsze z wyboru, nigdy z przymusu”), highlight the proactive stance of activists on broad social issues. These campaigns, which went beyond web graphics to physical advertisements in public spaces, demonstrate an innovative use of social

awareness strategies to engage specific demographic groups and address issues of violence and reproductive rights. The above campaigns, which are just two of many organized by feminist communities in Poland, represent a strategic approach to feminist activism that goes beyond immediate responses to social or legislative provocations. Instead, they represent calculated, proactive efforts to educate, influence public opinion, and bring about social change by directly addressing the root causes of the problems facing women and families. This approach recognizes the complex ecosystem of social change, in which street protests raise awareness and urgency, and concrete actions aim to translate the movement's vision into tangible results. This can be seen as embracing the principles of "integrated activism," where movements use a combination of direct action, public education, advocacy, and community building to achieve their goals. This shift also highlights the importance of adaptability within social movements. As the political and social landscape changes, so do the strategies of those seeking to influence it. The evolution of the organization's strategy is also linked to a broader dialogue within feminist activism about the most effective means of achieving long-term change. This strategic shift is therefore not just a local or organizational change, but part of a wider shift in feminist activism in Poland.

An important example of the changes in the tactics of the Polish feminist movement in response to the actions of the anti-gender movement was the mobilization around the Citizens' Bill "Legal Abortion. No Compromises," which was one of the responses of feminist organizations to the Constitutional Tribunal's decision of October 2020.³ This action undoubtedly led to the consolidation of the diverse and not always unified

³The Committee "Legal Abortion. No Compromises" was registered in May 2021. The committee managed to collect more than 200,000 signatures for the bill (100,000 are required for the citizens' project to reach the Sejm). The committee consisted of, among others, the Federation for Women and Family Planning, the Grand Coalition for Equality and Choice, the Abortion Dream Team, Łódź Dziewuchy Dziewuchom, Akcja Demokracja, the Women's Strike, the Centre for Women's Rights, and left-wing MPs. According to the draft, a woman could terminate a pregnancy under the NFZ (National Health Fund) without giving a reason until the 12th week of pregnancy. After that, abortion is possible in the case of fetal defects or if the pregnancy is the result of rape. The draft also provides for the decriminalization of abortion, i.e., "the abolition of the criminalization of doctors and persons who assist in an abortion with the consent of the pregnant person." On 23 June 2022, the Citizens' Initiative "Legal Abortion. No Compromises" was rejected by the Sejm in its first reading. This happened with the votes of members of the Law and Justice Party, the Confederation, the Polish Coalition, the Covenant, Members of the Civic Platform, the Left

milieu of Polish feminist activists, shifting their rhetoric from ideological to a more fact-based language. This strategic shift has helped them to gain additional political and media allies, increasing their influence and reach. One of the key activists involved in this action described it this way:

In the debate that took place around the project, we also changed the language of talking about abortion, we moved from a very ideological narrative to a narrative centered on the pregnant person. Our common assumption in the committee was to talk about abortion in a way that was based on facts, on reliable arguments, so that the debate would not be on the level of myths or assumptions, but on the level of concrete experiences. In our opinion, this has been very successful, because this project has not only given us political allies, which we can also see in this second term [of the Polish parliament after the election in 2023], but it has also begun to have a positive effect on the media. (FA, Legalna Aborcja)

During the work on the citizens' project "Legal Abortion. No Compromises," as well as during the collection of signatures of support among citizens and later during lobbying among politicians, the feminist organizations took deliberate steps to change the narrative of the abortion debate from an ideological one to one focused primarily on the facts and experiences of pregnant people. This approach has helped to raise public awareness and win political allies. Changing the language of the debate to one that was more based on sound arguments made it possible to gain broader support from the parliamentary opposition of the time, even from those who held conservative views in that opposition. This was seen as a major success of the campaign, even though the project was ultimately rejected by the then right-wing Law and Justice government.

One of the very important activities of feminist activists from Women's Strike (Strajk Kobiet) and the Abortion Dream Team (Aborcynjny Dream Team) in the preparation of the Citizens' Bill "Legal Abortion. No Compromises" was what one interviewee described as "mapping the gray zone" and identifying "frenemies."⁴ It involved a comprehensive mapping and auditing of the socio-political landscape to identify allies, adversaries and those in the "gray zone" and "frenemies." This process was

Party, and the Polish Socialist Party voted against the rejection. The members of Poland 2050 were divided on the issue.

⁴A term coined by combining two semantically opposed words: friend and enemy.

meticulous and involved external consultancy to enhance the accuracy and depth of the analysis.

So in 2021, after the autumn rush of 2020, we took stock of our activities before setting ourselves new goals and what to do next. [...] With the help of an external company specializing in auditing the activities of such non-governmental organizations, we carried out a solid mapping exercise. This consisted of writing down and describing our activities, our relationships with allies and with open enemies. And there was this group of grey zone. These are people who are not openly enemies. There is also the second subgroup, that is allies, who are ‘frenemies’, that is a little bit friends, a little bit enemies. So they are supposedly allies, but they have their own agenda, which somewhere under the surface is in conflict with us. (FA, Women’s Strike)

The “gray zone” or “frenemies” category includes actors (politicians, public figures, journalists, etc.) who publicly present themselves as neutral, undecided, or mildly supportive of progressive causes, but who do not implement inclusive policies internally, who undermine the efforts of the feminist movement. In other words, they are not openly hostile to feminist demands or LGBT+ rights, but whose actions, statements, or lack of clear support can contribute to maintaining the status quo of inequality or indirectly perpetuate discrimination.

The challenge of the gray zone lies in its subtlety and the difficulty of mobilizing against these ambiguous positions. Unlike overt opponents, whose positions are clear and can be directly challenged, dealing with gray zone actors requires nuanced strategies to expose the contradictions in their positions and move them toward more definitively supportive positions.

The first step was to identify these people. And then, of course, when you have such people mapped, we further discussed how to neutralize their influence, how to deal with such people. So, how should the Strike relate to such people, for example, officially, and what actions to take also behind the scenes to neutralize the actions of such people. (FA, Women’s Strike)

One of the key strategies has been to put pressure on individuals in the gray zone to take a clear stand on feminist and LGBT+ issues. This includes making public calls, engaging in direct dialogue, and using social pressure through digital platforms to demand accountability.

Without a doubt, therefore, the strength of the movement lies in its ability to mobilize a diverse base of supporters who are willing to actively participate in advocacy efforts, including through engagement in digital activism. After all, referring to Diani (2015), connections between activists and within communities serve as the “cement” of civil society.

The Polish feminist movement effectively uses social media and other digital platforms to engage with its community, supporters, and the wider public. “Mapping the gray zone” activities linked to digital activism have also involved not only activists from the organizations themselves, but also a wide range of allies and supporters of the movement. These allies and supporters engaged “grassroots mapping” to monitor and assess public figures’ statements and actions concerning feminist and pro-abortion stances. By bringing discrepancies between public personas and actual positions to light, activists create a platform for dialogue. This approach not only highlights inconsistencies but also pressures public figures to align their public statements with their actions, offering them an opportunity to clarify their positions or face potential consequences, such as losing followers, contracts, or advertising revenue, and for politicians, the risk of losing voter support.

People have taken this tool and we have been inundated with information [...]. The scale of the response and this kind of grassroots mapping is overwhelming and it’s an invaluable resource because, for example, we can’t research all the celebrities and we’re not able to read and listen to every interview. [...] And then we have the opportunity to put pressure on those people, to highlight the issue and show publicly that this person seems so pro [pro-feminist, pro-abortion] and yet they are not. And so it is with politicians, with celebrities. [...] We just publicize these cases and give these people a chance to explain, because the idea is to make it public and throw down the gauntlet to these people. And either you apologize for it, you reconsider it, or if you continue, we have it in black and white. And there’s an action that we boycott this person, or other consequences. [...]. For example, they lose a huge following, they lose people, they lose contracts, they lose advertising revenue. Politicians know that people will not vote for them afterwards. (FA. Women’s Strike)

This illustrates the transformative potential of digital activism in fostering public participation in feminist and LGBT+ causes. The “mapping” strategy was successfully used to put pressure on specific politicians both

before the reading of the Citizens' Bill "Legal Abortion. No Compromises" in June 2022 and before the last parliamentary elections in October 2023.

The impact of all these aforementioned actions would likely have been much more limited without the collaborative efforts and collective action to form alliances with various feminist and human rights groups, allowing them to consolidate efforts, share resources, and increase the overall impact of advocacy campaigns. The activist from the Women's Strike organization emphasized the importance of collaboration between different feminist and LGBT+ collectives. By pooling resources and sharing information, these groups have increased their ability to map the political landscape, strategize their actions, and influence public discourse on reproductive rights, gender equality, and LGBT+ issues.

The whole country and all the organizations under the umbrella of the Great Coalition for Equality, as well as Legal Abortion Without Compromise, FEDERA and Feminoteka joined in, and everyone pushed to gather this information through various channels. (FA, Women's Strike)

The emphasis on collaborative efforts and the importance of solidarity between different collectives within the feminist and LGBT+ movements highlights the importance of movement coalitions. It should be noted, however, that movement coalitions, like "coalition politics" (Staggenborg, 1986), bring with them both different dynamics of coalition formation and maintenance within social movements and the strategic benefits and challenges of collaborative action between diverse groups with common goals.

Building on the momentum generated by community engagement and collaborative efforts, Polish feminist activists strategically used some of the mainstream media to amplify their message and influence public discourse. Both grassroots mobilization and engagement with mainstream media, underlined by their positive recognition, is not only a response to the activities of anti-gender movements, but also marks a critical expansion of activists' approach to shaping the narrative of women's rights and feminism in Poland.

Then there is the issue of the media, and here I must certainly mention 'Ofeminin', 'Onet', 'OKO.press', 'Wyborcza', 'Wysokie Obcasy'. It was a great surprise for us, because it was the first time that we were mentioned in the summary of strong women of 'Wysokie Obcasy' and we were listed as

our organization, next to ‘Abortion Dream Team’ and ‘FEDER’, which was a great honor for us. [...] The media is definitely a very important ally that we need very much and we are very happy about it. For me it is super extra cool that in this group of allies we have these editors who have started to write about an issue that is important to us in a cool, smart way, who want that voice, who are also happy that we are speaking out. (FA, Legalna Aborcja)

The mention of various media platforms and journalists, including “Ofeminin,” “Onet,” and “OKO.press,” as supportive of the feminist organization’s cause, illustrates the strategic importance of media alliances in feminist activism. Media outlets serve feminist organizations as critical platforms for disseminating information, mobilizing support, shaping public opinion, and legitimizing feminist issues within broader societal discourse. By highlighting feminist achievements and narratives, the media contributes to the visibility of feminist issues, challenges stereotypes, and fosters a more inclusive public dialogue. Thus, the positive media coverage and recognition mentioned in the quotation suggest a strategic opportunity for feminist movements to leverage media relationships to enhance their influence and reach. However, while media alliances offer significant advantages, the challenges of media engagement highlight the need for strategic, critical, and inclusive approaches to ensure that the media serves as an effective and equitable ally in the pursuit of feminist goals. “You have to keep your eye on the ball,” as one respondent said, recalling the need to intervene after one of the recent TV debates on the legalization of abortion, to which no pro-choice representative was invited. The risk of co-optation, sensationalism, and misrepresentation looms, necessitating a nuanced and critical approach to media relations.

In addition to their collective strategies, feminist organizations, supported by LGBT+ groups, are confronting the socio-political climate and the anti-gender and anti-abortion movements also with distinct, individualized actions. One notable example is the initiative of the Legal Abortion (Legalna Aborcja) collective to launch a video podcast on YouTube to counter the overwhelming presence of conservative and anti-abortion content on the platform.

This is something that we noticed, that YouTube is very right-wing; the Confederation, pro-life organizations or Kaja Godek and so on, use YouTube very heavily and upload this content. It was very difficult to find reliable content about abortion. That was our first outlet to kind of point the way to

other organizations. So we have this video podcast and the most important thing is that it's tailored to YouTube. Because there is no content like that on YouTube. It's on Instagram and other platforms and it's virtually non-existent on YouTube. So these first 5 episodes that we've made will, as much as possible, fulfil that basic requirement that if someone is looking for it, they can at least find it, because it wasn't there. (FA, Legalna Aborcja)

By stepping into a digital media sphere heavily utilized by groups like *Konfederacja* and pro-life organizations led by figures such as Kaja Godek, the collective identifies and confronts the scarcity of factual, pro-choice content on this widely used platform. This move is emblematic of the broader struggle for narrative space within digital activism, especially on platforms where conservative voices have established a strong foothold. The collective has another idea to go "outside its bubble" in yet another way and to be active. The activists want to get involved in events and spaces that are not traditionally associated with feminist activism, at least not in Poland, such as music and cultural festivals.

We will probably exhibit at 'Audioriver.' I've been supporting the festival a little bit, but it's given me access to the decision-makers and I've taken advantage of that and it turns out that we'll probably be able to have our stand and maybe even some kind of panel discussion. This is completely outside the bubble, at some festival there. I've also been in contact with festivals that have nothing to do with the topic, like the *Light.Move.Festival* in Łódź. So I'm very much in favor of using such completely non-bubble, non-activist initiatives to show our message. (FA, Legalna Aborcja)

The strategic move to engage with non-traditional platforms such as the *Audioriver* music festival and the *Light.Move.Festival* in Łódź represents a departure from conventional modes of feminist activism, which have predominantly revolved around protests, academic discourse, and gender-focused events. By infiltrating spaces that are not explicitly feminist or activist, these movements can bring their messages to a wider, potentially unresponsive or neutral audience, thus democratizing access to feminist discourses. Feminist activists seek to use their knowledge, skills, and social networks to influence wider public spheres and, in this case, to shape public consciousness through the cultural sector.

Another aspect of the feminist movement's strategy is to build relationships and alliances with supportive politicians, especially those who themselves come from feminist movements and are in regular contact with

activist groups. As the activist from the Legalna Aborcja collective pointed out, effective communication has been established with several such politicians, particularly on the left, who are seen as credible in both their messages and their intentions.

It seems to me that we have effective contact with at least a few such MPs who we consider to be the most credible in message and intention. There is, of course, a group of Left MPs here with whom we are in fairly regular contact. (FA, Legalna Aborcja)

The strategic engagement with politicians, as outlined in the quotation, represents a vital component of feminist activism aimed at influencing policy and legislative processes. Establishing connections with sympathetic lawmakers can facilitate access to political arenas, enhance the visibility of feminist issues, and contribute to the development of gender-sensitive policies. Another example of a strategic approach to broadening politicians' understanding of socially sensitive issues is to involve them in activist events and introduce them to new issues. An example of this was the first National Transgender Day in Poland, organized in 2023. The involvement of politicians such as Minister Dziemianowicz-Bąk and MEP Sylwia Spurek played a key role in raising the profile of the event and ensuring that the issue of transgender rights received political and public attention. By deliberately informing politicians and ensuring their presence, the organizers bridged the gap between activism and political advocacy, enabling a wider discussion of transgender issues within a social and legislative framework. This strategy not only strengthened the movement, but also encouraged politicians to take a stand on transgender rights.

In March this year [2023] we had the first National Transgender Visibility Day. [...] It was not just about having fun, but there was also a very strong artistic and activist dimension. It was the first unprecedented event of its kind in Poland. Politicians were there too, because we made sure they knew about the issue and defined their attitude to it. Minister Dziemianowicz-Bąk was one of them. MEP Sylwia Spurek also helped us a lot with the organisation of the event. (FA/LGBTQ+A, Lambda)

Engagement with politicians is not limited to those who are already supportive; considerable effort is also invested in educating and changing the perspectives of mainstream, centrist, or even center-right politicians.

For at least three years, activists have dedicated themselves to working “behind the scenes” with these politicians, demonstrating a strategic and educational approach to advocacy.

The work on the politicians, the mainstream politicians, the ones closer to the center, also had an effect. There was a time when Kaja Godek and that shitty Krzysztof Kasprzak tabled a ‘Stop the LGBT’ bill in the Sejm, or something like that, and talked crap about some gays who had raped a one-year-old child somewhere in Brazil. After that, even PO, Nowoczesna and PSL MPs came to the podium and said: ‘Fuck you, fuck you with this nonsense’. That is our success as a movement. This kind of work behind the scenes with these centrist politicians has been going on for at least three years. (FA/LGBTQ+A, Lambda)

This strategy has led to remarkable results, such as the reaction to the “Stop the LGBT” bill proposed by Kaja Godek and Krzysztof Kasprzak. The strong denunciation by MPs from centrist parties such as PO, Nowoczesna, and PSL, who publicly condemned the bill and its offensive rhetoric, reflects a significant shift in the political dialogue on LGBT+ issues. Their firm stance against the spread of misinformation highlights the impact of sustained activist engagement.

In these circumstances, at least some of the feminist and LGBT+ actors have recognized that a more effective way of opposing anti-gender movements is to move out of the “activist comfort zone.” This shift involves a more robust and widespread engagement of activists in the political sphere, recognizing that having power offers a real opportunity for change. Consequently, this awareness has led to an increased interest in standing for election at various levels.

Because I look at my female colleagues and I see that it’s time for the next stage, which is let’s reach for other tools, tools that will allow us to exert more pressure. Because I talk to you differently if you’re an activist, and I talk to you completely differently if you’re a councilor. And then it’s a completely different conversation, different access to information, [a councilor] you can even ask for all kinds of data. (FA, Toruńska Brygada Feministyczna)

This quote from a member of the “Toruńska Brygada Feministyczna” highlights a crucial strategic pivot in feminist activism, indicating a recognition of the potential within political engagement to achieve their objectives. By considering a transition from street activism to participating

actively in politics, with plans to run in local government elections, the activists acknowledge the limitations of traditional forms of protest in effecting systemic change. This transition from external advocacy to internal policy-making marks an important evolution in strategies of at least some feminist actors, emphasizing a proactive approach where gaining political power is seen as crucial to achieving meaningful societal transformation. In this respect, the Women's Councils that are being set up all over Poland are also symptomatic. Women's Councils (*Rady Kobiet*) in Poland are advisory bodies set up at local, town/city, or regional level to provide opinion and advice to mayors, town presidents, or marshals. The Councils are grassroots initiatives that bring together women from different backgrounds, some of whom have no previous experience of feminist activism: NGOs, businesses, public institutions, and others who want to contribute to solving local women's problems. They have been formed since 2010, the first being the Women's Council of Wrocław. By March 2023, their number had increased to 56,⁵ with several more in the process of being organized. The main objective of the Women's Councils is to influence local laws and policies in all areas that directly or indirectly affect the situation of women. Their activities are diverse and aim to promote women's health, social inclusion, community involvement, and education. These councils organize events and workshops and work with local associations to raise awareness of women's issues.

THEORETICAL REFLECTIONS ON PRACTICAL (RE)ACTIONS

A central framework for understanding the recent strategic response of the Polish feminist movement to anti-gender mobilization, which has been characterized by an evolutionary shift from reactive protests to proactive activism and coalition building, is reflected in the work of Htun and Weldon (2018). They identified the ways in which feminist movements effectively influence public policy and societal norms through organized, issue-specific campaigns. Their observations suggest that successful feminist activism is often issue-specific and highly organized, and is able to mobilize both public and institutional support for gender equality. While their general observations about the organization and issue-specific nature

⁵ On 22–23 March 2024, the 4th All-Poland Forum of Women's Councils was held in Piaseczno (near Warsaw), during which the Presidium of Women's Councils announced the official number of Women's Councils in Poland.

of successful feminist campaigns are consistent with the shifts observed in Poland, it is important to consider the specific challenges and opportunities that have shaped the Polish context. These include the influence of conservative political powers and the Church, which have had a profound impact on the nature and effectiveness of feminist and LGBT+ activism in Poland, distinguishing it from cases in other regions analyzed by Htun and Weldon.

The educational theories of bell hooks, especially her later works, also continue to influence feminist practice (2010) by emphasizing the need for educational strategies that are not only informative but also transformative—encouraging the application of critical thinking to social injustices. hooks' approach is an integral part of recent Polish feminist activist campaigns that aim to educate the public not only about the issues, but also about the deeper systemic structures that perpetuate gender inequality and discrimination.

Proactive activism is often enhanced by collaborative efforts, emphasizing the importance of building strong coalitions to amplify its impact and reach. However, the complex dynamics of alliance formation in social movement organizations must be considered. Zajak and Haunss (2022) highlight that alliances often emerge from strategic needs to address political opportunities and threats, echoing the proactive strategies adopted by Polish feminists in response to political changes and legislative challenges. Their study emphasizes that alliances are not simply pragmatic but are embedded in broader social dynamics and ideological allegiances that shape the structure and effectiveness of movement coalitions. In the Polish context, the formation of alliances is not only a response to immediate legislative challenges, but also a strategic approach to maintaining a sustained presence in political discourse with the aim of reshaping public policy and societal norms around gender equality and LGBT+ rights. These coalitions often include a wide range of actors—from grassroots organizations to more formalized political entities—each bringing unique perspectives and resources to the table. However, the effectiveness of these coalitions depends on their ability to navigate the ideological differences and strategic priorities of their members. Furthermore, coalition formation, longevity, and success in social movements, as pointed out by Van Dyke and Amos (2017), depend significantly on factors such as shared ideologies, resource mobilization, and the ability to exploit institutional opportunities and manage threats. These elements are essential for

fostering alliances between diverse groups which in turn facilitate collective action toward common goals.

Moving from the mechanics of coalition building to the human elements that make it possible, Van Dyke and Amos (2017) also highlight the central role of “bridge builders” in coalition dynamics. These individuals or organizations play a fundamental role in connecting disparate groups, thereby fostering stronger and more sustainable alliances. Within the Polish feminist movement, the role of “bridge builders” has been played by, for example, the *Legalna Aborcja* collective, which has emerged as a central force in linking grassroots activists with broader national and international feminist networks. Particularly during the *Legalna Aborcja bez Kompromisów* initiative, it played a central role in aligning diverse groups with common goals, such as the *Aborcynjny Dream Team*, *FEDERA*, *Dziewuchy Dziewuchom*, and *Akcja Demokracja*, among others, demonstrating an effective model of coalition dynamics where bridge-building goes beyond mere cooperation and is deeply integrated into strategic and narrative shifts within the movement.

Movement coalitions often emerge in response to specific incidents or threats, catalyzing temporary alliances that can evolve into more permanent collaborations. Levi and Murphy (2006) refer to these as “event coalitions.” In Poland, such coalitions have been instrumental in responding to specific legislative threats, highlighting the strategic adaptation of the feminist movement to address immediate challenges while building toward long-term goals. This strategic evolution demonstrates not only a sophisticated understanding of how to effectively balance immediate responses with long-term planning, but also underlines the complexity of advancing feminist agendas within a socio-political landscape.

The use of “contentious politics” (Tilly & Tarrow, 2007), which involves the dynamic process of mobilizing resources, forming alliances, and identifying adversaries as well as those in the “gray zone,” is a form of strategic nonviolent action (Edwards, 2021; McAdam & Tarrow, 2000; Turner, 2023) that is a significant aspect of contemporary feminist proactive activism in Poland. Furthermore, the use of digital platforms has become one of the cornerstones of their activism. Jackson et al. (2020) study on “#HashtagActivism” reveals how social media has revolutionized activism, especially for marginalized communities. It allows them to call out discriminatory practices and promote an inclusive public discourse. Polish feminist activists leverage digital platforms not only for mobilizing

support but also for fostering community engagement, shaping public discourse, and upholding ethical standards in public life.

Some of the feminist organizations broaden their audience and democratize access to feminist discourses also by infiltrating spaces not typically associated with activism, such as the cultural sector. They not only amplify their message and facilitate social change by using their expertise and networks to influence public consciousness and foster relationships with institutions outside the traditional feminist sphere. This strategy resonates deeply with Chantal Mouffe's critique of the public sphere. Mouffe (2018) argues that the public sphere is not a neutral arena but rather one structured by dominant norms that often exclude marginalized voices. This undermines the democratic principle of pluralism, which requires the recognition and inclusion of diverse viewpoints. According to Mouffe, only by acknowledging these diverse viewpoints and fostering spaces for agonistic debate can the public sphere become truly inclusive and democratic. In this light, feminist activists' efforts to shape public consciousness through engagement in the cultural sector and beyond become crucial in challenging these exclusions. By fostering relationships with institutions beyond traditional feminist spheres, activists not only amplify their message but also contribute to the broader project of democratizing public discourse, as envisioned by Mouffe. This innovative approach also highlights the flexibility and adaptability of feminist movements in the face of changing social contexts.

The movement's shift from external advocacy to internal policy-making marks a significant adaptation, with feminist activists increasingly participating in local government elections and establishing women's councils across Poland. Their direct involvement in the political process is increasingly seen as essential to achieving substantive social change (Ansell & Gash, 2008). Activists within political institutions are uniquely positioned to navigate and ensure that a movement's goals are aligned with political opportunities and legislative processes (Böhm, 2015). This shift to a more politicized strategy is partly a response to the disappointment following the 2023 parliamentary elections in Poland, where despite feminist and LGBT+ support, pre-election promises on gender equality and reproductive rights were largely ignored. Consequently, there is a growing conviction that substantive change must come from women in decision-making positions.

Chadwick's (2017) concept of hybrid media systems is exemplified by Polish activists' strategic integration of direct and digital activism, which

effectively increased their communication impact. In particular, during the 2016 “Black Protests” and the 2020 abortion ruling demonstrations, activists skillfully combined street protests with a strong online presence, using social media for rapid mobilization, instant updates, and extensive international engagement (Avraamidou et al., 2021). This multifaceted approach not only broadened their audience, but also significantly increased their impact on public discourse and policy, demonstrating a deep understanding of the different logics of different media forms.

The challenges of digital activism must also be acknowledged. A pessimistic perspective points to the dangers of “slacktivism,” where online engagement often fails to translate into concrete offline action. This superficial engagement, characterized by likes, shares, or temporary profile overlays, lacks the depth and permanence that are crucial for the sustained impact of movements. Moreover, the same platforms that facilitate mobilization for activists are also used by conservative and anti-gender groups to spread misinformation and organize counter-movements, sometimes inciting harassment of activists (Avraamidou et al., 2021). Critical perspectives go deeper, exploring how social media is intertwined with broader socio-economic and political structures that perpetuate inequalities. Baer (2018) discusses how digital platforms, while offering new opportunities for resistance and empowerment, operate within commercial and capitalist frameworks that can co-opt feminist messages. This creates a dual reality in which the liberatory potential of digital activism is constrained by market logics that prioritize individualism over collective action.

Scholars such as Garnham (2000) and Fuchs (2012) offer a more nuanced critique of digital networks. Garnham questions the extent to which these technologies actually enable activism, noting that they both shape and reinforce existing power relations. Fuchs discusses the structural constraints inherent in networks, shaped by technological affordances and capitalist dynamics, that condition the effectiveness and scope of activism. Miconi (2022) echoes these sentiments, pointing out that while digital platforms offer new ways of disseminating information, they also reinforce power structures that limit the effectiveness of these tools for social change. The intersection of online activism and feminist goals introduces additional layers of complexity. Feminist activism within a digital framework must contend with both the patriarchal tendencies embedded in societal structures and the network dynamics that may not always align with feminist goals. The success of such movements often depends on

their ability to both utilize and challenge these networks, a process complicated by the overlapping influences of global and local pressures.

CONCLUSION

The anti-gender movement in Poland is closely linked to conservative, nationalist, and religious discourse, and uses both legislative and media strategies to pursue an agenda that restricts gender equality and the rights of LGBT+ people. These actions have not gone unanswered by the feminist and LGBT+ communities in Poland. Initially galvanized by the need to fight against restrictive legislative proposals (since 2016), actions that dignify human dignity and human rights, and proposed laws restricting LGBT+ rights, and finally the real tightening of abortion laws (in 2020), these communities increasingly saw the limits of reactive activism.

After the wave of street protests that erupted after the Constitutional Court ruling in 2020 had subsided, there was a strategic shift toward more proactive action, a comprehensive approach that not only responds to the actions of the anti-gender movement on an ongoing basis, but also seeks to foster deeper social change. The response of the feminist and LGBT+ communities at this point is not just street protests, but systematic and planned actions including legal challenges, educational campaigns, and political participation. Activists have recognized the importance of diversifying their tactics, engaging in less emotionally charged and more targeted actions that directly address the needs and rights of women and the LGBT+ community. This approach highlights a movement shift toward more integrated activism, where direct action is complemented by efforts to influence public policy and discourse from within the system. This development is characterized by increased engagement with the political landscape, including efforts to build dialogues and alliances with sympathetic politicians, but also an attempt to actively change the attitudes of politicians occupying centrist and even center-right positions. In this way, activists seek to broaden the base of support for feminist and LGBT+ issues, going beyond traditional allies to effect change in the wider socio-political structure. Moreover, the strategic decision to focus on political engagement, including activists running for political office, is a recognition that sustainable change often requires engagement with the mechanisms of governance.

This is not just a tactical adjustment, but a fundamental change.

REFERENCES

- Ansell, C., & Gash, A. (2008). Collaborative governance in theory and practice. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 18(4), 543–571. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/mum032>
- Avraamidou, M., Ioannou, M., & Eftychiou, E. (2021). “Innocent” hashtags? A cautionary tale: #IStandWithGreece as a network of intolerance on Twitter during a land border crisis. *International Journal of Communication*, 15, 2849–2869. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/16576>
- Baer, H. (2018). Redoing feminism: Digital activism, body politics, and neoliberalism. In *Digital Feminisms. Transnational activism in German protest cultures*. C. Scharff, C. Smith-Prei, M. Stehle. (Eds.). (pp. 25–42). Routledge.
- Böhm, T. (2015). Activists in politics: The influence of embedded activists on the success of social movements. *Social Problems*, 62(4), 477–498. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44014872>
- Chadwick, A. (2017). *The hybrid media system: Politics and power*. Oxford University Press.
- Chenoweth, E., & Stephan, M. J. (2011). *Why civil resistance works: The strategic logic of nonviolent conflict*. Columbia University Press.
- Desperak, I. (2019). Nowa żelazna kurtyna czy nowe średniowiecze? Ruchy anty-aborcyjne, antygender i anty-LGBT+ w Polsce i innych krajach Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej. *Władza sądzona*, (17), 20–35. <https://doi.org/10.18778/2300-1690.17.02>
- Diani, M. (2015). *The cement of civil society: Studying networks in localities*. Cambridge University Press.
- Duda, M. (2016). *Dogmat płci. Polska wojna z gender*. Wydawnictwo Naukowe Katedra.
- Edwards, P. (2021). The politics of nonviolent mobilization: Campaigns, competition, and social movement resources. *Journal of Peace Research*, 58(5), 945–961. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343320958456>
- Episkopat Polski. (2013). List pasterski na Niedzielę Świętej Rodziny 2013 roku. Retrieved September 12, 2024, from <https://episkopat.pl/list-pasterski-na-niedziele-swietej-rodziny-2013-roku/>
- Fuchs, C. (2012). Some reflections on manuel castells’ book “Networks of outrage and hope. Social Movements in the Internet Age”. tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. *Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society*, 10(2), 775–797. <https://doi.org/10.31269/triplec.v10i2.459>
- Graff, A. (2021). Anti-gender mobilization and right-wing populism. In *The Routledge handbook of gender in Central-Eastern Europe and Eurasia* (pp. 266–275). Routledge.
- Graff, A., & Korolczuk, E. (2022). *Anti-gender politics in the populist moment*. Taylor & Francis.

- Htun, M., & Weldon, S. L. (2018). *The logics of gender justice: State action on women's rights around the world*. Cambridge University Press.
- Jackson, S. J., Bailey, M., & Foucault Welles, B. (2020). *#HashtagActivism: Networks of race and gender justice*. MIT Press.
- Levi, M., & Murphy, G. H. (2006). Coalitions of contention: The case of the WTO protests in Seattle. *Political studies*, 54(4), 651–670. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2006.00629.x>
- Korolczuk, E., & Graff, A. (2018). Gender as “Ebola from Brussels”: The anticolonial frame and the rise of illiberal populism. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 43(4), 797–821. <https://doi.org/10.1086/696691>
- McAdam, D., & Tarrow, S. (2000). Nonviolence as contentious interaction. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 33(2), 149–154. <https://doi.org/10.2307/420883>
- Mouffe, C. (2018). *For a left populism*. Verso Books.
- Muszel, M. (2023). Ideological foundation of the contemporary anti-gender movements in Poland. Most recent history in the context of strategies and arguments. *Miscellanea Anthropologica et Sociologica*, 24(2–3).
- Muszel, M., & Piotrowski, G. (2018). Rocking the Small-Town Boat: Black Protest Activists in Small and Provincial Polish Cities, *Praktyka Teoretyczna*, 30(4), 101–128. <https://doi.org/10.14746/prt.2018.4.4>
- Oko, D. (2013). Gender-ideologia totalitarna. *Niedziela. Tygodnik Katolicki*, 24, 40–43.
- Pokorna-Ignatowicz, K. (2014). “Ideologia gender” i Konwencja o zapobieganiu i zwalczaniu przemocy wobec kobiet i przemocy domowej w polskich mediach katolickich. In M. Majorek, M. du Vall, J. Wojniak, D. Baran, K. Pokorna-Ignatowicz, & A. Frączak (Eds.), *Gender mainstreaming w polskim dyskursie medialnym. Na przykładzie debaty nad Konwencją o zapobieganiu i zwalczaniu przemocy wobec kobiet i przemocy domowej* (pp. 75–95). Oficyna Wydawnicza AFM.
- Segers, I. B., & Eslen-Ziya, H. (2023). Special Section: Contemporary forms of illiberal and anti-feminist mobilizations of gender. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, 30(1), 211–212. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxad003>
- Staggenborg, S. (1986). Coalition work in the pro-choice movement: Organizational and environmental opportunities and obstacles. *Social Problems*, 33(5), 374–390. <https://doi.org/10.2307/800657>
- Suchanow, K. (2020). *To jest wojna. Kobiety, fundamentaliści i nowe średniowiecze*. Wydawnictwo Agora.
- Tilly, C., & Tarrow, S. (2007). *Contentious politics*. Paradigm Publishers.
- Turner, R. H. (2023). Determinants of social movement strategies. In *Human nature and collective behavior* (pp. 145–164). Routledge.

- Van Dyke, N., & Amos, B. (2017). Social movement coalitions: Formation, longevity, and success. *Sociology Compass*, 11(7), e12489. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12489>
- Zajak, S., & Haunss, S. (2022). The politics of alliances: The making and breaking of social movement coalitions. Introduction to the special issue. *Social Movement Studies*, 21(1–2), 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2021.1973890>
- Žuk, P., & Žuk, P. (2020). ‘Murderers of the unborn’ and ‘sexual degenerates’: analysis of the ‘anti-gender’ discourse of the Catholic Church and the nationalist right in Poland. *Critical Discourse Studies*, 17(5), 566–588. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2019.1676808>

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if you modified the licensed material. You do not have permission under this license to share adapted material derived from this chapter or parts of it.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter’s Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter’s Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.





Patriarchal Backlash and Feminist Responses in Greece Today

Alexandros Kioupkiolis

INTRODUCTION

The vilification of feminism has been a leitmotif of social conservatism in Greece. During the dictatorship in 1967–1974, the notorious motto “Fatherland-Religion-Family” (Πατρίς-Θρησκεία-Οικογένεια) summed up the conditions that a “law-abiding” subject must fulfil according to the nationalist ideology of the post-war right. Despite advances in gender equality and LGBT+ rights, including significant reforms enacted in the 1980s and the 2010s, patriarchal, nationalist, and homophobic norms still underlie Greek society (Athanasίου, 2017).

In the contemporary national context from 2010 to date, antifeminist and anti-LGBT+ politics occurred in a deeply critical conjuncture. The dramatic economic crisis and the perceived “refugee crisis,” coupled with the defeat of the left-wing promise incarnated by the SYRIZA

A. Kioupkiolis (✉)

School of Political Sciences, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki,
Thessaloniki, Greece

e-mail: alkioup@polsci.auth.gr

© The Author(s) 2025

R. Smrdelj, R. Kuhar (eds.), *Anti-Gender Mobilizations in Europe and the Feminist Response*, Palgrave Studies in European Political Sociology, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-87693-6_8

197

government in 2015–2019, set the stage for the rise and the mainstreaming of far-right regressive politics, reaffirming in effect the historical motto of Greek socio-political reaction (Vasilaki & Souvlis, 2023; Siapera & Papadopoulou, 2023).

This chapter seeks to offer a critical overview of antifeminist mobilizations and the feminist rejoinders in recent years in Greece. We lay out first the broader scene of reactionary opposition to feminism and LGBT+ rights and recognition, noting the rise of new actors. We delve subsequently into two cases of late antifeminist intervention which sparked organized feminist rejoinders to them. What singles out these antifeminist assaults in the period of reference (2010–2023) is that they are not *merely* manifestations of persisting sexism and patriarchal violence or only expressions of opposition to *new* pro-feminist and pro-LGBT+ reforms initiated by state actors. They are strategic endeavors which take aim at established feminist conquests and institutional frameworks to promote reforms in a reactionary direction. They are new inroads of regressive politics proper. Hence, feminist resistances to them were not just part of the broader and ongoing feminist struggle against subsisting patriarchy in its various guises. They were specific responses to the antifeminist backlash and regressive initiatives, and they were new in this respect.

The reactionary regress in these years of crises featured also dispersed voices taking issue with “gender ideology,”¹ but there has been no organized collective action and discourse in these precise terms and, hence, no anti-gender movement properly speaking. However, the strategic, insidious, and partly successful assaults on established women’s rights are a novel and disquieting development in this period in Greece, which duly activated feminist reflexes. This event and the feminist defenses have been sparsely researched in recent social science studies, despite their significance for the reinforcement of patriarchy and the mutations of antifeminist politics in Greece today. The chapter seeks primarily to contribute to a first mapping of this critical territory that remains uncharted in published research.

¹ See, e.g., the edited volume Karampelias, G. (ed.) (2023) *Woke. The universal deconstruction: Nation, gender, race*. Athens: Enallaktikes Ekdoseis [in Greek], and the website of the anti-abortion network “Afiste me na ziso,” <https://mumdadandkids.gr/vioithiki-iatriki/helping-our-children-navigate-gender-ideology-the-middle-school-years>, accessed 29 April 2024.

The thrust of our argument is that feminist counter-agency reacted swiftly and deployed a diverse repertoire of cogent actions on multiple levels, from the digital sphere and the streets to national and international institutions. Feminists networked extensively, they tried to reach out to society, and they undertook multiple interventions in institutions. Their response demonstrates critical alertness and quick reflexes which grasped the patriarchal backlash in its depth, even in its most surreptitious, “alt-,” and complicated variants, as in the case of the “mandatory joint custody law.” Critical investigation debunked the deceptively “progressive” and rights-based arguments of the alt-right antifeminist front. The digital realm became a central combat zone for both sides, in which spontaneous, dispersed, but also organized feminist battles were waged and occasionally won. The effectiveness of the feminist resistances has varied significantly, and our account seeks to illuminate the grounds for differential outcomes.

ANTI-FEMINIST AND ANTI-LGBT+ ACTORS AND AGITATION IN 2010–2023

Actors

Given the deeply ingrained patriarchal culture of Greek society, antifeminist and anti-LGBT+ actors have been present since 1974, when the military dictatorship fell. They involve mainly the Greek Orthodox Church, the political and cultural right, the far right, but also members of other political parties and sectors of civil society infused with this culture.

The actual landscape of antifeminist and anti-LGBT+ politics is more complicated and seemingly contradictory. Traditional conservative and far- or extreme-right forces, typically represented by the Orthodox Church, the official religion of the state, and the currently outlawed neo-Nazi Golden Dawn, voiced openly their opposition to feminist and LGBT+ demands and to reproductive rights, standing for a staunch, even violent homophobia.

Hence, Golden Dawn female MPs have targeted feminism and gender equality as “deceptive, ineffective and disorienting women again from commitment to motherhood [...] and the growth of the national community [...] a ‘new order’ tool of hegemonic international forces” (Anastasiadou & Samara, 2022, p. 18). Moreover, Golden Dawn has framed gender violence as a fundamentally racial issue, whereby Greek

women are assailed by “immigrant hordes” (Anastasiadou & Samara, 2022, p. 16). This may appear as a typical femonationalist discourse (Farris, 2017), but the Greek far right denounces gender equality and rights in favor of conventional motherhood roles.

These forces have been supplemented in recent years by an emergent Greek alt-right which is situated both within and on the fringes of the governing right-wing New Democracy party, as well as in new pressure groups such as ‘Active Dads’ [‘Energoi Mpampades’], championing “men’s rights” against feminist conquests. These novel alt-right actors converge with the international alt-right in their discourse and methods. They speak in the name of equal rights to contest feminist positions and rights. They reverse the relation between dominant and dominated by posing men as threatened and abused by women and their allies. To illustrate, mediatic figures such as Kostas Bogdanos, who came and was eventually expelled from New Democracy, has assailed on TV “vegan lesbian anarchist witches, Satanist-troublemakers” who allegedly seek to impose themselves violently.²

Alt-right YouTubers have taken aim at abortion, feminism, and homosexuality, proclaiming that genders have a natural identity while legal equality has been achieved. They denounce the “myth of toxic masculinity and white privilege,” and they portray the left as “unclean” (Afouxenidis & Petridis, 2023, pp. 11–12). Moreover, contemporary reactionaries have adopted the standard far- and alt-right practice of instrumentalizing women’s and LGBT+ rights to take on mainly Muslim migrants and refugees along with their leftist allies (Vasilaki & Souvlis, 2023, pp. 458–460; Anastasiadou & Samara, 2022, p. 11; Afouxenidis & Petridis, 2023, p. 12).

The antifeminist radical right exists in an unstable ecosystem of far-right media outlets, several of which emerged under the conditions of the poly-crises. Diverse right-wing journals (such as *Makeleio* and *Eleftheri Ora*), blogs and Twitter accounts, news websites (e.g., pronews.gr, energoimpampades.gr), and radio stations (such as the one belonging to the nationalist right-wing party ‘Hellenic Solution’) disseminate antifeminist discourse. Men are portrayed as victims of women-spiders who deceive, manipulate, and exploit their partners to attain their goals. Prominent women are denigrated as “whores” who “suck” their way up the social ladder. By contrast, the female ideal is that of a mother who does not provoke through her sexuality, does not engage with public affairs, and is not

²<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v0dzhf7ggqM>, accessed 13 February 2024.

independent of her husband. LGBT+ people are likewise reviled in abusive terms, configuring them as “prostitutes,” sick and hideous, in opposition to the heroic ideal of the Greek man (Siapera & Papadopoulou, 2023, pp. 83–87).

At the same time, the incumbent New Democracy (ND) government of the dominant right-wing party, which has governed for almost half of the post-dictatorship period and was re-elected in 2023 for four years, has taken on board items of identity politics while pursuing antifeminist policies (Koulouris, 2018; Vasilaki & Souvlis, 2023). Hence, on the one hand, the ND government sponsored the election of the first female President of the Greek Republic in 2020, and it eventually legislated same-sex marriage in February 2024 with the votes of the opposition. On the other hand, in 2021 it passed the “mandatory joint custody” law for the children of divorced couples, coalescing with the new ‘Active Dads’ lobby to enact antifeminist demands at the forefront of the global alt-right patriarchal reaction. Furthermore, in a gesture that speaks volumes for its regressive agenda, in 2023 it subsumed the General Secretariat for Equality and Human Rights under the newly founded Ministry for Social Cohesion and Family.

The new stage of the patriarchal counter-offensive is partly mirrored in the composition of the parliament after the 25 June 2023 national elections, which marked a historic throwback for democratic pro-equality forces. New Democracy was reinstated in government, gaining 40.56% of the vote. Three more parties on the right of New Democracy, the Spartans, an offshoot of the outlawed Golden Dawn, *Elliniki Lysi* (“Greek Solution”), and *Niki* (“Victory”), with 4.68%, 4.44%, and 3.70% of the vote respectively, were also elected, the Spartans and *Niki* being new formations. Their political discourse and positions are more vocally traditionalist, nationalist, anti-immigrant, antifeminist, and anti-LGBT+ than New Democracy’s, expanding the front of anti-egalitarian forces in parliament without necessarily reflecting a society-wide regress; turnout reached only 53.74%, a historic low for national elections.

In sum, the traditional far right has rehearsed its old agenda but has also incorporated elements of femonationalism by casting gender violence as a racial matter. Furthermore, novel antifeminist strategies of the contemporary alt-right have arisen in the last decade. An apparently “liberal Right” strongly present in the social media has crafted a xenophobic rhetoric that weaponizes gender rights against “alien” others. The conservative government and new alt-right groups deploy more stealthy strategies

to subvert women's rights, and advance an antifeminist hegemonic intervention in popular culture (Afouxenidis & Petridis, 2023, p. 8; Anastasiadou & Samara, 2022; Vasilaki & Souvlis, 2023, pp. 461–463).

Finally, it is worth pointing out that traditional leftist “communist” parties such as KKE (Communist Party of Greece) are skeptical or even dismissive when it comes to LGBT+ rights and politics. Hence, KKE voted against extending to same-sex couples the right to form civil partnerships, and against same-sex marriage in February 2024 (Kosyfologou, 2018, p. 46).

Events

In the period of reference, a number of events and legislative reforms became hot spots of antifeminist and anti-LGBT+ discourse and action.

To begin with, a first grave moment of antifeminist politics and discourse was the arrest and public stigmatization of HIV-positive women who were drug addicts and worked reputedly as prostitutes in 2012. In what can be described as the worst violation of human rights in Greece in recent years, police arrested more than 2000 women. The personal data of HIV-positive women were published in the media. The discourse of mass media, police, justice, and healthcare agencies stigmatized these persons as a “hygienic bomb” which purposefully transmitted the HIV virus to ignorant Greek family leaders. Uncovered photos of these women were published in the press to “protect the Greek family.” Prostitutes were considered a “threat to society at large” (Kanaveli, 2016, pp. 41–42). A huge wave of solidarity was set off by feminist and other groups, and an *Initiative for Solidarity* was established to coordinate action through information campaigns, press releases, international networking, legal aid, etc.

The extension of the civil partnership contract to same-sex couples was a second major point of contention and anti-LGBT+ intervention in the 2010s. In November 2015, the Ministry of Justice of the coalition government led by the left-wing SYRIZA announced the new bill (Michos, 2017, pp. 8–9). An avalanche of reactions by the Greek Orthodox Church followed suit. The Archbishop of Athens stated that this contract is a “deviation from life,” while the Bishop of Kalavryta and Aigialia argued that this law constitutes a menace for Orthodoxy and Greek identity (Michos, 2017, pp. 10–11). In the period 2010–2023, the Orthodox Church typically used press releases, radio and TV shows, and the pulpit

itself to articulate their opposition to LGBT+ rights and feminism, targeting mainly reproductive rights (see the anti-abortion campaign below).

Femicide/feminicide (γυναικοκτονία in Greek) is another hot issue which has attracted antifeminist discourse in recent years. The term has been dismissed by the new and old right as abusive, coined by weird leftists. Blogs, webpages, authors in the mainstream “bourgeois” press, opinion leaders, and media personalities have been at the forefront of this “battle of words” (Michalakeli, 2020).

Another major incident of transphobia and murderous gender violence occurred on 21 September 2018, when a person was brutally hit by the owner of a jewelry shop in the center of Athens. Further brutalized by police and by-standers, Zacharias Kwstopoulos, also known as *Zackie Ob*, his drag alter ego, was murdered. Zak was a queer, HIV-positive LGBT+ activist and artist. His assassination brought on a wide-ranging agitation, signaling a pronounced “queer” turn in gender movements. It triggered multifarious action on the streets, the police headquarters in Athens, squats, bars, open public spaces and drag shows for more than two years (Athanasίου & Papanikolaou, 2020, pp. 9–11). Four days after Zak’s murder, a far-right group staged a demonstration on the street where the murder took place, repeating the slogan “Druggies and gays you are not needed” (“Πρεζάκια και γκέι δεν είστε αναγκαίοι”) (Athanasίου & Papanikolaou, 2020, p. 11).

The foregoing instances of antifeminist/anti-LGBT+ reaction are manifestations of enduring patriarchy and sexist violence as well as resistances to new institutional progress in an egalitarian direction. Two other episodes of antifeminist and feminist contest stand out in that they constitute strategic attempts to repeal women’s rights and reform the institutional framework in ways that reinforce patriarchal power and violence. These are the cases of the new 4800/2021 Act on “mandatory joint custody” for the children of divorced couples, and a chain of anti-abortion and “pro-fertility” campaigns, which gained momentum with the *Conference of Fertility* scheduled for July 2021 and were eventually cancelled. The chapter probes these two salient moments of antifeminist and feminist struggle in recent years to shed light on contemporary antifeminist repertoires as well as on the latest feminist action countering these regressive interventions.

MANDATORY JOINT CUSTODY

The Law and New Antifeminist Actors

The new legislation enacted by the right-wing New Democracy government in May 2021 occasioned the most compact and protracted reactions by feminist actors after 2018, fighting new items on the reactionary agenda through which the global alt-right politics set foot in the country.

This antifeminist initiative around the new 4800/2021 law on “mandatory joint child custody” is singular and notable in several respects. Law professor Fountedaki (2024) has singled it out as “a paradigmatic example of successful lobbying in Greece which should be taught in schools of political science.” In an unprecedented way for present-day Greece, actors mobilized discourses and practices of the international alt-right, disguising their misogyny and their attempt at reinvigorating patriarchal power in the garb of equal rights, pseudoscience, children’s rights, and feminist frames of argument which they twisted in favor of men’s rights. Their strategizing resembles that of anti-gender movements in other countries without articulating an explicit critique of “gender ideology” beyond occasional and short stabs at “neofeminism.” They launched a multi-layered and multi-modal campaign, drawing on ample financial resources, engaging in systematic digital battles, and lobbying with the government (Interview, 2023). The antifeminist actors attained their objective, and legislation regulating the custody of children of divorced couples was reformed in ways that erode gender equality and amplify gender violence. The failure of the organized and multifarious feminist counter to the antifeminist assault, contrasted with the victory of feminist responses to the anti-abortion campaign, illuminates the conditions of effective feminist and egalitarian politics under the circumstances of the conservative-reactionary turn in Greece today.

The former 1983 family law stipulated that parents’ decisions and courts’ judgment on the parental custody of children in separated families would be guided by children’s interests. It provided for joint custody only if both parents agreed. By contrast, according to the new 4800/2021 act, in the case of divorce or the dissolution of a civil partnership, both parents maintain together and equally their parental custody, unless they themselves consensually agree to make a different arrangement (AFEM, 2023, pp. 14–15; Papanagiotou, 2021, p. 131).

In effect, joint custody entails ongoing common decision-making about children's everyday lives which presupposes collaboration and equal power. As the default option in a field riddled with gendered, class, and other social differences, this arrangement often exposes women to gender violence and harassment by their former partners (Papanagiotou, 2021, p. 133). Abusive fathers can remain present in their children's and ex-partners' lives until the final ruling of the court indicting them for abusive behavior (AFEM, 2023, pp. 14–15).

The bill passed into law in the Greek Parliament on 20 May 2021 with the votes only of the MPs of the ruling party (156 out of 300 MPs) minus two female MPs of New Democracy. Feminist opposition to the law started in September 2020, but mainly from November 2020. NGOs and feminist collectives, supported by a broader cohort of human rights groups, academics, scientists, and lawyers, formed a loose but extensive front against the bill (AFEM, 2023, p. 13; Committee for Family Law, 2021a).

Although a “men's rights movement” has existed in Greece for more than 20 years, it was rather marginal and tiny. The bill boosted its expansion through the creation of active and well-networked groups such as ‘Active Dads’ [‘Energoi Mpampades’].³ These champions of “men's rights” not only advocate for joint custody, they also make a case for the existence of gender-based violence against men, which is allegedly higher in Greece than violence affecting women (Energoi mpampades, 2022a). They call for the inclusion of “parental alienation” in the law against domestic violence (Energoi mpampades, 2022b). The Active Dads group, along with the cognate Joint Custody Association,⁴ are new antifeminist actors linked up with international agencies, such as the International Council of Joint Parenting, and have not been yet researched from this perspective.

The “About Us” page on the Active Dads website states that the group was established at the initiative of a divorced father to “change Family Law for the rights of the children after the divorce of the two parents” (Energoi mpampades, n.d.-a). The other group agitating for joint custody, The Greek Council of Joint Parenting, declares that it is the Greek chapter of the International Council of Joint Parenting (Synepimelia, n.d.-a). Both

³ Ενεργοί μπαμπάδες, <https://www.energoimpampades.gr/>.

⁴ Σύλλογος Συνεπιμέλεια, <https://www.synepimelia.gr/>.

groups have constituted themselves as official non-profit civil organizations.

“New” Antifeminist Practices and Discourses

The mobilization of male groups occasioned by the new law marked a turn in patriarchal reactionary politics, displaying notable new features in the Greek context. To further regressive politics, men’s groups set up a propaganda machine which “bombards” society using every means available to them, funded by ample financial resources from wealthy men (Elliniko Diktyo gia ti Feministiki Aperia 8 March, 2021; Interview, 2023). The male actors pursued well-organized and well-funded campaigns and lobbying efforts, during which they appropriated and distorted gender equality discourses and struggles, deploying them against women. The male groups presented themselves as progressive, advocating for the rule of law and children’s rights, and even appealed to science, drawing on pseudoscientific constructs engineered by the international masculine alt-right.

The Active Dads group appears particularly active, undertaking diverse online and offline campaigns funded by the “kind offers of sympathizers and sensitive people.” They avow that they were consulted by the Greek Parliament on the new bill on joint custody, and they were *the main lobby* in favor of it. After the enactment of the new legislation, they expressed their commitment to continuing the fight until the law is fully implemented (Energoi mpampades, n.d.-a).

Their ongoing advocacy is realized through lobbying with politicians, mainly the right-wing government, “social action,” and the construction of a propaganda machine which enlisted diverse means of communication: their website, press releases, TV and radio spots, social media (Facebook, Instagram), including the creation of a YouTube channel, posters on public transport boards, and online public opinion surveys (Energoi mpampades, n.d.-b; Interview, 2023). Their extensive networking linked up with the government and the then Minister of Justice, with mass media, the police, the justice system, and even the “Greek Mafia” (Interview, 2023).

These organized men’s groups were the steady and privileged interlocutors of the Minister of Justice who introduced the bill, Konstantinos Tsiaras, from the preparatory law-making phase until after the bill was passed. A considerable number of feminist groups argued that men’s lobbies were the real initiators of the legislative reform. By contrast, women’s organizations were systematically excluded from consultation with the

Ministry of Justice, the government, and the parliament (To mov & Elliniko Diktyo, 2021, Ten Women's organizations and collectives, 2020).

Reversing Feminism

The first remarkable “innovation” of this antifeminist offensive lies in the way it replicates and twists feminist, egalitarian, and progressive democratic arguments. Active Dads vindicate men's rights in the name of gender equality, denouncing biases, stereotypes, and “gender-based violence against men.” Hence, they protest “gender-based discriminations” from the standpoint of gender equality, criticizing even local authorities when they provide benefits, such as free holidays, only for mothers who are single parents, excluding men. Such policies are said to offend our country as “the birthplace of democracy and equality of all human beings regardless of gender, color, nationality, religion etc.” (Energoi mpampades, 2022c). Similarly, the feminist opposition to joint custody is questioned on the grounds that it contradicts “fundamental human rights, equal rights and responsibilities of both parents vindicated by the feminist movement” (Kaperoni, 2021).

In this context, they engage in the systematic construction of “fake news” and pseudoscientific truth in ways which resist empirical and logical refutation. They contend that there is growing corporal violence against men, asserting that today incidents of gender-based violence are equally distributed. The putative evidence they provide calls upon European and national research, as well as on videos reporting “24 incidents of corporal violence and homicide by women which took place in Greece” (Energoi mpampades, 2022a).

To make their case practically “irrefutable” they stress several factors which supposedly contribute to suppressing the phenomenon of female abuse. To begin with, “taboos” and “stereotypes” affecting men, who are portrayed as strong and invulnerable, become grounds of discrimination against male victims. Further factors include the scant reporting of such incidents because of male egoism, fear of losing contact with children, and the funding provided to women urging them to report domestic violence. Finally, they call for an end to institutional indifference imposed by some “fanatic and activist female groups” (Energoi mpampades, 2022a).

The rehearsal and reversal of feminist discourses reaches a point of culmination in the counsel they offer to address “domestic violence against men,” which copy-pastes feminist texts, modifying only the gender. They

lay out a series of indicators to help male victims identify domestic violence: the use of abusive speech, the exercise of control over how men spend their money or dress, possessiveness and jealousy, the description of violence as reciprocal and consensual. They raise the “big burning questions”: Why is there no shelter to protect men/fathers who are victims? Why does the state fund only female organizations? (Charbea, 2023).

In this discursive frame of “women’s violence” their acid antifeminism and misogyny come sharply into view. In January 2024, Active Dads provided a retrospective account of their campaign. In 2020–2021, “thousands of sidelined dads” fought against “vested female interests” which never conceded defeat. The same “irrational voices,” the “so-called neo-feminists,” now aim at devastating the male sex by promoting reforms in the penal code on domestic violence which enshrine gender discrimination by implying that only men perpetrate domestic violence. They assert that “men are abused on a daily basis, nearly 80% of all suicides are committed by men, and mothers abuse their children three times more than men” (Energoi mpampades, 2024a).

Children’s Rights and Welfare

Concern with children’s rights and well-being is also central to their frames of reasoning. Their starting point is that the “harmonious psychosomatic and emotional growth of children” calls for the presence of both parents (Energoi mpampades, n.d.-b). Allegedly, until 2021, courts did not apply the law regarding the communication of children with the parent who has not been awarded custody, failing to protect children’s rights (Energoi mpampades, 2020). Hence, they advocate for the rights of children, claiming that joint custody, equal time between parents, and alternate residence is the sole way of protecting children’s rights and their normal development (Energoi mpampades, n.d.-c).

In a blunt antifeminist vein, they report statistical findings based on the national SOS line for child abuse and the NGO Child’s Smile according to which the perpetrators of violence against children are overwhelmingly women and the incidents of female violence against children have risen dramatically in recent years (Energoi mpampades, 2021, 2023a).

Evoking children’s welfare is a standard-bearing strategy of contemporary antifeminism and anti-genderism across the globe. Its reiteration by

the Active Dads pressure group in this particular campaign speaks volumes for their international networks and bearings. In Judith Butler's words,

There is hardly an instance of the anti-gender movement that does not claim to be saving the children from harm. The movement finds, stokes, and organizes that fear wherever it can. The tactic is clever and effective, for few things could be more personal and singular (Butler, 2024, p. 249)

Pseudoscience

The theme of "parental alienation" is pivotal to their argument for joint custody. This discursive motif spotlights the pseudoscientific and seemingly "objective" mantle of this antifeminist intervention, as well as its connection with the English-speaking alt-right since they reference international sources.

To illustrate the main points, in a re-post of an article by Bill Eddy they elaborate on parental alienation. This is defined as the resistance of a child to be with one ("rejected") parent and its strong preference for the other parent, in case of highly intense divorces or separation, when the rejected parent "has done nothing to generate this rejection." The parent who generates parental alienation is conflictual, narcissistic, antisocial, and is bent on accusing the other parent. This accounts for the highly dismissive attitude of children aged 9–13 (Energoi mpampades, 2023b).

The vitriolic antifeminism infusing this discourse is brought into relief through its explicit articulation of the "malicious mother." Parental alienation, introduced by Richard Gardner in 1985, is associated with the "divorce-related malicious mother syndrome" defined by the psychologist Ira Turkat in 1995. In a long, apparently "clinical" account of this "syndrome," its multiple adverse effects are laid out. Malicious mothers poison children's souls. They "campaign" to demean the other parent and to turn their children against him as a way of punishing him. Such women are manipulative, unable to love anyone, harshly and systematically abusing their children (Energoi mpampades, 2022d).

To counter arguments that parental alienation is a pseudo-theory, they reference "scientific literature" and its international evidence (Kaperoni, 2021; Synepimelia, n.d.-b). Elsewhere, they concede that the use of the term "parental alienation syndrome" is no longer accepted by official medical associations, but they call on people to remain open-minded and search for the root causes when a child dismisses one parent (Energoi

mpampades, 2022c). Further “evidence” for parental alienation is provided through “personal testimonies” of people narrated in videos or text by grandmothers, aunts, fathers etc. (Energoi mpampades, 2024b).

Appeal to science more broadly is salient in their discursive repertoire. The Greek Council on Joint Parenting highlights its putative scientific, professional, “state-of-the-art” approach to mandatory joint custody. Hence, in May 2023, it hosted the 6th International “Council” (sic) on Joint Parenting, in Athens. This aimed at

the promotion of scientific knowledge regarding the needs and the best interest of children [...]. It has gathered a big database on new research [...] and seeks to incorporate this scientific knowledge in scientific knowledge and professional practice. (Synepimelia, 2023)

The Feminist Counter-Mobilization

The feminist counteraction was swift, multimodal, and multi-layered. It targeted civil society at large as well as national and international institutions, directly taking on the men’s lobby.

In November 2020, 18 women’s NGOs called on the government to withdraw the bill, enshrine consensual joint custody, and set up family courts and social work services. Twenty-four NGOs and feminist collectives proceeded to form the Committee for Family Law and Consensual Joint Custody, while a broader cohort of human rights groups, academics, scientists, the Union of Judges and Attorneys, and family law experts coalesced to rigorously contest the bill (AFEM, 2023, p. 13; Committee for Family Law, 2021a).

The battery of feminist strategies and actions was manifold, multi-level, and wide-ranging. The repertoire featured feminist alliance-building and extensive networking with broader supportive forces: political parties, scientific organizations, trade unions, local government, and international organizations and institutions. It involved, moreover, pickets, protests and 8 March demonstrations in several cities. Feminist actors conducted, furthermore, communication and information campaigns, both national and international, online and offline. These employed various means, such as open letters to politicians and institutions, including the Prime Minister and the Minister of Justice, meetings with MPs of all parties, local meetings with political parties and civil society actors, reaching out to feminist organizations and institutions in Europe, and the creation of the website

No to Mandatory Joint Custody. Finally, an open public petition was made, collecting signatures against the bill (Committee for Family Law, 2021a; Eighty-one Organizations, 2021). A large bulk of this activism unfolded in the digital sphere due to the constraining circumstances of the pandemic but also due to the attempts made by the male groups to terrorize women in dispute with their divorced partners; the digital realm was considered safer (Interview, 2023).

The thrust of the feminist argument was that the law is regressive and toxic. It is the outcome of lobbying by fathers' pressure groups which further their own interests to the detriment of children's welfare. In effect, the law reinforces the power of father-master for the first time after 1983, when the first progressive Family Law was enacted. This change, feminists claimed, is likely to amplify domestic violence and reduce or abolish children's alimony. The reform has been condemned as the "worst assault" on the feminist movement undertaken by any government after the restoration of democracy in 1974–1975, as the government starts implementing the antifeminist and reactionary agenda of the international far right (Committee for Family Law, 2021a; To mov, 2021).

Dissecting the Feminist Strategies

In greater detail, we can see a diversity of more specific discursive-practical strategies which informed the manifold campaigns and actions of the feminist responses on this occasion. A starting point of the feminist counteraction was to politically identify and denounce joint custody law and fathers' groups as a far-right initiative and propaganda machine, which belongs to a broader far-right or "alt-right" misogynous "men's movement." The new "fathers groups" are thus said to represent the contribution of the Greek right to the frontal assault on women's rights launched by the International of neoliberal "obscurantists" and "racists," who are well organized and coordinated. This global "counter-revolution," whose leaders include Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, and Viktor Orbán, assails the feminist movement and emblematic women's conquests such as the right to abortion, legislation against gender-based violence, and gender studies (Mitrailia, 2021).

To promote such regressive politics in Greece, the men's groups have set up a propaganda machine which "bombards" society by deploying every means made available to them through ample financial resources provided by rich men (Elliniko Diktyo gia ti Feministiki Aperia 8 March 2021, access 29/2/2024; Interview, 2023).

Further specific strategies included diverse forms of reasoning which demonstrated the patriarchal bias of the law; emotional narratives; digital wars; a pronounced concern with children which reversed men's argument; and making counter-demands.

*Argument and Evidence-Based Reason: Demonstrating
the Patriarchal Bias and Regress*

The feminist contestation put forward diverse arguments and sought to provide compelling evidence in order to expose the law as a form of regress and vengeance against women which reinforces patriarchy and men's control over their (former) female partners, negating the seeming progressive and egalitarian character of the reform (Synelefsi 8 Marti, 2020; Interview, 2023).

To illustrate, the feminist rejoinder highlighted international experience on the topic in France, Italy, and Spain, which discloses the inegalitarian direction of the bill and how "joint custody is often in effect the means to maintain control by the violent former partner" (Synelefsi 8 Marti, 2020). Furthermore, the patriarchal bias was brought to light by noting the exclusion of women's organizations from the law-making processes, as well as the massive opposition of the feminist movement and the parliamentary law-making committee to the new Family Law (Elliniko Diktyo gia ti Feministiki Apergia 8 March, 2021).

Finally, the bill is said to reproduce the "paternal" heteronormative model of nuclear family, riding roughshod over the rights of same-sex couples. Hence, a bill which is not inclusionary regarding diverse family models is antidemocratic rather than "modernizing" (Synelefsi 8 Marti, 2020).

The evidence adduced against the bill included state statistics about violence against women which demonstrate that the relationship between victim and perpetrator is mainly a relationship between husband and wife. Since the law does not reckon with domestic violence and does not require the consensus of both parents, legally imposed joint custody will force women and their children to remain in contact with the abusive context (Synelefsi 8 Marti, 2020).

Deconstructive Reason: Debunking Misinformation

In a sub-sector of the former operation, feminist actors set out to systematically refute the misinformation and fake news on which the government and the lobbies' propaganda relied. Providing concrete evidence through references to legislation, international conventions, etc., they dismissed as false claims the assertions that the pre-existing Family Law rules out joint custody; that it disregards gender equality and children's interests; and that joint custody is required by international conventions and EU law, etc. (Fifteen Women's organizations, 2020).

In this enterprise of debunking and exposing the propaganda machine, the illicit methods, and the extensive networking of male groups, *investigative journalism* was also enlisted. Among others, many reports and videos of the journalists' collective The Manifold dismantled the construct of "parental alienation" evoked by the Active Dads lobby, illuminating how a minority of "men's rights" advocates hijacked the legislative process to push their antifeminist agenda using their connections with the government (The Manifold Files, 2021). Parental alienation has been dismissed by GREVIO, among others, as "scientifically unsound" and "highly dangerous" (Fifteen Women's organizations, 2020).

Legal Reason: In Violation of International Law and Conventions, Eroding Justice

The feminist case emphasized also how the new legislation effectively contravenes the Constitution and international law and conventions, including the Istanbul Convention, European Directive 2012/29 on the Rights of Victims, and the UN Convention on Children's Rights. Furthermore, it is bound to spark conflicts in courts, thus further harming the children of divorced parents. The law curtails in effect the courts' freedom to rule according to the particular circumstances at hand, and does not foster a culture of consensus for the resolution of differences between divorced parents (Eighty-one Organizations, 2021).

Emotional Narrative: Storytelling

The plight of mothers with divorced children and abusive former partners has been further illuminated by way of storytelling that narrates the stories of women struggling to escape an abusive relationship and to save their

children. This gender-based violence affecting divorced partners with children is bound to rise when ongoing and close contact between them becomes obligatory by default (Samou & Vovou, 2020).

“Children First”: Detrimental to Children’s Rights and Welfare

As noted above, raising the alarm about children’s integrity and welfare is a key strategy of the antifeminist International, rehearsed by the Greek males’ movement in the case of their campaign for family law reform and for men’s rights, more broadly. Feminist interventions took on directly this emotional and discursive scheme, inverted it, and turned it against its antifeminist users. They detailed, thus, the adverse effects of the new family law on children. The law instrumentalizes children, treating them as potentially driven by malicious mothers. Abusive parents who have perpetrated domestic violence or sexual violence or a financial exploitation of sexual life maintain their rights over their children until they are found “definitely” guilty in courts. In the reality of the Greek justice system, this means that abusive parents will have access to children who have suffered violence at their hands for two to five years (Committee for Family Law, 2021b).

Digital Wars

The debunking operation engaged in “digital wars.” A large part of Active Dads’ daily campaigning and the feminist anti-campaign were carried out in the digital sphere, mainly from November 2020 until the end of May and the passage of the new legislation. To illustrate, a key plank in the ministers’ and Active Dads propaganda was that public opinion is overwhelmingly in favor of mandatory joint custody. The outcome of the on-line public deliberation on the bill allegedly attested to this majoritarian support. Feminist research conducted data analysis and revealed that this result was rigged as 63% of the positive comments were copy-pasted and were repeated hundred of times through the use of bots (Trompoukis, 2021).

Going on the Offensive: Counter-Demands

The feminist pushback proceeded also by way of advancing counter-demands, starting with the withdrawal of the bill, or the repeal of the law after it was voted, and moving on to the enactment of consensual joint

custody and the improvement of justice by establishing family courts and mandatory social research to guide the courts' judgment. Furthermore, the government was urged to set up a new and adequate body of family social workers, which would be aided by psychologists and would collaborate with court mediators. Finally, single-parent families should be supported, and special benefits should be provided to lower-income divorced parents who have custody of children (Fifteen Women's organizations, 2020).

In sum, the feminist counter-charge to the patriarchal offensive was sharp, multimodal, and multi-layered, undertaking an extensive enterprise of deconstruction and exposure in discourse and campaigning. It perceptively identified a wide range of opponents, encompassing the government, the "hateful" lobby of the Active Dads inspired by the alt-right, the really harmed fathers who cannot improve communication with their former partners, a group of women who have misunderstood the law as advancing gender equality, and all those who chose not to listen. To cancel the regressive legislation, feminist agency sought to forge a broad-based bloc of allied feminist forces, coalescing with the pan-European and global feminist movement, aspiring to join forces with trade unions and the workers' movement. It extended solidarity in courts to women and children who are victims of inequality and violence, and it evoked international conventions (Committee for Family Law, 2021a; To mov, 2021).

Yet, the battle was lost, for the time being at least. Feminist activists were faced with several critical constraints and challenges. In addition to the pandemic, even other feminists were slow to grasp the point of the bill and its predicaments. Men's lobbying was powerful, well organized, and well funded. It exploited extensive links with the government, the police, and even justice. It also used mafia-style methods to terrorize women in dispute with their partners who were thus afraid to publicly oppose the bill (Interview, 2023). This outcome points arguably to the limits of a counter-hegemonic intervention which lacks both adequate institutional clout and broader outreach in civil society, in a field where there are no ingrained ideas and acquired reflexes in hegemonic common sense.

ANTI-ABORTION CAMPAIGNS

Another set of antifeminist incursions since 2019 were anti-abortion campaigns led by a dedicated anti-abortion organization (www.afistemnaziso.gr), the Greek Orthodox Church, civil society, and political actors. The 1st

Panhellenic Conference of Fertility and Reproductive Autonomy marked a point of culmination for both the anti-abortion front and the feminist resistance.

In all the different instances of anti-abortion initiatives, the feminist rebuttal was both prompt and effective. Again, it took place largely in the digital sphere and social media. It encompassed widespread, spontaneous, non-coordinated reactions of multiple actors, ranging from feminist organizations to political parties and ordinary citizens. The discursive frames affirmed women's right to self-determination, and voiced repulsion at the regress attempted by the attacks on this right.

The first related incident occurred in 2019 when the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church introduced the Unborn Child day, celebrated initially on the first Sunday after Christmas. According to sources connected with the Church, it was the foregoing anti-abortion network, called *Let me live* in Greek and made up of 19 Greek Orthodox unions in Athens and the Greek Union of Multi-child Families, that had called upon the Church to establish this celebration. The organization states that they are faithful to the Gospel and that unborn children are human beings "in the image of God" who deserve unconditional protection since their conception (Lakasas, 2019, Orthodoxy News Agency, 2020).

On its first celebration in December 2019, a sports newspaper published a photo with a fetus and an anti-abortion text on its front page, triggering multiple individual reactions against this "terrifying regress" on social media, mainly Twitter/X (News247.gr, 2019). In 2022, the Church moved the Unborn Child day to 8 September, when the birthdate of Virgin Mary is celebrated. On that occasion, feminist collectives staged a protest in front of the Athens Cathedral (Vovou, 2022).

In January 2020, the foregoing anti-abortion organization under-signed posters put up on noticeboards at several stations of the Athens' Underground Train. They featured a fetus, and read "Did you know that since the 18th day its heart beats? [...] Choose life" (Orthodoxy News Agency, 2020). Again, an avalanche of spontaneous immediate responses on social media followed suit, posting pictures of the poster and commenting on "social regress" (Spyropoulou, 2020). Feminist organizations put up online posters affirming that abortion is an entrenched right and using mottos such as "My mind, my body, my choice [...] Movement of born women" (To mov, 2020). Later on, several papers published in feminist journals drew attention to the anti-abortion campaign as an enterprise of social regression, and debunked its biological and other arguments (Mpampatzimopoulou, 2022).

Offline, newspaper articles publicized the massive reactions against the event, and members of the center-left PASOK and the left-leaning SYRIZA parties voiced their opposition, upholding women's right to free choice which was enacted in Greece in 1986. As an almost instant effect of this battery of scattered but massive reactions, the Minister of Transport and Infrastructure denied any responsibility and forced the company managing the Underground to remove the anti-abortion posters immediately (Spyropoulou, 2020).

The First "Fertility Conference"

In the sequence of these recent anti-abortion campaigns, the event which generated most heated debate was the organization of the 1st Panhellenic Conference of 'Fertility and Reproductive Autonomy: Limits and options' that would be held in the city of Ioannina in north-western Greece. It was launched at the initiative of a group of male gynecologists at Greek universities, along with the "Greek Association of Reproductive Medicine of Athens." The conference would take place in 2–4 July 2021 with the participation of university professors and representatives of the Orthodox Church. Its aim would be to foreground the issue of low fertility, to propose remedies, and to help restore the model of the nuclear family.

Indeed, in the preliminary program, the organizing committee construes "low fertility" as a "plague" that "threatens to eliminate our nation." The state and its agencies should disseminate the message that giving birth to children and creating a family is the "joy of life" and the "financial security of a state with prospects which does not decay but flourishes, [...] a state which must [...] focus on the central pillar, the couples at an age of reproduction." The conference would be placed under the auspices of state institutions including the President of the Republic, the Public Broadcaster (ERT), the Region of Epirus, and the General Secretariat of Family Policy and Gender Equality (Iatrikos Syllogos Ioanninon, 2021).

Publicity for it included a video in which a woman apologized for opting for studies and career rather than children. Women appeared as integral to a process of reproduction bearing on public finance. This sparked massive opposition and expressions of revulsion in mass media. The digital sphere was again the space where public uproar erupted and spread,

engendering political effects that reached the offline public realm and warded off the antifeminist initiative. Public figures sponsoring the conference or participating in it voiced their discontent, taking issue particularly with the sexist content of the video which portrayed women as reproductive machines, and withdrew from the conference (CNN Greece, 2021).

As a result of fierce and rapid reaction by feminist groups and the opposition, state support was withheld, and the conference was cancelled. The organizing committee announced in a Facebook post that the conference would not take place “on account of the negative reaction of social media” to a video that was “misunderstood.” Under the video, hundreds of social media users uttered their intense discontent, characterizing it as “incriminating, racist, stereotypical and regressive” (Kathimerini, 2021).

Feminist texts dwelled on the “incredibly fast reflexes of feminist organizations, human rights activists and a sizeable part of digital Press” (Galanopoulou, 2021), and highlighted the fact that “the feminist discourse of social media achieved a major victory: the cancellation of the 1st Panhellenic Fertility Conference [...] organized by male gynaecologists doing business with IVF which had, however, an unprecedented institutional and communication framing” (Karydaki, 2021). Extensive online reactions gave visibility to the misogynous elements of a presumably scientific “Fertility and Reproductive Autonomy Conference,” prompting people to take a stance on “regressive politics masked under a pseudoscientific approach to reproduction” (Paralika, 2021).

However, the group of actors brought together around this event is still operative. Hence, a “second,” but much downsized, version of the conference was eventually held online in November 2021, sponsored only by the Parents’ School and the Open University of Katerini (Galanopoulou, 2021).

Feminist actors remain steadily alert to reactionary initiatives bearing on abortion and reproductive rights. Among others, the feminist collective Women’s Assembly 8 March in Thessaloniki, northern Greece, has been decorating every Christmas since 2020 a “feminist Christmas tree” which it installs in the central Aristotelous Square. Posted on the tree are feminist wishes and messages: “May you live many years, safe, without oppression and repression,” “Whoever cares for unborn children, should take care first of refugee children,” “Solidarity to our sisters in Poland” (Synelefsi Gynaikon 8 Marti, 2020).

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

The antifeminist and anti-gender backlash in 2010–2023 unfurled under the dire circumstances of the socio-economic downturn and the political crisis which beset Greece from 2010 onwards. Insecurity caused by unemployment and poverty challenged established masculinities constructed around work. The general social dislocation under the austerity regime gave rise to a broader “gender trouble.” This spurred gender violence as a performance of masculinity in an endangered patriarchal context, which was also experienced as a lethal threat to the “nation.” Hence the reaffirmation of nationalism through the reaffirmation of male power, the traditional family structure, and the Greek Orthodox Church—the historical pillars of Greek patriarchal nationalism (Kosyfologou, 2018, pp. 40–42). The crisis of aggressive masculinity brought about a rigidification of gender hierarchies, deeper conservatism, and a further normalization of sexism which was amplified by the rise of the far right and the alt-right (Karamesini, 2015, pp. 239–278; Vaiou, 2021, pp. 185–187).

In addition to gender equality and LGBT+ advances which occasioned conservative reactions, a number of distinct events constituted the focus of antifeminist action and discourse, such as the persecution and stigmatization of HIV-positive women in 2012, the 2021 law on “mandatory joint custody,” and campaigns against legal abortion from 2019 onwards. The latter can be situated in the politics of the conservative shift which seeks to legitimize neoliberal austerity and the shrinking of the welfare state by rendering women responsible for the development and the care of the “nation.” Women should assume the burdens of social welfare by re-assuming their traditional roles of child bearers and caregivers for children and the elderly. Hence, strategic attacks on the right to abortion are integral to a nationalist conservatism which aims at confining women and nurturing in them feelings of responsibility and guilt for the welfare of the nation (Interview, 2024).

Traditional agents of antifeminism—the conservative Right and the Greek Orthodox Church—were reinforced by newcomers, including first the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn and, from 2015 onwards, old and alt-right politicians and media personalities propagating antifeminist discourse, the male “movement” for joint custody and against “women’s violence,” the “Let me live” campaign, a diverse chorus which coalesced around the 1st Panhellenic Conference of Fertility, right-wing journals, blogs, news

websites, and newspapers and radio stations, along with non-organized groups and individuals in civil society.

Their repertoire of action evinced old and novel patterns: physical and verbal assaults, press releases, radio and TV shows, the pulpit, advertisements in public transport, online campaigns, and, more broadly, the systematic use of social media (Facebook, Twitter/X, websites), lobbying with right-wing politicians and the organization of conferences.

Antifeminist politics and discourse in 2010–2022 call for further rigorous exploration as existing research is poor and fragmentary. The overview of the antifeminist backlash offered in this chapter and the deeper “dive” into two critical battlegrounds in recent years could warrant a number of initial claims for antifeminist and feminist politics in the last decade or so.

The patriarchal regress forms part of a broader conservative turn in Greek society since 2015. In addition to the multiple public manifestations of traditionalist sexist politics, the conservative shift is evident in the two consecutive victories of the right-wing New Democracy in national elections since 2019. New Democracy currently promotes key planks of the antifeminist agenda. Moreover, three extremist nationalist and anti-feminist parties entered the parliament in 2023. The left-leaning SYRIZA party, which held office in 2015–2019, has suffered repeated electoral defeats, while the broader left and the center-left have been paralyzingly fragmented since 2019. Progressive social movements have recessed. In this respect, Greek politics and society are aligned with the global rise of an authoritarian, xenophobic, anti-immigrant, and anti-gender right, coming in older and alt-right variants, which has spread from Javier Milei’s Argentina and Donald Trump’s US to Vladimir Putin’s Russia, Viktor Orbán’s Hungary, and Marin Le Pen’s France, to name a few.

According to Colin Crouch (2020), in an era when the “horizon of expectations” seems narrow and bleak across the globe, “pessimistic nostalgia” has become a dominant mindset animating extreme-right parties and “right-wing populism” more broadly. Pessimistic nostalgia over aspects of a cherished world that have been lost or are currently menaced, and the politicization of such nostalgia by conservative actors, nourishes collective dispositions of defensiveness, exclusion, and violence against perceived “intruders.” Nostalgia is constructed politically as a “zero-sum game” in which the space for “our people” is shrinking. We thus need to defend our vital space against putative intruders who today include migrants, global financial forces, but also women and LGBT+ subjects who threaten traditional masculinity. These “enemies” become the objects

of resentment and rage by those who feel deprived of the “happy life” of the past (Crouch, 2020, pp. 91–97).

The two instances of feminist counter-offensive to new antifeminist initiatives on which this chapter has dwelled provide critical insights into the stakes and the forces of socio-political struggles for gender equality in the gloomy landscape of regressive politics today. On the one hand, a swarm of uncoordinated, yet swift and diffuse, resistances against challenges to enshrined basic rights, such as the right to abortion, can attain their objective of warding off the assault and upholding feminist conquests. A multitude of online and offline actions, such as posting critical comments on antifeminist videos on YouTube or defacing antifeminist posters, can bring about the wished-for effect when they fall back on positions which have been conquered decades ago and are well ingrained in the hegemonic political culture of contemporary democracy, including the “European” right (Interview, 2024). In this case, a multiplicity of dispersed, spontaneous reactions can immediately activate established reflexes in mainstream politics and civil society, forcing the assailants to retreat.

The failure, on the other hand, of the organized and multi-layered confrontation between allied feminist forces and the new men’s “movement” around the law on “mandatory joint custody” sheds light on new challenges for counter-hegemonic contestation in favor of gender equality and beyond. Although any claims advanced about this battle should reckon with the limitations imposed on collective action by the COVID lockdown, it can hardly be denied that a multiplicity of feminist actors coalesced and waged a multifarious struggle, online and offline, deploying all means at their disposal in quite compelling ways. This feminist mobilization was arguably an instance of contemporary democratic alter-politics that welds together opposition with proposition, coupling (a) street politics and protests with (b) engagement with established institutions and (c) positive demands as well as long-term visions and strategies of remaking society at large. Straddling the reform or revolution divide, the practices of alter-politics tend to organize in grassroots and bottom-up ways, while also addressing institutional actors and structures, and combining local action with international alliances (Dixon, 2014; De Angelis, 2017).

The antifeminist campaign was carried out by well-organized male lobbies and vested economic interests. It deployed the insidious communicative strategies of the international alt-right, which appropriates the discourse of rights and equality, vesting its interventions with seemingly neutral or progressive, legalistic, and pseudoscientific mantles. In addition

to this misleading frame, the legislative initiative was rather technical and specialized in ways which could hardly trigger the critical reflexes of existing political culture and common sense. Crucially, it relied upon the institutional power of a resolute and stable conservative government. All these tactical and structural components make up an effective strategy for the old and the alt- right politics of regress, which should be grasped thoroughly as such. Successful opposition-cum-proposition in an egalitarian key should arguably build upon the compound counter-hegemonic action pursued by the feminist movement in this case, reinforcing it by effectively forging a broad-based political coalition which brings together diverse social actors, including trade unions and schools, and allied political forces in the state and government.

REFERENCES

- AFEM. (2023). *Greece: Mandatory shared custody for all children in breach of the Istanbul Convention. A shadow report by AFEM in view of the upcoming evaluation of Greece by Grevio*. Grevio.
- Afouxenidis, A., & Petridis, P. (2023). Discourses and politics of the far-right on social media. *SocArXiv Papers*. <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/kj5ab>
- Anastasiadou, M., & Samara, J. (2022). ‘Where are the equal rights?’ Far-right women challenging gender equality and human rights in Greece. *DiGeSt - Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies*, 9(2), 8–25. <https://doi.org/10.21825/digest.81849>
- Athanasiou, A. (2017). To na ginesai feministria os kritiki epitelestikotita tou politikou. In D. Vaiou & A. Psarra (Eds.), *Ennoiologiseis kai praktikes tou feministrou. Metapolitefsi kai ‘meta’* (pp. 19–32). Hellenic Parliament Foundation.
- Athanasiou, A., & Papanikolaou, D. (2020). Introduction: ‘Pes to onoma tis’: I queer mnimi os kritiki tou parontos. In A. Athanasiou, G. Gkougkousis, & D. Papanikolaou (Eds.), *Queer politiki/dimosia mnimi. Trianta keimena gia ton Zak* (pp. 9–27). Rosa Luxemburg Foundation.
- Butler, J. (2024). *Who’s afraid of gender?* Allen Lane.
- Charbea, I. (2023). H via kata ton andron oloena kai ayxanetai i apokalyptetai. *Energoi Mpampades*. Retrieved February 21, 2024, from <https://www.energoimpampades.gr/h-via-kata-ton-andron-oloena-kai-ayxanetai-i-apokalyptetai/>
- CNN Greece. (2021, June 14). Synedrio gonimotitas: Akyrothike meta ton salo gia to diafimistiko spot. *CNN Greece*. Retrieved March 6, 2024, from <https://www.cnn.gr/ellada/story/269945/synedrio-gonimotitas-akyrothike-meta-ton-salo-gia-to-diafimistiko-spot>
- Committee for Family Law and Consensual Shared Custody. (2021a, May 26). Purreios Niki tis Kuvernisis. *Press release*. Retrieved February 27, 2024, from <https://tomov.gr/2021/05/26/pyrreios-niki-tis-kyvernisis/>

- Committee for Family Law and Consensual Shared Custody. (2021b, May 16). Ametaklita kai oristika ochi sto nomoschedio gia tin paramorfosi tou oikogeneiakoy dikaioy. *Press release*. Retrieved March 1, 2024, from <https://tomov.gr/2021/05/16/ametaklita-oristika-ochi-nomoschedio-tin-paramorfosi-oikogeneiakoy-dikaioy/>
- Crouch, C. (2020). *Post-democracy after the crises*. Polity.
- De Angelis, M. (2017). *Omnia sunt communia*. Zed Books.
- Dixon, C. (2014). *Another politics: Talking across today's transformative movements*. University of California Press.
- Eighty-one organizations. (2021, May 16). Ekklisi na aposyrete to nomoschedio poy kathista tin synepimelia ypochreotiki gia ola ta paidia stin Ellada. *Petition*. Retrieved March 4, 2024, from <https://tomov.gr/2021/05/16/ekklisi-na-aposyrete-to-nomoschedio-poy-kathista-tin/>
- Elliniko Diktyo gia ti Feministiki Apergia 8 March. (2021, January 28). Ochi stin peraitero ischyropoisi tis patriarchias. *Press release*. Retrieved February 29, 2024, from <https://tomov.gr/2021/01/28/ochi-stin-peraitero-ischyropoisi-tis-patriarchias/>
- Energoi mpampades. (2020, October 2). To dikaioma epikoinonias ton paidion me ton mi echonta tin epimeleia gonea exakolouthei na min prostateyetai para tin riti diatixi nomoy. *Press release*. Retrieved February 20, 2024, from <https://www.energoimpampades.gr/to-dikaioma-epikoinonias-ton-paidion-me-ton-mi-echonta-tin-epimeleia-gonea-exakoloythei-na-min-prostateyetai-para-tin-riti-diatixi-nomoy/>
- Energoi mpampades. (2021, June 3). Panelladika statistika stoixeia gia to etos 2020 pou aforoun tin kakopoiisi ton paidion. *Press release*. Retrieved February 20, 2024, from <https://www.energoimpampades.gr/kakopoiisi-paidion/>
- Energoi mpampades. (2022a, October 12). I via den echei fylo. *Press release*. Retrieved May 7, 2024, from <https://www.energoimpampades.gr/i-via-den-echei-fylo/>
- Energoi mpampades. (2022b, November 7). Entaksi tou orou 'Goniki Apoxenosi' sto ypo anamorfosi thesmiko plaisio gia tin antimetopisi tis endooikogeneiakis vias'. *Public letter*. Retrieved May 7, 2024, from <https://www.energoimpampades.gr/goniki-apoxenosi-sto-ypo-anamorfosi-thesmiko-plaisio-gia-tin-antimetopisi-tis-endooikogeneiakis-vias/>
- Energoi mpampades. (2022c, July 6). Diamartyria pros ton Dimo Larisas. *Opinion letter*. Retrieved February 23, 2024, from <https://www.energoimpampades.gr/diamartyria-pros-ton-dimo-larisas/>
- Energoi mpampades. (2022d, November 3). Syndromo kakovoylis miteras kai gonikis apoxenosis. *Opinion article*. Retrieved February 23, 2024, from <https://www.energoimpampades.gr/syndromo-kakovoylis-miteras-kai-gonikis-apoxenosis/>
- Energoi mpampades. (2022e, June 14). Goniki apoxenosi: I Psychologia ton Diarrigmenon Scheseon goneon-paidion, by R. A. Warshak (Greek transla-

- tion). *Opinion article*. Retrieved February 22, 2024, from <https://www.energoimpampades.gr/goniki-apoxenosi-i-psychologia-ton-goneon-paidion/>
- Energoi mpampades. (2023a). Kakopoiiseis paidion statistika apo to chamogelo toy paidioy. Retrieved February 20, 2024, from <https://www.energoimpampades.gr/kakopoiiseis-paidion-statistika-apo-to-chamogelo-toy-paidioy/>
- Energoi mpampades. (2023b). I goniki apoxenosi kai o egkefalos toy paidioy. Retrieved February 23, 2024, from <https://www.energoimpampades.gr/i-goniki-apoxenosi-kai-o-egkefalos-toy-paidioy/>
- Energoi mpampades. (2024a, January 4). Gia tin diavouleusi toy ypourgeiou dikaiosynis. *Press release*. Retrieved February 21, 2024, from <https://www.energoimpampades.gr/deltio-typoy-energon-mpampadon-gia-tin-diavoyleysi-toy-ypourgeio-dikaiosynis/>
- Energoi mpampades. (2024b, January 31). Einai telika 'psydotheoria' I goniki apoxenosi???. *Opinion article*. Retrieved February 22, 2024, from <https://www.energoimpampades.gr/einai-telika-quot-psydotheoria-quot-i-goniki-apoxenosi/>
- Energoi mpampades. (n.d.-a). About us. *Energoi Mpampades*. Retrieved February 19, 2024, from <https://www.energoimpampades.gr/about-us/>
- Energoi mpampades. (n.d.-b). Skopos-apostoli. *Energoi Mpampades*. Retrieved February 20, 2024, from <https://www.energoimpampades.gr/skopos-apostoli/>
- Energoi mpampades. (n.d.-c). Sychnes erotiseis. *Energoi Mpampades*. Retrieved February 22, 2024, from <https://www.energoimpampades.gr/sychnes-erotiseis/>
- Farris, S. R. (2017). *In the name of women's rights: The rise of femonationalism*. Duke University Press.
- Fifteen Women's Organizations. (2020, November 27). Na papsei kathe epemvasi sto oikogeneiako dikαιο. *Petition*. Retrieved February 27, 2024, from <https://tomov.gr/2020/11/27/na-papsei-epemvasi-oikogeneiako-dikαιο-psifisma-15-gynaikion/>
- Fountedaki, K. (2024, March 26). Joint children's custody and security. Presentation at the Marangopoulos Foundation for Human Rights event on the GREVIO report on Greece, Athens.
- Galanopoulou, Ch. (2021). Synedrio gonimotitas Vol. 2: Epistrefei pio kits kai to idio misogyniko -Oi omilites. *Ampa. Lifo*. Retrieved March 11, 2024, from <https://ampa.lifo.gr/featured/synedrio-gonimotitas-vol-2-epistrefei-pio-kits-kai-to-idio-misogyniko-oi-omilites/>
- Iatrikos Syllogos Ioanninon. (2021). Preliminary program. '1st Panhellenic Conference of Fertility and Reproductive Autonomy. Limits and options.' Retrieved January 3, 2024, from <https://www.isioanninon.gr/info/useful-addresses/93-events/2302-...1>
- Interview. (2023, December 27). Interview with three main actors in the campaign against the mandatory joint custody law and for children's rights. Athens.

- Interview. (2024, April 26). Interview with a main actor of the feminist ‘Women’s Assembly 8 March’ in Thessaloniki. Thessaloniki.
- Kanaveli, E. (2016). *Chartografisi tou feministikou kinimatos stin Ellada. Ideologikopolitikes anazitiseis kai I suneisfora tou ston dimosio choro kai logo*. Diotima.
- Kaperoni, M. (2021). Atekmiriotoi ischyrismoi en onomati tou ‘feminismou’ kata tis synepimelias. Retrieved February 24, 2024, from <https://www.energoimpampades.gr/atekmiriotoi-ischyrismoi/>
- Karamesini, M. (2015). Diarthrwitiki krisi kai prosarmogi stin Ellada. In M. Karamesini & J. Rubery (Eds.), *Gynaikes kai litotita. I oikonomiki krisi kai to mellon tis isotitas tw n fylon* (pp. 239–278). Alexandria.
- Karydaki, D. (2021, June 20). Akomi ena feministiko keimeno. *The Press Project*. Retrieved March 6, 2024, from <https://thepressproject.gr/akomi-ena-feministiko-keimeno/>
- Kathimerini. (2021, June 14). Akyrothike to synedrio gonimotitas meta tis sfodres antidraseis. *Kathimerini*. Retrieved March 6, 2024, from <https://www.kathimerini.gr/society/561398371/akyrothike-to-synedrio-gonimotitas-meta-tis-sfodres-antidraseis/>
- Kosyfologou, A. (2018). Oi emfyles diastaseis tou kathestotos litotitas stin Ellada: 2010–2017. *Litotita, emfyli anisotita kai feminismos meta tin krisi*. Rosa Luxemburg Foundation.
- Koulouris, T. (2018). Online misogyny and the alternative right: Debating the undebatable. *Feminist Media Studies*, 18(4), 750–761. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1447428>
- Lakasas, A. (2019, July 27). Imera agennitou paidioy kathierose i iera synodos. *Kathimerini*. Retrieved March 5, 2024, from <https://www.kathimerini.gr/society/1035602/imera-agennitoy-paidioy-kathierose-i-iera-synodos/>
- Michalakeli, A. (2020). I gynaikoktonia ston dimosio logo kai ti dimosia sfaira. In G. Petraki (Ed.), *Gynaikoktonies: Diapistoseis, erotimata kai erotimatika* (pp. 87–96). Gutenberg.
- Michos, I. (2017). Taftotites kai ideologika zitimata sto dimosio logo gia tin epektasi tou symfonou symviosis se omofyla zeugaria. MA Thesis, MA Program in Social Psychology and Psychosocial Interventions, AUTH, Thessaloniki.
- Mitralia, S. (2021, January 10). Me to nomoschedio gia tin ‘ypochreotiki synepimeleia,’ i kyvernisi Mitsotaki sti Diethni toy mysogynismou. *Opinion article*. Retrieved March 4, 2024, from <https://tomov.gr/2021/01/10/to-nomoschedio-tin-ypochreotiki-synepimeleia-kyvernisi-mitsotaki-sti/>
- Mpampatzimopoulou, P. (2022). Oi ektroseis, to emvryo kai i epixeiroumeni ‘koinoniki opisthodromisi’ stin Ellada. *Φεμινιστικά*, 5. <https://feministika.net/ektroseis-embryo-koinoniki-opisthodromisi/>
- News247.gr. (2019, December 29). Imera tou agennitou paidiou. *News247*. Retrieved March 5, 2024, from <https://www.news247.gr/ellada/>

- imera-tou-agennitou-paidiou-oi-antidraseis-sta-social-media-kai-i-apofasi-tis-ieras-sinodou-pou-egine-xana-epikairi/
- Orthodoxia News Agency. (2020, January 13). Kampania gia to agennito paidi sto metro. *Orthodoxia News Agency*. Retrieved March 5, 2024, from <https://www.orthodoxianewsagency.gr/epikairotita/kampania-gia-to-agennito-paidi-sto-metro/>
- Papanagiotou, A. (2021). ‘Synepimeleia’ kai to ‘symferon tou teknu’: Mia feministiki kritiki stis diefthetiseis tis goneikotitas. *φemynιστιγά*, 4, 128–152.
- Paralika, P. (2021, June 13). Epimenoume stin akyrosi tou Synedriou Misogynismou. *To Mov*. Retrieved March 6, 2024, from <https://tomov.gr/2021/06/13/epimenoume-stin-akyrosi-synedriou-misogynismoy/>
- Samou, S., & Vovou, S. (2020, December 6). Istories gamon, diazygion, kakopoiiseon. *To Mov*. Retrieved March 4, 2024, from <https://tomov.gr/2020/12/06/istories-gamon-diazygion-kakopoiiseon/>
- Siapera, E., & Papadopoulou, L. (2023). The affective and political economy of hate journalism: Toxic masculinity, misogyny and homophobia in Greek extreme right-wing media. *The Greek Review of Social Research*, 161, 73–93. <https://doi.org/10.12681/grsr.35010>
- Spyropoulou, M. (2020). Sto agennito paidi: Mia afisa, dekades antidraseis. *Parapolitika*. Retrieved March 5, 2024, from <https://www.parapolitika.gr/ellada/article/1033661/sto-agennito-paidi-mia-afisa-dekades-adidraseis/>
- Synelefsi 8 Marti. (2020, December 10). Ypochreotiki synepimeleia: Giati leme ‘ochi.’ *Press release*. Retrieved February 28, 2024, from <https://tomov.gr/2020/12/10/ypochreotiki-synepimeleia-giati-leme-ochi-synelefsi-8is-marti/>
- Synelefsi Gynaikon 8 Marti. (2020, December 24). Photograph posted on Facebook. Retrieved March 11, 2024, from <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=691284081584228&set=pcb.691285884917381>
- Synepimelia. (2023, May 12). Conclusions. 6th International Council on Shared Parenting. *Press release*. Retrieved February 23, 2024, from <https://www.synepimelia.gr/?p=7091>
- Synepimelia. (n.d.-a). Poioi eimaste. Retrieved February 26, 2024, from https://www.synepimelia.gr/?page_id=52
- Synepimelia. (n.d.-b). 25 Apriliou pagkosmia imera KATA tis gonikis apoxenosis. Retrieved February 22, 2024, from <https://www.synepimelia.gr/?p=6317>
- Ten Women’s Organizations and Collectives. (2020, November 17). Oikogeneiako dikaio-Synepimeleia-Ypomnima Gynaikion Organoseon. *Petition*. Retrieved April 16, 2024, from <https://tomov.gr/2020/11/17/oikogeneiako-dikaio-synepimeleia-ypomnima-gynaikion-organoseon/>
- The Manifold Files. (2021, July 12). In the Name of the Father. *Feature story*. Retrieved April 22, 2024, from <https://themanifoldfiles.org/children-and-state/in-the-name-of-the-father/>

- To mov. (2020, January 14). I apantisi mas! -Ikseres oti? *Poster*. Accessed February 5, 2024, from <https://tomov.gr/2020/01/14/apantisi-mas/>
- To mov. (2021, March 6). 8 Marti: Stin pandimia tis patriarchias apantame me agones. *Press release*. Retrieved February 28, 2024, from <https://tomov.gr/2021/03/06/8-marti-stin-pandimia-tis-patriarchias-apantame-agones/>
- To mov & Elliniko Diktyo gia ti Feministiki Aperia 8 March. (2021, May 12). Kataggelia: Oudepote o Tsiaras syzitise me tis gynaikeies organoseis. *Press release*. Retrieved April 16, 2024, from <https://tomov.gr/2021/05/12/kataggelia-oydepote-o-tsiaras-syzytise-tis-gynaikeies-organoseis/>
- Trompoukis, Th. (2021, July 12). Notheia sti dimosia diavoyleysi. *Reporters United*. Retrieved February 29, 2024, from <https://www.reportersunited.gr/5937/notheia-sti-dimosia-diavoyleysi/>
- Vaiou, Nt. (2021). *I atheati ergasia ton gynaikon sti sygkrotisi tis polis. Opseis tis Athinas meta ti metapolitefsi*. Alexandria.
- Vasilaki, R., & Souvlis, G. (2023). Instrumentalizing gender: From interwar fascism to the Alt Right in Greece. *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, 31(2), 447–466. <https://doi.org/10.1080/25739638.2023.2228066>
- Vovou, S. (2022, September 16). Kato ta cheria, kai ta rasa, apo to dikaioma stin ektrosi. *To Mov*. Retrieved March 5, 2024, from <https://tomov.gr/2022/09/16/kato-ta-cheria-ta-rasa-to-dikaioma-stin/>

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if you modified the licensed material. You do not have permission under this license to share adapted material derived from this chapter or parts of it.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.





“So Common to Score Cheap Points on Being an Antifeminist”: The Rise of Antifeminist and Anti-Gender Mobilizations in Denmark and the Feminist Response

*Andreas Beyer Gregersen, Susi Meret,
and Lise Rolandsen Agustín*

INTRODUCTION

Antifeminism and anti-gender positions have become increasingly significant in Denmark, with a pattern similar to those discernible in other countries, although with context-based variations. These movements, involving diverse groups and individuals, display overlapping rhetoric and actions. While academic studies acknowledge their diversity, a tendency remains to merge these phenomena. Yet a clearer distinction between antifeminism

A. Beyer Gregersen (✉) • S. Meret • L. Rolandsen Agustín
The Department of Politics and Society, Aalborg University, Aalborg, Denmark
e-mail: abg@ikl.aau.dk; meret@dps.aau.dk; lisera@dps.aau.dk

© The Author(s) 2025

R. Smrdelj, R. Kuhar (eds.), *Anti-Gender Mobilizations in Europe and the Feminist Response*, Palgrave Studies in European Political Sociology, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-87693-6_9

229

and anti-gender mobilizations can help to clarify some of the specific development trajectories, roles, and organizational backgrounds of the actors involved, and the influence exerted by international events, cross-country diffusion, and learning patterns. In this chapter, the term anti-gender is used to refer to actors who criticize “gender ideology” and “gender theory” and argue that the concept of gender serves to polarize and divide public opinion. Although relatively new in Denmark, this phenomenon appears to be influenced by international debates and events, including opposition to gender studies as a legitimate and scientific academic field (Meret, 2021). Notably, in 2018, Hungary issued a decree rescinding the accreditation of gender studies programs at two Hungarian universities (Balogh, 2019). On that occasion, the then Deputy Prime Minister, Zsolt Semjén, claimed that gender studies is “an ideology, not a science” (Pető, 2022). But, in recent years, a questioning of the validity of gender and critical race studies has also surfaced within other contexts, such as in France, where politicians in government have warned against the spreading of “Islamism-leftism” in academia, accusing some scholars of promoting a divisive ideology. These accusations echoed French President Emmanuel Macron’s critique of those who racialize social issues, alleging that this contributes to dividing the Republic (BBC, 2021; Fassin, 2024; Stamenkovic, 2022). This chapter argues that these contemporary debates and the anti-gender mobilizations across Europe have also had an impact on the Danish debate, particularly at the political level.

In contrast, antifeminism has a specific historical trajectory and development that is more closely tied to the progress and actions of the Danish feminist movement, including some of its institutionalization patterns and organizational developments in recent decades. In this respect, antifeminism is largely motivated by growing criticism of the feminist project and directed against women’s and LGBT+ organizations. The underlying narrative driving this movement is that the quest for equality for women and other marginalized groups has compromised the basic rights and well-being of men in society. This sentiment draws a parallel with historical injustices faced by women, suggesting that men today are experiencing similar deprivations and injustices. These views are organized and propagated differently by various individuals and groups, yet collectively they reveal a rise in men’s rights activism in a Danish context. This growing movement champions a narrative that criticizes and questions the feminist movement’s interpretations of gender equality, as well as the means to achieve gender equality proposed by feminist actors, encapsulated by the

claim that “gender equality has gone too far.” In this regard, both anti-gender mobilizations and antifeminism signify relatively recent challenges to Danish feminism. Consequently, as we will see, strategies and responses from feminists and the LGBT+ community are currently evolving and being organized.

The Danish context is characterized by a so-called gender-equality paradox regarding the discrepancies between, in particular, the strong support for gender equality within the population and the lack of major policy reforms on gender equality in recent decades (Borchorst & Dahlerup, 2020). This paradox reveals a gap between discourses and political ambitions on the one hand, and practices and concrete legislation on the other. Feminist movements in Denmark have historically had considerable influence on both public policies and cultural developments, but during the 1990s feminist activism and the political focus on gender equality declined. This has changed somewhat in recent years due to renewed feminist mobilization since the emergence of the #MeToo movement and the adoption of new policies, such as the 2018 revision of the equal treatment legislation and the 2020 consent-based rape legislation. However, in general, gender-equality legislation has been driven by the adoption of EU directives, such as the introduction of earmarked paternity leave in 2022 as a right for fathers. One key factor that can help explain such a gender-equality paradox in the Danish context is an exceptionalist discourse that praises Denmark, and other Scandinavian countries, for having already achieved gender equality, implying that there is not much need for further action. Recent studies show that four out of 10 voters agree that gender equality has already been achieved, while 20% of Danish men aged between 18 and 34 years even agree with the statement that gender equality has “gone too far” (Shamshiri-Petersen et al., 2024, pp. 250–254). The latter phrase is also commonly used in antifeminist rhetoric. The percentage of men agreeing with this stance is higher within parties that can be described as populist right-wing, as well as the party Liberal Alliance, which is popular among male youth (see also Askanius & Hartley, 2019; Andersen & Reiermann, 2023).

In our view, the dissemination of more critical views on gender equality in public opinion, particularly among young men, is very likely to be related to the surge in men’s rights activism after the #MeToo movement. Certain right-wing politicians and parties have also contributed to propagating the idea that feminists and LGBT+ activists are threatening freedom of speech through so-called identity politics and wokeness. This

chapter highlights both the similarities and differences between antifeminism and anti-gender activism in Denmark, showing that, while anti-gender mobilizations constitute a relatively new and fragmented phenomenon, mainly engaging a few individual actors with a primary focus on transpersons, antifeminism is more organized and structured within formal and informal groups whose activities and members interconnect to a certain extent.

The chapter is structured into three parts. We start with an overview of antifeminist and anti-gender activism in Denmark, with a specific focus on the surge in men's rights activism sparked by the developments of the #MeToo movement since 2017. We then map and analyze the feminist response to these mobilizations, identifying three main types of reaction by feminists, LGBT+ organizations, and feminist content makers: (1) critique; (2) issue reappropriation; and (3) disengagement. Finally, we conclude by engaging in a discussion on the political avenues for responding to antifeminist and anti-gender mobilizations in Denmark. This entails exploring coordinated and self-reflective approaches that consider the current situation and the significant challenges posed to the feminist movement.

ANTIFEMINIST AND ANTI-GENDER ACTIVITIES AND MOBILIZATION

Resistance to the women's movement in Denmark has historical roots, with early criticism coming from conservative forces and condemning feminist pioneers like Natalie Zahle, Mathilde Fibiger, and Ida Falbe-Hansen. The 1970s saw renewed opposition from national conservative environs, particularly from traditionalists and religious groups, in particular against the Redstockings Movement, representing the second wave of feminism in Denmark (Dahlerup, 1998). More recently, far-right groups have criticized this and later feminist waves as a threat to traditional family values, under which women are primary caregivers and men the breadwinners, a division deemed indispensable for societal stability. Such an approach was articulated, for instance, by the populist right-wing Danish People's Party in the 2002 Principle Programme (Meret & Siim, 2013), where the "family" is defined as comprising husband, wife, and children, and placed at "the core of Danish society"¹ (DF, 2002, p. v). At the same

¹ All Danish texts quoted in the chapter have been translated into English by the authors.

time, the Danish People’s Party criticized the feminist waves of the 1970s for moving away from the “original” goal of equality toward an aggressive defense of (sexual and ethnic) minorities that, if given room, would establish a so-called dictatorship of the minorities (Kildegaard, 2020). Similar expressions of conservative antifeminism were also recorded in the political rhetoric and policy initiatives of the New Right (*Nye Borgerlige*) and sections of the Conservative People’s Party.

While liberal politicians and civil society actors have not uniformly positioned themselves against feminism, there exists a spectrum that encompasses different grades and shades of feminism.² There are, for instance, politicians within the right-wing spectrum who self-identify as liberal feminists, while others within the same party are outspokenly critical of the feminist movement tout court, espousing antifeminist and anti-gender rhetoric. An example is the anti-gender alliance between the MPs Henrik Dahl from Liberal Alliance and Morten Messerschmidt, leader of the Danish People’s Party. Since 2020–2021, both have instigated a political campaign against gender studies and “wokeness.” In their opinion, these are spreading within some academic fields and research, which they argue are characterized by “excessive activism.” While contingent upon individual political stances, this alliance underscores shared ground between liberal and conservative forces on specific issues, such as the critique of so-called identity politics and wokeness, which has been stimulated by debates on gender and academia held in other European countries (Meret, 2021).

Compared to other countries, Denmark has witnessed a subdued approach to conducting anti-gender campaigns and protests. LGB rights—and, to a much more limited extent, transgender rights—have found acceptance among mainstream parties across the political spectrum. Notably, in a rhetorical gesture of recognition, former Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen declared at the 2018 Copenhagen Pride Parade that LGBT+ persons “are Denmark” (Hansen, 2021). Scholars like Breiding Hansen define such rhetoric as *homonationalist* in the sense put forward by Puar (2007), maintaining that advocacy for LGBT+ rights can, at times, become coupled with an overtly nationalist agenda (*ibid.*, p. 65). This narrative has a specific way of being expressed in Denmark, which is often

²In a Danish context, “liberal” refers to a political orientation that is somewhat right-leaning, with an emphasis on individual liberty, the right to private property, and various political freedoms such as freedom of speech.

portrayed as a pioneer country when it comes to tolerance and anti-discrimination, including at the normative level of protecting LGBT+ rights. In this setting, LGBT+ rights are enveloped within an exceptionalist discourse about Denmark “as a model” (which also extends to the other Nordic countries) even more than in the case of gender equality. This framework has been used to frame “others,” in particular Muslims, as acting against Danish democratic values and standards and to bolster the narrative of the Danish exceptionalist gender regime model from which others need to learn.

Anti-gender actors pursue two lines of argument. The first maintains that the increasing emphasis on LGBT+ rights is the result of an ongoing dissolution of societal norms, which undermines traditional gender and sexual identities and threatens biological reproduction. This reasoning stems mainly from the conservative, religious, and ultra-traditionalist right, and some of its content is disseminated through platforms such as *Kontrast* and *Årsskriftet Critique*, but at times also by the Danish Men’s Council. *Kontrast* is a self-declared right-wing online platform regularly publishing opinion pieces by both center-right and far-right politicians and debaters, while *Årsskriftet Critique* is a journal published both in print and partly online with a more intellectual approach and a conservative positioning. Furthermore, public profiles such as that of the biologist Kåre Fog spread this viewpoint through books, social media, and opinion articles (Fog, 2019), emphasizing biological differences between men and women and criticizing those who refute such differences (Fog, 2022).

The second line of argument is linked to terms such as “political correctness,” “identity politics,” and “wokeness/wokeism.”³ The concept of “identity politics” is most often employed in discussions about LGBT+ rights and refers to an alleged “tyranny of sexual minorities,” suggesting that the view of gender as a social construct is imposed upon the majority by left-leaning progressive intellectuals and political elites. This approach mainly aligns with the liberal discourse that sees LGBT+ movements, gender studies scholars, and left-wing political parties as proponents of a “new order” that threatens individual freedoms and freedom of speech. Notably, the Danish Rainbow Council, an LGB association established in 2022,

³The term “gender ideology” (*kønsideologi*) is seldom used in public debates because the Danish language does not distinguish between gender and sex, as in English, but has one word for both (*køn*). It can thus refer to biology and social norms, nature and culture, at the same time.

challenges the mainstreaming of LGBT+ positions, accusing it of promoting “transideology,” “wokeness,” and “gender extremism.” In contrast to most other organizations associated with the anti-gender movement worldwide, the Danish Rainbow Council does not refute the rights of gay and bisexual people, but claims to promote such rights. Yet, it also speaks of an ideology about gender and sexuality that is pervading contemporary society, which is considered to be promoting “gender extremism” because it dissolves the notion of biological sex. In this sense, the Danish Rainbow Council’s arguments merge biological essentialism with a critique of what they perceive as an ideology that has spread from LGBT+ organizations throughout society and is today intolerant of dissent.

Over the years, transgender individuals have become the primary focus of anti-gender mobilizations, particularly in relation to recent legislation and proposals for legislation. The lack of a political decision on legal gender change for minors is a case in point. A requirement to undergo medical castration in order to acquire legal gender change was removed in 2014, while being transgender was officially removed from the list of mental diseases in 2017. There was no significant anti-gender mobilization from the conservative right wing against these decisions, and the latter policy change was even passed under a right-wing government. Yet, the proposal to allow legal gender change for minors, which was put forward in 2020 under a government led by the Social Democrats, was intensively criticized because it specifically concerned children and young people. This contributed to delays in the decision-making, bringing the parliamentary policy process to an indefinite halt when the Social Democrats abstained from presenting the proposal again after 2022, when they also entered a broad coalition government (Holst, 2022). Thus, as in many other countries across Europe, the “protection of children” anti-gender framing has proven to be a powerful discourse and mobilization strategy in relation to transgender issues in Denmark.

Danish Antifeminism in the Post-#MeToo Era

A significant aspect of the Danish response to feminist mobilizations in recent years is the rise and development of men’s rights activist groups. These have gained increased visibility since the emergence of the #MeToo movement. This form of activism is primarily championed by the Danish Men’s Council (*Manderådet*), an organization that was established partly as a critical reaction to the #MeToo movement. Their main argument is

that women wield excessive power and rights in Denmark today, and that the means proposed by the Danish feminist movement to achieve greater gender equality, such as gender quotas and earmarked paternity leave, are illegitimate. Thus, the Danish Men's Council stands out as the most influential antifeminist organization in Denmark. It was launched in 2019 and since its foundation has strategically aimed for a stronger political impact and a more mainstream image. Its co-founder and chairperson, Simon Simonsen, is a former Social Democratic member of the Copenhagen City Council, while Daniel Holst Pinderup, a parliamentary candidate for the New Right (*Nye Borgerlige*), was the organization's spokesperson for several years. The Danish Men's Council occasionally also supports anti-gender views and discourses, but its central argument and focus is that men's rights are overshadowed by prevailing feminist positions, which positions them more clearly within the antifeminist movement.

In 2023, the Danish Men's Council held a public meeting with the Minister for Digital Government and Gender Equality, Marie Bjerre, and in the same year a popular TV show (*Signe Molde på udebane*) broadcast an episode featuring the group. The fact that a large antifeminist organization has become established during the time since the rise of the #MeToo movement is notable. Before #MeToo, such positions were mainly the domain of individual antifeminists like Lennart Kiil, content creator of the webpage MANFO and the online *People's Newspaper* (*Folkets Avis*). The Danish Men's Council has succeeded in providing an organizational framework for individuals with similar viewpoints who, in some cases, were also active before the establishment of the organization. Profiles like those of Kåre Fog and Marianne Stidsen have found a platform within this organization. Stidsen is particularly well known for having defined #MeToo as a "terror movement" and drawn parallels between feminism and Nazism (Stidsen, 2019). As argued by one of our interviewees,⁴ the Danish Men's Council constitutes a "collection of individualists" (AFI, The Danish Men's Council, 28 September 2023). When interviewed, representatives of the Danish Men's Council declared that the organization

⁴In total, we interviewed 25 activists (independent public debaters, representatives of feminist and LGBT+ organizations, and representatives of men's rights groups and antifeminist organizations) and 16 politicians (from parties across the political spectrum as well as party youth wings). The interviews were conducted throughout 2023 and 2024. In this chapter, the interviews are identified in the following order: the label AFI (Anti-Feminist Interviewee) or FI (Feminist Interviewee), organizational affiliation, and date of the interview.

embraces different opinions, sometimes triggering heated debates and discussions. Despite this, the Danish Men’s Council maintains four clear areas of focus, which they claim are ignored by the feminist movement: (1) men’s health issues; (2) boys’ challenges in the school system; (3) fathers’ rights and family law; and (4) legal rights and due process in cases of sexual violence. On the basis of these key areas of interest, the Danish Men’s Council seeks to engage in public debates with feminist organizations [such as KVINFO and the Women’s Society](#), striving to characterize the organization as both mainstream and open to different views and opinions.

There are also other, smaller men’s groups in Denmark that express less vocal criticism of feminism and the feminist movement. This is the case for an organization that facilitates self-help groups for men, called *Maniphesto*, which seeks to provide community-building for men and promote conservative—and to a certain extent also religious—values, which are at odds with feminism. They engage in the debate mainly by means of blogs, videos, podcasts, and network activities. Other groups identify themselves as feminists (including in their names) but are, nevertheless, very critical of the contemporary feminist movement. This is the case, for instance, with Preserve Danish Women’s Gender Equality (*Bevar Danske Kvinders Ligestilling*). This group criticizes Danish feminists for neglecting what they see as the primary threat to gender equality, namely the growing presence of ethnic minorities with Muslim backgrounds in Danish society. Furthermore, some public commentators have also repeatedly criticized feminists, but they tend to do so in a less direct and disapproving manner than, for instance, the Danish Men’s Council. Most notable among these is Tobias Petersen, who in 2014 established the online media platform *Real Gender Equality* (*Reel Ligestilling*). Petersen constantly reports on news relating to gender equality in Denmark and publishes comments that are often critical of contemporary feminism. However, he also feels the need to specify on his online platform that he is a “non-feminist” rather than an “antifeminist,” since—in his view—he is not dismissive of everything related to the feminist movement. Over the years, Petersen has conducted a series of interviews with feminists and published them on his site. The role of such media profiles and groups in the Danish public debate illustrates the broad range of critical perspectives on feminism, gender equality, and LGBT+ rights, from outright opposition to subtler critiques that cannot in all cases be straightforwardly classified as antifeminist per se.

The Danish Manosphere

Another form of antifeminist mobilization consists of the dedicated social media fora and websites that are often grouped under the term *manosphere*. The term “manosphere” combines the words “man” and “sphere” to form a neologism that refers to the websites, blogs, and online fora promoting hostility or hatred toward women, hypermasculinity, and various beliefs associated with men’s rights activism, incels (involuntary celibates), pick-up artists, and MGTOW (Men Going Their Own Way). Originating in the 2010s within online discussions and fora, the manosphere is a fragmented cluster of online activities taking place on many platforms, a transnational and diffused space where English is the primary language of communication among users, who typically maintain anonymity. In this sense, the manosphere does not constitute one coherent entity but is rather what Dickel and Evolvi (2023) call a “cluster of misogynist networks” on independently run websites.

In 2020, the Centre for Digital Youth Care estimated in a report that there were around 850 active users in the Nordic manosphere, and among them approximately 100–200 were Danish (CFDP, 2020). Although potential links between Danish antifeminist groups and the manosphere are difficult to detect, the influence of the extreme positions expressed online among likeminded groups and individuals, often within closed settings, sometimes reaches the headlines. This was the case for the 27-year-old Dane who was arrested in 2020 for planning mass shootings at local schools, with women as the main targets.⁵ A mapping conducted by the Association for Digital Responsibility (*Foreningen Digital Ansvar*) and the Danish Broadcasting Corporation, DR, uncovered nearly 6000 posts made by this person.

There are also extremist individuals and groups espousing far-right ideology, including antifeminist and anti-gender views, at the fringes of Danish civil society. Anti-immigration and critiques of Islam remain the most prominent themes for such actors, who express a nationalist and ultra-conservative approach (Meret & Gregersen, 2019). At times, anti-feminist and anti-gender discourses are coupled with this anti-immigration agenda through a populist critique of the economic and political elite, whom they accuse of threatening national unity and culture in various

⁵In January 2023, this individual was acquitted of preparing for a mass shooting but not of fantasizing about it in detail by, for instance, publishing a manifesto announcing a mass shooting targeting women and sharing such ideas online.

ways. The Danish branch of *Generation Identity* was established in 2018 (Kühle & Christensen, 2022), and besides their primary and controversial focus on anti-Muslim and anti-Islam campaigning, they have also espoused some antifeminist and anti-gender critiques over the years. Notably, in 2022 they launched an activist campaign under the title “There are only two sexes” (*Der er kun to køn*), which explicitly denies the reality of transgender individuals, charging them with “disguising” their real, biological sex. *Generation Identity* also targeted feminist and LGBT+ organizations, most notably by conducting a symbolic closure of the Danish Family Planning Association in 2022 by plastering the organization’s front door in Copenhagen with posters stating “Closed – for the sake of children” as well as stickers. The Danish Family Planning Association is a member of the International Planned Parenthood Federation and is the only major organization in Denmark whose work primarily focuses on health and reproductive rights, including the promotion of abortion rights and comprehensive sex education abroad.

In terms of far-right extra-parliamentary political organizations and politicians, the most controversial actor in recent years has been Rasmus Paludan. Paludan is a lawyer, activist, and politician who became famous in 2018 for his public activities across Denmark in which he threw, spat on, and burned copies of the Qur’an. Paludan founded the far-right party Hard Line in 2017, which quickly became successful after his rise to fame. In 2019, the party nearly gained enough votes to enter the Danish Parliament, based on a political manifesto that included a ban on Islam and mass expulsion of “non-Westerners” from the country. Although gender and sexuality were very rarely addressed by the party during this electoral turn, some of their candidates occasionally made controversial statements in this area, such as a proposal by one candidate to temporarily remove women’s right to vote.

In recent years, antifeminist and anti-gender movements in Denmark have seen an increase in support, although less pronounced than in other European countries. This is particularly significant in a nation that prides itself on being a beacon of gender equality. However, the impact of these movements remains fragmented due to their still limited collaboration and mobilization strength. Such fragmentation stems from ideological differences, diverse backgrounds and communication tools, and varying priorities and strategies. Despite these obstacles, however, a growing network of anti-gender and antifeminist groups is increasingly challenging both the Danish feminist and LGBT+ movements. This increasing mobilization

highlights a certain pushback against feminist agendas, policy proposals, and campaigns, indicating a complex and evolving opposition. To address this challenge, concerted efforts are needed from feminist and LGBT+ movements, as well as broader societal engagement.

COUNTERING ANTI-GENDER AND ANTIFEMINIST MOVEMENTS: CRITIQUE, ISSUE REAPPROPRIATION, AND DISENGAGEMENT

The feminist movement in Denmark is primarily composed of established feminist organizations, such as the Women's Council Denmark, the Danish Women's Society, and KVININFO. Furthermore, four political parties within the Danish center-left wing—the Red/Green Alliance, Green Left, the Alternative, and the Danish Social Liberal Party—largely align on gender-equality issues and collectively support the feminist agenda. In addition, influential debaters, content creators, and ad hoc initiatives and programs contribute to supporting feminist positions and viewpoints. Also, the LGBT+ and feminist movements in Denmark regularly express support for each other, even though there is no formal collaboration or articulation of a common struggle at the time of writing. This does not seem to be primarily due to ideological or positional differences between the LGBT+ and feminist movements, but rather to reflect differences in their target groups around mobilization and representation and a lack of human and economic resources among some of the smaller organizations.

In recent years, both feminist and LGBT+ groups have shown some caution in addressing the rise of antifeminism and anti-gender mobilizations, despite widespread concern and increasing awareness of the international trends (Corredor, 2019; Verloo & Paternotte, 2018). When they have responded, the types of reactions have typically fallen into three main categories: (1) **Critique** within the public sphere, which is often conducted at a general level, focusing on antifeminism and anti-gender mobilizations as movements still on the rise and, thus, not directly addressed toward specific actors or events; (2) **Issue Reappropriation** by recognizing and addressing key factors and the relevance of some of the triggering causes, including, for instance, men's health issues and male youth vulnerability, thus demonstrating understanding of some of the concerns that have sparked public debate, but also claiming that these have often already been addressed by the feminist movement; and (3) **Disengagement**,

which is an attempt to avoid direct interaction or engagement with anti-feminist and/or anti-gender actors, especially in public debates. The latter includes both feminists avoiding engagement in social media comment threads, often due to fear of receiving hateful messages, and feminist actors opting out of interactions in more formal settings and public events. While feminists from social movements and civil society seldom interact with antifeminists or anti-gender actors, feminist politicians are more likely to engage in debates with their antifeminist/anti-gender counterparts. These three types of reaction are not mutually exclusive but vary according to the context and can partially overlap with each other, for instance, when acknowledging men’s rights activists in some respects and criticizing them in others. As we demonstrate below, their reactions sometimes depend on whether the setting is formal and public, or informal and private, with some feminist actors being willing to engage in informal exchanges, but not in public ones.

Critique

Major concerns about the rise of antifeminism and the anti-gender movement, both in Denmark and globally, emerged in our interviews with both feminists and LGBT+ activists. However, these concerns are less frequently expressed publicly, with the notable exception of the Danish Family Planning Association, which has several times warned about the European anti-gender upsurge in its press releases and opinion pieces. This organization has a unique international outlook, both regarding the strengthening of health and reproductive rights and in being able to follow global anti-gender mobilizations against such rights through its international work. Similarly, *Cybernauterne*, which is a group specializing in cybersecurity and digital media, has also criticized the anti-gender movement (e.g., in a series of podcasts released in 2018), addressing the issue at both a global and a national level. Like the Danish Family Planning Association, *Cybernauterne* also has a global reach, engaging in mapping and monitoring on the Internet, and particularly on social media. In some of its podcast episodes, as well as in other publications, this group has explicitly identified and criticized the influence of transnational discourses, activities, and movements on the Danish context, especially in relation to the critique of activism for transgender people’s rights.

Men’s rights activists have not faced the same level of direct scrutiny and critique. This may be due to the perception that antifeminists,

advocating for men's rights and equality, present less threatening viewpoints that cannot be entirely dismissed. In most cases, the critique also involves a global reach, with expressions of concern about the influence of controversial profiles such as those of Jordan Peterson and Andrew Tate. Recently, there has been growing concern among organizations and media experts about the impact of antifeminist rhetoric and misogynist online content on young boys. The Centre for Digital Youth Care (CFDP, 2020), as well as a collaboration between *Cybernauterne* and DareGender (2020), have published reports expressing these concerns. DareGender is a feminist organization for men established in 2016 with a specific focus on challenging stereotypical masculinity norms. Together with the Danish Men's Society (*Dansk Mandesamfund*), created in 2020, these two men's organizations frequently criticize antifeminist groups for their ultra-conservative views on gender roles, while emphasizing that one can work for men's interests while holding a feminist perspective. However, they concur with some of the claims made by men's rights activists, such as the Danish Men's Council, particularly on the need for a greater focus on issues like men's health and boys' educational challenges. In this sense, DareGender and the Danish Men's Society, as the two most significant feminist men's organizations in Denmark, seem to be strategically following a combination of public critique and reappropriation of some of the issues raised.

Several activists and organizations see the promotion of men's rights and men's interests as a way to convey ultra-traditional gender roles, stereotypical masculinity models, and anti-gender positions. DareGender and the Danish Men's Society also argue that patriarchal structures are at the foundations of gender inequality, which also affects men, thus promoting a common struggle with feminists. According to an interviewee from the Women's Council Denmark, it is not men's rights activists but women's organizations that have historically fought the hardest for men's rights in Denmark, for instance by advocating for men's right to earmarked paternity leave (FI, the Women's Council Denmark, 5 July 2023). Men's rights activists and anti-gender actors are described by several respondents as aggressive, polemical, and unnecessarily provocative. According to the interviewees, this shows that they are not genuinely interested in a constructive debate. One media debater with over a decade of experience of feminist activism explained during her interview that she has often experienced the way in which antifeminists present an "enormously sharp-cut and ungenerous presentation of one's position" as a feminist (FI, independent public debater, 22 November 2023), while another activist claimed

that “dehumanization” is a general strategy applied by both antifeminist and anti-gender activists and politicians in Denmark, which she explicitly compared to Nazism (FI, Voldtægtsofres Vilkår, 30 June 2023). To this, she added that feminists have become easy targets to demonize, resulting in a political culture where it is “so common to score cheap points on being an antifeminist” (FI, independent public debater, 22 November 2023). This is particularly true on social media platforms, where antifeminists and anti-gender actors are often perceived as engaging in “trolling” by derailing legitimate debates, to purposely obstruct feminist activism, both online and offline. As she formulated it:

You find yourself in a situation where you must defend a position that you do not really have. Because you become a board others can play on. If you hate feminism, then you hate [interviewee’s name], and then you think that everything she says is totally ridiculous. And this has been a consideration for me as to how it could make sense to do feminist activism in Denmark. (FI, independent public debater, 22 November 2023)

Hence, the perception that many antifeminist actors are aggressive and hateful directly influences how groups and, in particular, individuals engage in feminist activism. Direct attacks result in some activists choosing to disengage from specific contentious and antagonistic debates, or even to withdraw altogether from social media platforms. There is also a widespread view among feminist actors that others across the world are faced with similar dilemmas about how to respond to and resist attacks. As mentioned above, many connect the surge in global antifeminism to the role played by profiles such as those of Andrew Tate and Jordan Peterson, whom one activist linked to the growing “neo-conservative” wave around the world (Loc. Cit.). The perception is that these global trends constitute a counter-reaction, a backlash, to the basic rights that women and minorities have acquired. As a respondent from KVINFO claimed, such a counter-reaction also serves as a reminder for feminists that rights are never secured once and for all, but must be fought for even when those rights have already been formally acquired. A particular concern is the influence that a misogynist content creator such as the British Andrew Tate has on Danish youth, an influencer whose activity ought to be taken “very seriously” (FI, KVINFO, 13 September 2023), even though others in the feminist movement stress that younger generations seem to be more progressive than older ones. Another of the interviewed activists applied a

figurative metaphor, describing antifeminist and anti-gender mobilizations as “a wave that is coming to Denmark,” which entails a “new struggle” generated outside the country that needs to be resisted by feminist activists (FI, *Voldtægtslovens Vilkår*, 30 June 2023). As these examples demonstrate, feminist actors in Denmark are following global antifeminist developments with great concern, even though only some have chosen to publicly mobilize and react against these developments.

As for anti-gender mobilizations specifically, there also seems to be a growing awareness that anti-gender discourses and activities have been spreading in Denmark in recent years. As a respondent from LGBT+ Denmark claims, for many years, the political climate has been resilient against anti-gender rhetoric and mobilizations compared to other European contexts. Yet, the emergence in 2022 of the Danish Rainbow Council as a somewhat recognizable anti-gender organization epitomized the end of such exceptionalism in Denmark. As one interviewee formulated it:

When the Danish Rainbow Council hit last year, then I thought, here it comes, that's, what I waited...in this sense, you could say that we've been spared for a while in Denmark from this anti-gender movement, until the Danish Rainbow Council came out, and then I think it hit pretty hard, but still less than what they're experiencing in England and Sweden and Norway. Here we're in continuous contact with our cooperation partners to hear how we can best handle this. (FI, LGBT+ Denmark, 29 June 2023)

The anti-gender rhetoric was perceived by several respondents as building on an “enemy image, that there are some people who are doing something unnatural, something inappropriate, something wrong” (FI, *the Alternative*, 11 August 2023). A common claim was that anti-gender actors, while leveraging their privileged position, accuse sexual minorities of being the true powerholders, thereby reversing the roles. Interviewees noticed how anti-gender rhetoric is framed as a way of protecting children from exposure to “gender-fluid” ideas that endanger their development and sexuality. According to one feminist politician, even pedophilia is sometimes insinuated to be the underlying motive behind certain educational efforts, in the sense that involving children and young people in an open conversation about gender and sexuality is claimed to be an easy route to manipulating them with ulterior sexual motives (*ibid.*). A representative from LGBT+ Denmark pointed out that such deceptive

allegations thrive online, and that they are often coupled with conspiracy theories (FI, LGBT+ Denmark, 29 June 2023). This narrative was regarded as exaggerated and outrageous, especially given that the incidents sparking anti-gender mobilizations are often trivial.

As a case in point, in March 2023, a Disney Show for children in Copenhagen featuring two drag queens was met with harsh criticism by politicians from the Danish People’s Party and led to a small protest by activists. However, the public reaction to this form of mobilization was mainly disbelief and condemnation, culminating in a large counterdemonstration called “Protect the children from hate and xenophobia,” which managed to reverse and counter-frame the anti-gender rhetoric about how and against what to protect children. In this and similar cases, the type of reaction is primarily a public and direct critique of anti-gender actors and their claims, framing their public position as being both illegitimate and grotesque due to the perceived demonization of gendered and sexual minorities.

Issue Reappropriation

Men’s rights activism is perceived as more complex and multifaceted than anti-gender mobilizations. In the interviews, some feminist actors underlined a lack of clear answers to current questions about how to transform masculinity norms and rethink men’s role in society. As a former member of DareGender puts it, the Danish Men’s Council and similar organizations “sell an easy message” by presenting traditional masculinity as a solution to the question of men’s role in society. But, at the same time, this respondent claimed that feminists have so far been unable to find convincing alternatives, other than the “totally fluffy message” that men should change themselves somehow (FI, former member of DareGender, 1 December 2023). Other feminists are more confident in arguing that men’s issues are already being addressed by feminism or, at least, that it is also a feminist concern to focus on men’s challenges. In a (rare) direct conversation between a feminist and an antifeminist, the public debater Louise Kjølsten was interviewed by Daniel Holst Pinderup, former spokesperson of the Danish Men’s Council, on his YouTube channel, called *Gender Equality Debate (Ligestillingsdebat)*. In the interview, labeled “building bridges” in gender-equality debates, Louise Kjølsten argued that many of the issues raised by Pinderup as affecting men are already being addressed by the feminist movement. Since 2021, DareGender, the Danish

Men's Society, KVINFO, and the Forum for Men's Health (*Forum for Mænds Sundhed*) have collaborated to organize an annual event in Copenhagen to celebrate International Men's Day on 19 November. This initiative is not explicitly linked to the critique raised by men's rights activists, but could be seen as an indication of feminists' concrete response to men's rights activists' critique in public debates.

The fact is that for several decades there has been an ongoing discussion among feminists, in the political arena, and among the broader public, about how to address gender inequalities specifically affecting men, without diminishing the historical struggle for women's rights. For instance, the Forum for Men's Health, founded in 2004 with close ties to the feminist movement, offered an explicit focus on inequalities affecting men in relation to physical and mental health. Their demands are recognized by most Danish feminist organizations, which is also why the critique put forward by men's rights activists that the feminist movement has systematically ignored such issues is met with grounded skepticism and challenged through examples such as the common political fight for earmarked paternity leave.

Feminists and men's rights activists in Denmark disagree about which rights it is important for men to fight for today. Women's organizations such as the Women's Council Denmark and the Danish Women's Society argue that introducing the right to earmarked paternity leave at the same level as earmarked maternity leave is essential to provide fathers with the opportunity to build a closer relationship with their children. Similarly, the two feminist men's organizations, DareGender and the Danish Men's Society, also emphasize the importance of promoting opportunities for men to break with traditional masculinity norms, and have suggested new strategies and approaches to current understandings of masculinity. In contrast, the Danish Men's Council and other antifeminists argue that in this way men are being denied the opportunity to adhere to traditional masculine norms and models. Thus, they offer antagonistic framings of how gender inequality impacts upon men and how this relates to broader feminist struggles. The Danish feminist movement already acknowledges that gender inequalities can also harm men, but asserts that addressing such inequalities complements rather than opposes women's struggles for rights and emancipation. In this context, when Danish feminists address gender inequalities affecting men in response to a critique by, in particular,

men’s rights activists, they are reappropriating such inequalities within a feminist framework.

Disengagement

Reactions and motivations linked to disengagement are more difficult to detect, considering that this would imply recording the lack of feminists’ engagement with, for instance, online media debates or public events. Yet, several feminist politicians have publicly declared their reluctance to take part in online public discussions and threads due to sexist and personal attacks, some of which are explicitly motivated by antifeminist and anti-gender viewpoints. This was the subject, for instance, of a TV documentary in 2014 entitled *Be silent, woman* (*Ti stille, kvinde*), in which influential female politicians and public debaters spoke up about the threats and sexual harassment that they had experienced over the years, and some of the male perpetrators were publicly confronted. In 2021, an algorithmic analysis of 63 million comments on Danish public Facebook sites showed that 9% of all comments in debates about gender equality could be categorized as “lingual attacks,” while about 14% of such attacks across different subjects explicitly targeted female users (Analyse & Tal, 2021). In one of our interviews, an activist expressly mentioned that she had been the direct target of such an attack and underlined how this had contributed to her decision to no longer engage with social media or television debates, because it is physically and psychologically too distressing. As she put it, she gets “extremely affected” by online harassment, adding to this that such a decision was also related to the “personal traumas” that each public debater carries with her by being politically and personally engaged (FI, independent public debater, 22 November 2023). In this sense, strategies may differ in relation to how and to what extent feminist activists are affected by their exposure to lingual attacks and potential threats and harassment. In some cases, disengagement is an immediate reaction to attacks, rather than a deliberate strategy.

This issue also extends to the activists’ personal lives, which is the case for many LGBT+ activists and feminists focusing on gender-based violence. This can be psychologically demanding in terms of the risk of becoming the recipient of direct attacks or of being met with counterarguments that question, for instance, the right to be personally involved, or the credibility of one’s own personal stories. On the other hand, emotions such as anger and indignation based on personal experiences of perceived

injustice and resistance to one's activism can also sustain the strategizing and engagement of feminist actors and, as an act of defiance, may perhaps even lead to more or less confrontational interactions with antifeminist and/or anti-gender actors.

A case in point is the experience of Kirstine Holst, the former chairperson of the Conditions of Rape Victims (*Voldtægtsorfres Vilkår*). Holst played a significant role in the campaign for a consent-based rape law, which was adopted by the Danish Parliament in 2020 (Rønsholt, 2020). She reported to the police that she had been raped in 2017, but the accused was acquitted the following year and later, in 2020, he decided to publicly defend his alleged innocence. A trigger for Holst's activism was her traumatic experiences with both the police and the judicial system. As Holst aptly put it, she felt "an urge to go out and act" (FI, *Voldtægtsorfres Vilkår*, 30 June 2023). Activism, in her case, was a response to frustration and feeling powerless, even though she found it emotionally draining to experience how others repeatedly questioned her personal story (ibidem). In this sense, reacting to a perceived unjust situation boosted her indignation and activism, even while it also provoked some physical and mental distress. Kirstine Holst and other feminist activists have received death and rape threats over the years, which for some, like Holst, has led them to reconsider their engagement due to concerns about both their own and their families' well-being.

Furthermore, several organizations within the Danish feminist and LGBT+ movements seem to repeatedly refuse to debate or engage with antifeminist and anti-gender actors. In 2022, a public debate at the People's Meeting in Bornholm, the largest political festival in Denmark, had the provocative and polemical title: "Is feminism a hate ideology?" The debate was organized by the Danish Men's Council and KVINFO was invited to participate; however, the organization did not respond to the invitation. When the Danish Broadcasting Corporation invited KVINFO to debate the gender pay gap with the Danish Men's Council in 2023, KVINFO also declined to participate.⁶ Similarly, the largest and most influential LGBT+ organization, LGBT+ Denmark, has refused to

⁶In January 2024, the Danish Men's Council did meet with KVINFO behind closed doors and announced afterwards, on its Facebook page, that it was a "good and productive meeting" in which the two organizations had gained a better understanding of each other's positions. Even though KVINFO has not commented on this meeting in public, it might be indicative of a slightly different approach to men's rights activists henceforth, at least in KVINFO's case.

engage in debates with the Danish Rainbow Council, despite the latter organization’s open invitation to the LGBT+ movement, which they publicly define as being “woke” and “gender extremist.” Asked to comment on their disengagement strategy, Susanne Branner Jespersen, head of the secretariat at LGBT+ Denmark, replied that “out of principle [we] do not comment on other LGBT+ organizations’ existence or politics” (Fahrendorff, 2022). Similar forms of disengagement can also be observed among other organizations, such as the Women’s Council Denmark, the Danish Women’s Society, and Danner.

The situation is different for Danish feminist politicians, who are regularly confronted with their antifeminist and anti-gender counterparts, in Parliament as well as in other contexts. The Danish political system has a longstanding tradition of minority coalition governments that rely on cooperation among parties. In this context, some feminist politicians might also have considered disengagement in response to antifeminist and anti-gender rhetoric but found this to be too difficult given the political climate.

In Danish politics, cooperation between feminist and antifeminist politicians also takes place when dealing with specific issues such as reproductive rights or targeted gender-equality issues. For instance, in 2023, the Danish Parliament passed a law, which achieved broad consensus, guaranteeing women the right to egg freezing beyond a five-year period. This law was supported by pro-feminist parties such as Green Left and the Red/Green Alliance, but also by antifeminist and anti-gender parties such as the Danish People’s Party and the New Right. Another example is the consent-based rape legislation, which was approved unanimously in 2020, even though the Danish People’s Party expressed criticism regarding the focus on “consent” instead of “voluntariness.” In this sense, feminist political actors have less margin for disengagement or for ignoring antifeminist and anti-gender positions in public debates and political negotiations. This approach could deter feminist activists from engaging in politics by reinforcing a perception that politics demands excessive compromise and pragmatism, even though it also reveals actual cooperation on some gender-equality issues between feminist and antifeminist politicians.

CONCLUSIONS

Danish feminists often resort to a combination of the three main types of reaction identified throughout this chapter: critique, issue reappropriation, and disengagement. It is difficult to provide any precise recommendation on what kind of balance one ought to strike between critique, issue reappropriation, and disengagement. This is partly because activists have different access to human and economic resources. Thus, it is recommended, wherever possible, to establish some form of dialogue and networking among feminist actors to discuss how to organize, be resilient, and move forward. The three types of reaction exhibited by Danish feminist actors illustrated above refer mainly to current reactions to antifeminist and anti-gender mobilizations related to specific contexts, without necessarily displaying continuity or structured planning over time. These three types of reaction cannot yet be characterized as deliberate strategies employed by the Danish feminist movement. What most resembles a strategy is the consistent public disengagement of major women's organizations with antifeminist and anti-gender actors. This concerns both KVINFO as a feminist knowledge center on gender and the most influential LGBT+ organizations.

Several of the interviewees said that they perceive Danish anti-gender and antifeminist mobilizations as more cohesive and interconnected than actually seems to be the case when mapping the actors and their activities. This might give the impression that strategies and responses are difficult to organize and coordinate. As described, attacks against feminist actors in public constitute a serious issue, and such attacks are sometimes motivated by antifeminist viewpoints. However, it is not evident that these are coordinated by a coherent antifeminist and/or anti-gender movement. Hence, it might be possible to act strategically on the fragmented nature of anti-feminist and anti-gender mobilizations in Denmark, for instance, by deliberately engaging with selected actors.

Disengagement from public debates, due to fear of either personal attacks or harsh tones and behavior, still poses a democratic and ethical problem that concerns all citizens, not only women and LGBT+ individuals. Recent polls have shown that it is not just feminists but, in fact, a majority of the Danish population that is reluctant to engage in online debates because these are generally perceived as being too tough and difficult to control (Analyse & Tal, 2021, p. 5). This situation calls for a multifaceted response from, first and foremost, the judiciary, politicians,

and targeted law enforcement, aiming to promote a democratic culture of respect toward dissent and diversity, particularly online. From this perspective, disengagement from public debates constitutes a much larger issue related to the state of democracy and political participation in modern societies.

If feminist and LGBT+ organizations coordinate a strategic disengagement, this might effectively marginalize antifeminist and anti-gender positions by rendering them illegitimate in terms of public attention and discussion. In the Danish context, the strategic silencing of antifeminist and anti-gender actors is also challenged by a political culture characterized by consensus and cooperation across political divides. This means that it is difficult, if not impossible, to prevent antifeminist and anti-gender organizations from gaining access to powerholders, such as the spokespersons on gender equality for the political parties represented in the Danish Parliament. Recent developments confirm such obstacles to a potential silencing strategy. For instance, the Danish Rainbow Council received considerable media coverage on the occasion of its meeting with the Minister of Digital Government and Gender Equality, despite the disengagement strategy promoted by the largest LGBT+ organizations. Similarly, the Danish Men’s Council has gained both media and political recognition over the years, despite the attempts at disengagement practiced by feminist organizations such as KVINFO and the Women’s Council Denmark. Thus, the impact of a coordinated and targeted feminist response might be constrained by other variables and conditions. The situation in Denmark underscores the urgent need for a proactive evaluation of the opportunities and constraints within feminist responses to the challenges posed by antifeminist and anti-gender mobilizations, by also raising awareness and involvement among the broader society.

REFERENCES

- Analyse and Tal. (2021). *Angreb i den offentlige debat på Facebook*. Analyse and Tal. Retrieved January 16, 2024, from <https://www.ogtal.dk/assets/files/Angreb-i-den-offentlige-debat-paa-Facebook.pdf>
- Andersen, T., & Reiermann, J. (2023, June 5). Hver femte mand under 50 mener, ligestillingen er gået for langt. *Mandag Morgen*. Retrieved November 30, 2023, from https://www.mm.dk/artikel/hver-femte-mand-under-50-mener-ligestillingen-er-gaaet-for-langt?SNSubscribed=true&ref=newsletter&refid=mandag-morgen-gratis-normal-1148&utm_

- campaign=Mandag%20Morgen&utm_content=Mandag%20Morgen%20gratis%20%28Normal%29&utm_medium=e-mail&utm_source=nyhedsbrev
- Askanius, T., & Hartley, J. M. (2019). Framing gender justice: A comparative analysis of the media coverage of #MeToo in Denmark and Sweden. *Nordicom Review*, 40(2), 19–36. <https://doi.org/10.2478/nor-2019-0022>
- Balogh, P. (2019, May 6). On recent developments affecting academic institutions in Hungary. *Baltic Worlds*. Retrieved May 21, 2024, from <https://baltic-worlds.com/on-recent-developments-affecting-academic-institutions-in-hungary/?s=gender%20studies%20hungary>
- BBC. (2021, February 22). French minister orders probe of “Islamism” in academia. *BBC Monitoring European*. Retrieved May 21, 2024, from <https://www.proquest.com/wire-feeds/french-minister-orders-probe-islamism/docview/2491794681/se-2>
- Borchorst, A., & Dahlerup, D. (2020). Det danske ligestillingspolitiske regime: Konklusioner og perspektiver. In A. Borchorst & D. Dahlerup (Eds.), *Konflikt og konsensus: Det danske ligestillingspolitiske regime* (pp. 14–42). Frydenlund Academic.
- CFDP, Centre for Digital Youth Care. (2020). *Vrede, unge mænd: Viden om ekstreme onlinefællesskaber*. Centre for Digital Youth Care. Retrieved January 10, 2024, from <https://cfdp.dk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Vrede-unge-maend-okt-2020.pdf>
- Corredor, E. S. (2019). Unpacking “gender ideology” and the global right’s anti-gender countermovement. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 44(3), 613–638. <https://doi.org/10.1086/701171>
- Cybernauterne, & DareGender. (2020). *Under indflydelse: Veje ind i ekstreme digitale fællesskaber gennem køn og maskulinitet*. Retrieved January 10, 2024, from <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1t-Q2VkJeskQ6RDbJ2VXTPoVlc1-9AYeCb/view>
- Dahlerup, D. (1998). *Rødstrømperne. Den danske Rødstrømpebevægelses udvikling, nytænkning og gennemslag – 1970–1985*. Gyldendal.
- DF, Dansk Folkeparti. (2002). *Principprogram*. Dansk Folkeparti. Retrieved January 18, 2024, from <https://www.dansksfolkeparti.dk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Dansk-Folkeparti-Principprogram-2002.pdf>
- Dickel, V., & Evolvi, G. (2023). “Victims of feminism”: Exploring networked misogyny and #MeToo in the manosphere. *Feminist Media Studies*, 23(4), 1392–1408. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2022.2029925>
- Fahrendorff, R. (2022). Ny regnbueforening vil gøre op med “woke konsekstrisme”. *Kristeligt Dagblad*. Retrieved April 15, 2024, from <https://www.kristeligt-dagblad.dk/danmark/ny-regnbueforening-vil-goere-op-med-woke-koensekstrisme>
- Fassin, E. (2024). *State anti-intellectualism and the politics of gender and race: Illiberal France and beyond*. CEU Press Perspectives.

- Fog, K. (2019, October 10). Når transtoget er kørt. *Weekendavisen*. Retrieved March 17, 2024, from <https://www.weekendavisen.dk/2019-41/samfund/naar-transtoget-er-koert>
- Fog, K. (2022). *Fakta og myter om kvinder og mænd*. Herreværelset.
- Hansen, M. B. (2021). “Between two ills”: Homonationalism, gender ideology and the case of Denmark. *Redescriptions: Yearbook of Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory*, 24(1), 60–75. <https://doi.org/10.33134/rds.339>
- Holst, E. Q. (2022, December 13). Danmark får ny regering: “Det betyder ikke, at vi er enige om alt”. *Altinget*. Retrieved March 18, 2024, from <https://www.alinget.dk/artikel/danmark-har-faet-ny-regering>
- Kildegaard, K. (2020, January 12). Forarget Pia Kjærsgaard: En lille elite ”sidder på flæsket” med deres ”åh-så-tolerante holdninger” og spærrer danskerne inde. *Berlingske*. Retrieved January 17, 2024, from <https://www.berlingske.dk/politik/forarget-pia-kjaersgaard-en-lille-elite-sidder-paa-flaesk-med-deres-aah>
- Kühle, L., & Christensen, H. R. (2022). Den nye islamdebat: Generation Identitars ideer og metoder. *Økonomi & Politik*, 95(1), 58–72. <https://doi.org/10.7146/okonomiogpolitik.v95i1.132359>
- Meret, S. (2021, July 30). Attacks on academic freedom escalate in France and Denmark. *OpenDemocracy*. Retrieved May 6, 2024, from <https://www.open-democracy.net/en/countering-radical-right/attacks-academic-freedom-escalate-france-and-denmark/>
- Meret, S., & Gregersen, A. B. (2019). Islam as a “floating signifier”: Right-wing populism and perceptions of Muslims in Denmark. In *The one percent problem: Muslims in the west and the rise of the new populists*. Brookings Institution Press. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/islam-as-a-floating-signifier-right-wing-populism-and-perceptions-of-muslims-in-denmark/>
- Meret, S., & Siim, B. (2013). Gender, populism and politics of belonging: Discourses of right-wing populist parties in Denmark, Norway and Austria. In B. Siim & M. Mokre (Eds.), *Negotiating gender and diversity in an emerging European public sphere* (pp. 78–96). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Pető, A. (2022). Andrea Pető on gender and illiberalism. *Illiberalism Studies Program*. Retrieved June 28, 2024, from <https://www.illiberalism.org/andrea-peto-on-gender-and-illiberalism/>
- Puar, J. K. (2007). *Terrorist assemblages: Homonationalism in queer times*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822390442>
- Rønsholt, C. B. (2020, March 5). Kirstine Holst hædres for kæmp for samtykke. *Altinget*. Retrieved March 18, 2024, from <https://www.alinget.dk/navne-nyt/kirstine-holst-haedres-for-kamp-for-samtykke>

- Shamshiri-Petersen, D., Kjær, U., & Kosiara-Pedersen, K. (2024). Ikke alle ønsker lige meget kønsligestilling. In K. M. Hansen & R. Stubager (Eds.), *Partiledernes kamp om midten: Folketingsvalget 2022* (pp. 241–260). Jurist- og Økonomiforbundets Forlag.
- Stamenkovic, P. (2022). A philosophical analysis of the recent controversy about “Islamism” in French academia. *Ruch Filozoficzny*, 77(4), 153–173. <https://doi.org/10.12775/RF.2021.040>
- Stidsen, M. (2019, October 21). Derfor er MeToo en terrorbevægelse. *Berlingske*. Retrieved March 18, 2024, from <https://www.berlingske.dk/kommentarer/marianne-stidsen-derfor-er-metoo-en-terrorbevaegelse>
- Verloof, M., & Paternotte, D. (2018). The feminist project under threat in Europe. *Politics and Governance*, 6(3), 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v6i3.1736>

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if you modified the licensed material. You do not have permission under this license to share adapted material derived from this chapter or parts of it.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter’s Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter’s Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.





Productive Resistance

Rok Smrdelj and Roman Kuhar

When the initial signs of anti-gender campaigns began to surface nearly two decades ago, the predominant response from politicians, practitioners, and some activists alike was to dismiss those ideas as relics of the “medieval past” rather than serious contemporary concerns. It was widely believed that society was on an unstoppable trajectory toward “full equality,” and that such regressive ideologies had no place in modern democratic politics.

However, after the first successes of anti-gender mobilizations, the initial dismissive attitude shifted to one of defensive reactivity. The inflammatory populist rhetoric of anti-gender actors was only met with passive responses, characterized largely by denials and rebuttals of the accusations that these movements effectively directed at feminists, LGBT+ activists, and what they broadly referred to as “corrupt elites.”

Our analysis demonstrates that while the initial responses were defensive, feminist and LGBT+ movements have since transitioned toward a

R. Smrdelj (✉) • R. Kuhar

Faculty of Arts, Department of Sociology, University of Ljubljana,
Ljubljana, Slovenia

e-mail: rok.smrdej@ff.uni-lj.si; roman.kuhar@ff.uni-lj.si

© The Author(s) 2025

R. Smrdelj, R. Kuhar (eds.), *Anti-Gender Mobilizations in Europe and the Feminist Response*, Palgrave Studies in European Political Sociology, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-87693-6_10

255

more proactive form of resistance, which we will call “productive resistance.” Today, the landscape of responses is more diverse, being influenced by factors such as the structural position of individual actors, the degree of their institutionalization, and the broader political context—all of which are examined in the chapters of this book.¹

A substantial body of scholarship has emerged to analyze anti-gender mobilizations (see Paternotte, 2023); however, a critical gap persists in research focused on effective feminist and LGBT+ responses to the challenges posed by these movements. This collective volume aims to address this gap by comparatively examining these strategies and, in doing so, providing valuable insights into the mechanisms through which diverse social groups advocate for their rights within the shifting social and political landscapes of democratic backsliding (Waldner & Lust, 2018).

The first valuable insights into the strategies employed by feminist and LGBT+ groups in resisting anti-gender mobilizations were provided by some national case studies. For example, Kurylo (2022) explored how local feminist actors in Poland resisted right-wing populist constructions of (in)security by utilizing counter-populist discourses and security-related aesthetics, drawing on Judith Butler’s theory of performative politics. Graff and Korolczuk (2022) also provided an account of the Black Protests in Poland, suggesting a new wave of feminist organizing called “populist feminism.” Similarly, Yüce and Çatalbaş (2023) examined feminist organizations’ social media activism in Turkey, identifying strategies aimed at building networks and countering reactionary online publics. One of the most effective strategies highlighted in their study was the avoidance of direct confrontation, while simultaneously disregarding anti-gender reactive counter-publics. The study further underscores the critical role of forming alliances with like-minded groups, securing support from politicians and celebrities, and establishing local and international networks. Similarly, a study on feminist strategies employed in the Catalan Parliament to counteract the far-right party Vox’s opposition to gender equality highlights the importance of coalition building, rule-making, and institutionalizing gender equality as key responses to anti-gender opposition

¹In addition to the project “FIERCE – Feminist Movements Revitalizing Democracy in Europe” (No. 101061748), funded by the EU Horizon Europe research and innovation program, this text was also produced within the framework of the project “Gender, Democracy, and the Neoconservative Anti-Gender Movement” (J5-50158, 2023–2026) and the research program “Problems of Autonomy and Identity at the Time of Globalization” (P6-0194, 2019–2027), both funded by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency.

(Caravantes et al., 2024). The importance of broad coalition support is further demonstrated in Rédai's (2023) analysis of the publication of *A Fairytale for Everyone*, which sparked anti-gender backlash in Hungary while also illustrating how cultural production can serve as a platform for resistance against authoritarian regimes. Similarly, scientific production is also framed as a site of resistance. A study on Swedish gender studies scholars and their experiences of perceived attacks on their work positions gender studies as both a site of resilience and a platform for imagining alternative futures beyond neoliberal and authoritarian paradigms (Carbin et al., 2024). In the context of the United States and their debates on reproductive justice, Zavella (2024) and Luna (2020) emphasized the importance of discursive actions to promote cultural shifts. Similarly, the significance of "framing" or "reframing" and coalition activism, which focuses on "what unites rather than what divides," is highlighted in some studies on countering the backlash of anti-gender mobilizations in the Global South (Edström et al., 2024). Most recently, Böhmová (2024) examined the strategic practices of the Croatian feminist movement in defending abortion rights, highlighting a shift from compliant to contentious practices over the last decade. This shift was influenced by external factors, such as the rise of conservative movements and expected changes in abortion laws, as well as an internal generational shift within the movement.

There is also a lack of systematic transnational and comparative analysis of the strategies employed by feminist and LGBT+ actors. A notable exception is the analysis of women's rights movements in Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, and Poland against attacks on the Istanbul Convention (Krizsán & Roggeband, 2021), which shows that feminist strategies have shifted from predominantly transactional approaches to more radical, disruptive, and grassroots protest-based actions. This shift involves either diversifying strategies where state access is still possible or adopting disruptive actions in hostile states, including street protests, petitioning state actors, and turning to international bodies. Women's rights organizations have also aimed to strengthen their voices through more unified activism and broader coalition building, extending alliances beyond gender equality advocates to include pro-democracy and other civil society actors.

Another notable exception is the recent analysis of "feminist institutional responses" to anti-gender politics in the European Parliament. Based on extensive research of parliamentary debates and interviews with MEPs and other actors, Kantola and Lombardo (2024) propose four analytical categories that capture feminist institutional responses: knowledge,

coalition building, rule-making, and everyday pragmatic engagement. The “knowledge” category refers to the discursive approach of “counter-framing,” where knowledge is used to counter anti-gender narratives. “Coalition building” within institutions involves forming alliances through compromises and exchanges. “Rule-making” encompasses both formal rules and informal institutional practices designed to counter anti-gender opposition. Lastly, “everyday pragmatic engagement” includes various individual and collective actions that pragmatically target anti-gender opposition within institutional settings.

Cullen (2021) also investigated feminist responses, not specifically to anti-gender mobilizations, but more broadly to right-wing populist opposition, examining the strategies employed by the European Women’s Lobby. Utilizing the concept of counter-framing, the analysis is based on McCaffrey and Keys’s (2000) framework, which distinguishes between polarization-vilification framing (discrediting the adversary and establishing a binary us-versus-them dynamic), frame saving (efforts to rescue feminist frames that have been denounced), and frame debunking (discrediting competing ideologies). Cullen identifies that the European Women’s Lobby has employed all three strategies over the past decade, with vilification and debunking demonstrating limited effectiveness. The study emphasizes that feminist responses to right-wing populism should be inclusive, incorporating an analysis of the broader economic and social factors that contribute to inequalities.

Çağatay et al. (2023) explored the connectedness of resistance and resilience, showing how feminist and LGBT+ activists in Germany, Turkey, and Sweden cultivate resilience through care networks and mobilize collective solidarity in response to anti-gender challenges. Their research reveals how resistance and resilience are intertwined in both online and offline spaces, underscoring the importance of collective resources and alliances across borders. Moreover, they argue that resilience is not merely an individual trait but a collective process, reinforced by solidarity structures that help activists navigate both digital and physical spaces.

Lourdes Peroni (2024) examined the responses of international human rights bodies to anti-gender mobilizations, categorizing them into three types of counteractions—assertive, defensive, and offensive—that aim to resist, mitigate, or directly confront anti-gender discourse. Based on interviews with advocates and scholars in Hungary and Poland, the study investigates how these responses challenge the backlash against gender equality and address the hostile environments shaped by anti-gender movements.

Some studies do not concentrate on the analysis of existing strategies; rather, they offer recommendations for transnational approaches and strategies that should be implemented to counter anti-gender mobilizations. Näser-Lather et al. (2023), for example, discuss strategies to counter anti-gender attacks on academia and scientific work, proposing a transdisciplinary intersectional approach. They emphasize exposing antifeminism as a reactionary ideology that undermines democracy and advocate for integrating discussions on antifeminism into higher education curricula to empower students in deconstructing and countering these arguments. The authors call for a better institutionalization of gender research in universities and the establishment of protective measures to shield researchers from hate speech and other attacks.

They underscore the importance of public engagement and clear science communication, highlighting the need for effective interactions with journalists and social media to emphasize the relevance of gender studies. Lastly, they stress the necessity for sustained collaboration between scholars, journalists, and activists to maintain networks and support continuous cooperation in countering anti-gender attacks.

In the context of feminist and LGBT+ social movements, Petö (2024) posits that the initial step in devising effective counter-strategies to anti-gender mobilizations is to advance beyond reactive measures and develop proactive, independent strategies. One such strategy is re-enchantment, wherein progressive politics should adopt a new language beyond policy to effectively mobilize against anti-gender movements and the neoliberal framework. In alignment with Krizsan and Roggeband (2018), Petö also highlights the necessity of reconsidering the role of NGOs as the primary form of protest, given the rise of state-funded pseudo-NGOs (government-organized non-governmental organizations; see the chapter on Turkey in this volume) which challenge traditional NGOs. This necessitates resistance through localized, grassroots movements. Additionally, progressive politics should explore the emancipation of women beyond employment and focus on addressing localized issues globally to transform political parties into genuine representative institutions.

Krizsan and Roggeband (2018; Roggeband & Krizsán, 2020) also address the necessity of analyzing feminist movements' responses to anti-gender mobilizations by proposing a triadic conceptual approach, termed the "gender power triangle." This framework rethinks the role of the state by introducing a triangular understanding of the relationships between the state, women's organizations, and a new actor—the anti-gender

movement. This new situation between feminist actors and the state might call for “more complex forms of engagement, with mixed strategies and capacities” (Roggeband & Krizsán, 2020, p. 12), such as grassroots, decentralized actions, disruptive repertoires (including protests and petitions), securing alternative sources of funding, or utilizing abeyance as a strategic response to the lack of political opportunities.

Existing studies and discussions place considerable emphasis on the importance of knowledge and feminist scholarship as the foundation for strategies to counter and respond to anti-gender mobilizations (Kantola & Lombardo, 2024; Lombardo & Caravantes, 2024; Roggeband & Krizsán, 2020). The protection of the scientific methods of knowledge production is crucial because the anti-gender project encompasses not only political power but also epistemic power (Korolczuk, 2020; Paternotte & Verloo, 2021). This is also evident from our comparative analysis, where all identified strategies are either based on or framed by feminist and LGBT+ knowledge, whether derived from academic expertise or the embodied knowledge produced through activist work. Nonetheless, relying solely on scientific rhetoric or the belief that a rational, well-informed public will follow scientific arguments does not necessarily counter the emotionally based strategies of anti-gender actors. Petö (2024) specifically points out that one of the most effective strategies of anti-gender actors is the new language they utilize, which calls for progressive politics to “move politics back to the ground to people using a different language than the language of policy.”

FROM REACTION TO PROACTION

The authors of the national case studies presented in this volume adopt diverse theoretical perspectives in their analysis of feminist and LGBT+ strategies against anti-gender mobilizations. Some adopt a framework of antagonistic politics, highlighting polarization, confrontation, and intensified conflict between ideologically diverse groups; others situate their analysis within the movement-counter-movement dynamic, emphasizing the strategic navigation of political opportunities and demonstrating how both sides adapt and reframe their strategies in response to each other's actions.

In this comparative conclusion, we propose the concept of “productive resistance” to illustrate a shift from reactive to more proactive stances and strategies used in countering anti-gender mobilization. This builds on Paternotte's (2020, 2023; see also Corrêa et al., 2023) critique of viewing

anti-gender mobilizations solely as a backlash. Paternotte contends that the backlash approach, though widely used to explain current events across diverse contexts, is problematic for several reasons. First, it oversimplifies history by assuming a mechanical relationship between feminist and LGBT+ activism and opposition, neglecting the complexities and nuances of these struggles. Second, it promotes a linear and teleological view of progress, suggesting that history inevitably moves toward a more progressive future, thus underestimating the potential rise of authoritarianism. Third, it imposes simplistic and binary categorizations, overlooking the diversity and internal tensions in both conservative and progressive camps, which could limit opportunities for building more creative and effective alliances. Additionally, this narrative tends to focus too narrowly on what is under attack, obscuring the broader goal of anti-gender mobilizations: the construction of a new neoconservative social order.

From the perspective of the movements' strategies, the backlash framework often implies that progressive actions are followed by conservative reactions, with feminist and LGBT+ actors then merely defending past achievements. If we limit our analysis to this perspective, we risk overlooking the productive dimension of these responses. Our case studies show that feminist and LGBT+ movements are not just defending established rights but are also innovating and expanding into new areas of engagement. These strategies go beyond a mere defensive stance, proposing new policies and actions that proactively protect and expand rights, even when they are not under immediate threat.

In the remainder of this concluding chapter, we revisit the foundational question posed at the outset of this volume: How do feminist and LGBT+ movements adapt their strategies in response to the rise of anti-gender mobilizations, and what challenges do they encounter in an era defined by antagonistic politics, misinformation, and conspiracy theories? The eight case studies that form the core of this book reveal that, despite significant structural obstacles and disadvantages compared to anti-gender actors, feminist and LGBT+ movements exhibit remarkable resilience, particularly through their capacity for "productive resistance." While the movements examined in these chapters operate within diverse national contexts, each with its own specific conditions and opportunities for action, they share commonalities rooted in their collective opposition to anti-gender mobilizations. These shared characteristics reflect a unified approach that not only transcends the notion of a mere backlash but also embraces a forward-looking vision, actively shaping new social realities.

THE CONTINUUM OF STRATEGIES

The strategies outlined in this volume are categorized into eight distinct types, some with various sub-types, as detailed in Table 1. Although these strategies exist on a continuum, empirical cases from each national study have been used to evaluate and analyze the reactive or proactive tendencies of each strategy. While many strategies may have initially served a reactive purpose, with feminist and LGBT+ movements primarily adopting defensive positions in response to anti-gender attacks, these strategies have evolved over time to assume more proactive and productive roles.

Table 1 Types of strategies

<i>Strategy type</i>	<i>Strategy sub-types</i>	<i>Level of engagement with anti-gender actors</i>
1. Public actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counter-protests • Subversive strategies • Humor 	High (direct intervention through counter-protests)
2. Legal and institutional actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutional engagement • Legal interventions • Lobbying • Strategic litigation • Participation in political processes 	Low (focus on legislation and institutions)
3. Watchdog advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fact-checking • Monitoring 	Variable (high in direct responses, low in monitoring)
4. Strategic communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Storytelling • Issue reappropriation 	Low (focus on broader audience engagement)
5. Digital activism		Variable (can be high or low depending on context)
6. Strategic withdrawal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-engagement • Camouflage 	Low (avoids direct engagement)
7. Community and coalition building		Low (focus on building alliances)
8. Empowerment and protective advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer-to-peer support • Reporting threats and incidents 	Variable (low in peer-to-peer support, high in reporting to authorities)

Thus, their position on this continuum shifts depending on the context, period, and specific cases in which they are applied.

In the current phase of feminist and LGBT+ movements' responses to anti-gender mobilizations, the productive dimension of their strategies is reflected in the relatively low (or variable) levels of direct engagement with anti-gender actors. Here, engagement encompasses several key areas, including physical participation (e.g., attending protests), digital responses (e.g., reacting to anti-gender posts on social media), and responses to anti-gender initiatives (e.g., countering efforts to block equality legislation). The consistently low level of engagement across these areas underscores a strategic shift by feminist and LGBT+ actors toward proactive, forward-looking policies, rather than becoming entangled in reactive confrontations with anti-gender actors.

Public Actions

The first of the identified strategy types, public actions, encompasses proactive public interventions aimed at challenging and disrupting anti-gender activities and discourses. In this form of collective action participants actively intervene in public space, generating visible resistance (Tilly, 2004; della Porta & Diani, 2006). Three specific approaches can be identified in this context: counter-protests to anti-gender rallies and demonstrations; subversive strategies which involve innovative and visually impactful actions that leverage artistic, symbolic, or direct interventions to challenge and disrupt anti-gender messages, discourses, and activities; and the use of humor to counter anti-gender rhetoric and attract media attention.

Counter-protests are a form of collective action which range from spontaneous demonstrations to disrupt or halt anti-gender activities to carefully organized actions, aiming to reclaim public space, challenge anti-gender ideologies, and create visible resistance. In contrast, creative subversive strategies, often relying on subversive art and performative politics (Butler, 1997), use innovative and visually impactful artistic or symbolic interventions to disrupt anti-gender messages without requiring physical presence. This approach is particularly effective in the contexts where protests are restricted, offering a powerful alternative to direct confrontation. Additionally, humor-based public actions leverage positive imagery and comedic elements to counter anti-gender rhetoric, diffuse hostility, and engage a broader audience. Studies on the use of humor as a form of resistance demonstrate that it can facilitate activists' engagement with broader

audiences and reduce tension (Damir-Geilsdorf & Milich, 2020). The use of humor not only provides a critique of discriminatory messages in an accessible manner, but also serves to strengthen solidarity and foster a sense of community among participants. By being media-friendly and visually engaging, these actions increase visibility and help spread their message more effectively, undermining opposition anti-gender discourse while strengthening feminist or LGBT+ movements.

This group of strategies involves a relatively high level of engagement with anti-gender actors, as they directly intervene in their (physical) activities, aligning them more with reactive strategies. However, they also have a productive dimension, as counter-protests often evolve into broader actions that go beyond merely responding to anti-gender mobilizations. The productive aspect is especially evident in subversive strategies and the use of humor, which create dynamics not directly tied to specific anti-gender actions. By employing humor and subversive tactics, these approaches undermine anti-gender discourses by reshaping their meaning and rendering anti-gender stances absurd, thereby potentially diminishing their legitimacy.

Legal and Institutional Actions

Legal and institutional actions engage with formal institutions to challenge unjust and discriminatory policies promoted by anti-gender mobilizations and strengthen gender equality and justice. These strategies include institutional engagement, legal interventions, lobbying, strategic litigation, and participation in political processes. Institutional engagement, for example, involves feminist actors and their allies intervening in formal settings like legislative bodies and courtrooms to create spaces where feminist voices are heard and influence policy decisions. Through active participation, they advocate for gender equality and justice within these institutions. Moreover, legal interventions use judicial processes to challenge discriminatory policies and practices, trying to establish legal precedents that protect marginalized groups. This approach involves collaboration between legal professionals, advocacy groups, and affected communities, ensuring that legal arguments are both sound and reflective of lived experiences.

High-profile litigation, however, not only addresses specific injustices but also generates public awareness, mobilizing support for broader systemic change. In addition, lobbying focuses on influencing policymakers,

legislators, and government officials to secure legislative or regulatory changes that align with feminist goals. By engaging directly with political actors, movements aim to shape policies that address the needs of marginalized communities. Some activists respond to anti-gender mobilizations by seeking political office, thereby expanding their influence and advancing changes that may not be achievable through activism alone. However, these strategies are not unique to feminist and LGBT+ movements. Numerous studies have shown that anti-gender mobilizations have successfully employed similar or even identical tactics, including strategic litigation and the “walking through institutions” approach (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). As a result, this feminist strategy now operates within a landscape increasingly shaped by the rise of anti-gender movements. The latter frequently invoke human rights frameworks, emphasizing claims such as religious freedom and the protection of children’s rights, which poses new challenges for an effective use of legal interventions.

The productive dimension of legal and institutional actions is evident in the fact that these strategies are not confined to addressing only specific anti-gender threats but may represent a broader feminist and LGBT+ vision focusing on building an inclusive society and strengthening equality policies. Among all the identified strategy types, this productive dimension is most prominent in legal and institutional actions, where feminist and LGBT+ actors work to influence legislation and institutions to bring about societal change. Unlike more direct confrontational strategies, such as public actions, the level of engagement with anti-gender actors in this context is generally low, as the focus is on shaping laws and institutional practices to achieve long-term, systemic progress. However, this can change when these processes involve direct confrontations within expert bodies, parliamentary commissions, and similar settings.

Watchdog Advocacy

Watchdog advocacy encompasses systematic strategies to ensure accurate information dissemination and public accountability, primarily through fact-checking and monitoring. As Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) point out in their report on “information disorder” for the Council of Europe, disinformation agents exploit echo chambers and filter bubbles, targeting groups that are more likely to accept and share their messages without opposition. Social media amplifies this effect by reinforcing confirmation

bias, as individuals are more likely to trust and spread information from within their peer networks, exacerbating polarization.

While there are extensive discussions on how to counter fake news—ranging from regulatory measures to educational initiatives—feminist and LGBT+ actors must respond promptly and cannot rely on potential future legal solutions or self-regulation by social media platforms. Our study shows that anti-gender misinformation has often been effectively countered through simple fact-checking. While this may not change the opinions of those entrenched in echo chambers, it can influence the media, politicians, and segments of the general public.

Fact-checking involves countering misinformation and the distorted narratives propagated by anti-gender actors by systematically analyzing false claims, deconstructing inaccuracies, and offering evidence-based counterarguments. By presenting scientifically backed data and credible sources, activists educate the public, correct misconceptions, and strengthen the credibility of feminist and allied movements as reliable sources of information. In addition, monitoring focuses on evaluating gender policies implemented by public administrations to ensure they effectively address gender inequalities. This includes policy analysis, data collection, and the establishment of benchmarks to measure progress. By making findings public and advocating for necessary reforms, watchdog advocacy promotes public accountability and transparency, and engages with policymakers, civil society, and the public to influence positive policy change.

Although the strategies classified as watchdog advocacy may initially seem reactive, as they involve varying levels of engagement with anti-gender actors—high when directly responding to misinformation and low when monitoring public discourse to ensure the dissemination of accurate information—they also have a significant productive dimension. These strategies reflect a broader social vision focused on promoting reliable information in key areas of equality policy (e.g., reproductive rights). Thus, they do more than just counter false information; they help shape a normative framework for how information on equality policies should be understood and communicated in public. In this way, watchdog advocacy is not only reactive but also plays a crucial role in shaping public understanding and discourse on gender-related issues.

Strategic Communication

The next type of strategy identified in our study, strategic communication, uses various discursive techniques to challenge dominant anti-gender narratives and engage diverse audiences. Two key techniques are storytelling and issue reappropriation.

Storytelling amplifies marginalized voices and introduces new dimensions to public debates by sharing personal experiences often overlooked in mainstream discourse. It engages the public emotionally and intellectually, making abstract issues more relatable (Polletta, 2006). For example, in response to negative narratives about transgender people, storytelling might share positive, empowering experiences of the individuals who have transitioned. The goal is to challenge dominant exclusionary narratives and provide space for alternative viewpoints. Moreover, issue reappropriation involves reclaiming key issues raised by opposing movements, showing how they align with the feminist movement's goals. For instance, feminist activists might address some concerns raised by men's movements, demonstrating that these issues are already part of their broader agenda. In several cases analyzed in our study, the feminist movement demonstrated that it had been actively addressing these issues for years, thereby revealing that opposition to the movement is unfounded. Reappropriation can also involve reclaiming the topics co-opted by anti-gender actors, such as the focus on "innocent children," to expose the deception in anti-gender narratives by highlighting real dangers to children. This technique challenges and undermines the narratives put forward by anti-gender actors.

The communication approaches discussed arise from the recognition that the contemporary public sphere no longer serves as a space for deliberative debate and the free exchange of opinions (if such a space ever truly existed). Instead, it is shaped by antagonistic dynamics, marked by intense polarization and confrontation between ideologically opposed actors (Mouffe, 2013, 2018). These conditions necessitate innovative communication strategies, such as storytelling, which engage the public through affective dimensions (see also Ahmed, 2004). In this context, these approaches take on a distinctly productive character, allowing feminist and LGBT+ movements to communicate their goals and initiatives effectively to a broader audience. In doing so, they emerge directly from the existing social context, working to build a more inclusive society.

The level of engagement with anti-gender actors through these innovative communication strategies is generally low, as they are primarily focused on reaching and engaging a broader audience. However, the exact level of engagement may vary depending on the specific strategy employed.

Digital Activism

Digital activism harnesses digital tools and platforms to organize, advocate, and mobilize efforts to protect and advance equality policies and extend existing rights. This strategy type leverages the Internet and social media to protest anti-gender activities, raise awareness, and foster community engagement in virtual spaces. In the contemporary social context, it is challenging to separate digital activism from “traditional” activism in physical space, as social media and digital technologies are deeply embedded in our daily lives (Smrdelj & Lenarčič, 2024). Consequently, all strategies employed by feminist and LGBT+ movements are inherently connected to the digital media sphere (e.g., information about an upcoming protest can spread online, leading to a corresponding event in physical space). Since digital spaces transcend physical boundaries, they become crucial when restrictions arise. For instance, when physical protests are limited by pandemic-related measures or political prohibitions, digital activism becomes essential for maintaining momentum and visibility for social movements. Thus, through the digital realm, activists can continue to mobilize, advocate, and engage communities, ensuring their causes remain vibrant and impactful despite physical constraints.

While the contemporary digital media sphere provides structural opportunities for strengthening neoconservative populist efforts (Pajnik, 2023), including anti-gender mobilizations, our study highlights that the digital media sphere can also serve as a powerful platform for successful feminist and LGBT+ activism. Although it is difficult to assess the level of engagement with anti-gender actors in digital activism—sometimes it can be very high (e.g., in direct confrontations on social media), but in most cases it involves low levels of interaction—it is clear that the digital sphere offers many structural opportunities for feminist and LGBT+ activism and, in this sense, holds significant structural importance for fostering a more inclusive society.

In addition to real-time activism, digital platforms serve as repositories of knowledge and memory. For instance, digital archives documenting femicide cases in recent years provide a stark reminder of the ongoing

violence against women and serve as an evidence base for advocacy. Podcasts offer another medium for in-depth discussions, storytelling, and education, reaching diverse audiences with accessible and engaging content. In the context of storytelling, it is important to highlight another dimension: the use of affective communication to spread love, compassion, empathy, and positive emotions as a counterbalance to moral panic and the politics of fear (Wodak, 2015). By promoting positive emotions, personal stories are also emphasized, aiming to evoke empathy in a broader audience and thereby build a more solidaristic and inclusive society.

Furthermore, digital activism also encompasses organizing support and advocacy groups to combat online harassment and cybersexism. It involves social media moderation and messaging control, including blocking and deleting hateful comments and users, as well as retaining records of these comments for reporting and legal purposes. In this manner, their goal is to create a safe and supportive environment for members of social minorities. At the same time, they strive to foster a culture of zero tolerance toward hate speech and violence, which are often prevalent in online spaces.

In general, digital activism holds great promise because the digital space is limitless, unbound by the physical barriers and constraints that often restrict traditional forms of activism. However, it is important to acknowledge that the Internet is not without its challenges. Authoritarian regimes may attempt to limit and censor online activities, imposing restrictions on the flow of information and curtailing freedom of expression. Despite these efforts, digital activism continues to hold substantial potential for the development of innovative strategies, as our study clearly demonstrates.

Strategic Withdrawal

Strategic withdrawal refers to deliberate tactics employed by feminist and LGBT+ actors to either avoid unproductive confrontations with anti-gender activists (strategic non-engagement) or subtly introduce feminist/progressive ideas into resistant spaces, advancing their goals without triggering opposition (strategic integration or camouflage). The level of engagement with anti-gender actors is the lowest in the case of strategic non-engagement. This strategy's productive dimension lies in deliberately ignoring anti-gender provocations or invitations to collaborate, avoiding the legitimization of anti-gender actors through public dialogue. In practice, this means that feminist and LGBT+ actors have chosen not to

participate in *pro et contra* media debates and roundtable discussions, particularly when the focus is on human rights and, more specifically, minority rights, claiming that such issues cannot be discussed in such a manner. Participation is withheld where rational discourse is unlikely, and engagement risks amplifying anti-gender voices. By choosing not to react to provocations, lies, or inflammatory statements—particularly online—activists aim to deprive anti-gender actors of the attention and platform they seek, preventing the escalation of conflicts and the spread of misinformation. This approach does not mean that all anti-gender activities are ignored; rather, responses are selective, focusing only on the instances that are crucial to achieving the movement's goals. This tactical decision preserves the integrity of the movement's message and avoids diverting resources and attention from constructive efforts. It is important to note that non-engagement in this context is strategic; however, non-engagement can also result from structural limitations, such as insufficient financial resources, a small activist base, or a lack of infrastructure, which may prevent organizations from responding even when they would prefer to.

Similarly, strategic non-engagement is a tactical approach used by feminist actors to gain access to spaces and audiences that might otherwise be resistant due to their feminist affiliations. This strategy involves subtly downplaying or concealing their feminist identity and focusing on expert knowledge to avoid potential criticism or exclusion. By doing so, activists can engage with these audiences more effectively and deliver critical information without provoking resistance. Presenting themselves in such a manner helps build trust and acceptance, allowing activists to incorporate key messages into workshops or presentations. For example, a workshop on general health or personal development might include elements of comprehensive sexual education, promote gender equality, or challenge harmful gender stereotypes. The productive dimension of this approach lies in promoting feminist or LGBT+ ideas without them being automatically dismissed due to their label, which could trigger reactions from anti-gender forces. As a result, engagement with anti-gender actors remains low—or is deliberately kept low—while the focus is on fostering an inclusive society through the subtle promotion of more equitable and inclusive perspectives.

Community and Coalition Building

Community and coalition building involves feminist movements collaborating with a wide range of groups to combat anti-gender activities. These alliances extend beyond traditional partners, such as LGBT+ actors, to include trade unions, businesses, government bodies, and organizations focused on democratic values and human rights. By forming broad-based coalitions, feminist movements can pool resources, share expertise, and amplify their collective voice, resulting in stronger and more far-reaching advocacy efforts. Community and coalition building involves mapping the social and political landscape to identify allies, opponents, and those in the “gray zone” who may be undecided or inconsistent in their support. The goal is to sway these individuals toward supporting feminist and LGBT+ issues through public campaigns, direct dialogue, and social pressure, often utilizing digital platforms. Additionally, coalition building seeks to expand reach by engaging in non-traditional spaces, such as music and cultural festivals, to attract new audiences. By forming alliances with diverse actors, feminist movements foster a unified response to counter anti-gender activities, effectively leveraging collective resources and influence. Additionally, our study highlights the growing trend of intersectional cooperation—driven not only by the fact that anti-gender mobilizations target a broad range of groups and their rights, beyond just women’s rights, but also the fact that the issues central to feminist activism are increasingly intersectional in nature.

In the community and coalition building approach, engagement with anti-gender actors is minimal, as the focus is primarily on the productive formation of alliances. These alliances represent a new mode of practicing feminist and LGBT+ activism in the contemporary social context, incorporating an intersectional dimension and expanding to a broader, even transnational, level.

Empowerment and Protective Advocacy

Empowerment and protective advocacy focus on providing direct support and protection for individuals in feminist and LGBT+ movements, as well as the broader social groups for which these movements advocate. Assistance is organized through peer-to-peer networks and systematic reporting of discrimination and violence. In the area of reproductive rights, for example, peer-to-peer support empowers women by offering

direct assistance when navigating hospitals or the healthcare system, and by sharing critical embodied knowledge based on personal experiences with these procedures. Activists provide both practical and emotional support, helping women access healthcare services, resources, and the emotional care they need. This approach also involves monitoring health institutions to evaluate service quality and accessibility, combining immediate support with efforts toward long-term systemic change. The goal is to create a network of informed and empowered women who can collectively advocate for better services and support systems. Moreover, systematic reporting involves documenting and reporting instances of hate speech, physical attacks, and intimidation by anti-gender actors to authorities. This regular reporting helps track patterns of discrimination and violence, ensuring these incidents are formally addressed. By advocating for legal enforcement, this strategy reinforces the role of the legal system in protecting individuals and holding perpetrators accountable.

In this group of strategies, engagement with anti-gender actors varies, ranging from relatively low in instances of peer-to-peer support to higher levels of engagement when anti-gender actors are reported to authorities. Both approaches demonstrate a productive dimension: internally, by fostering solidarity among group members, and externally, by actively contributing to a more inclusive society through the reporting of hate crimes and hate speech. This dual approach seeks to build a solidarity-based society that upholds zero tolerance for actions promoting discrimination, violence, and exclusion.

CONCLUSION

At the outset of our discussions for this book with our partners from the FIERCE project, our initial assumptions were relatively straightforward. Having observed the rise of anti-gender rhetoric in our local contexts and its increasing normalization in mass media, political debates, and even informal conversations, our initial outlook was somewhat pessimistic. We anticipated that feminist and LGBT+ actors, faced with the growing wave of anti-gender mobilizations, were predominantly engaged in defensive reactions. This expectation was reinforced by our early discussions, where the “backlash” perspective was frequently invoked to describe the dire circumstances. This concept initially shaped our research framework, and the notion of “backlash” was itself incorporated into the provisional title of the book. However, as our research advanced and we began to collect

empirical data, with the chapters taking shape, it became clear that this framing was too narrow as well as misleading. What we were witnessing was not simply a defensive reaction to the regressive mobilizations of anti-gender actors, but something more constructive—what we have since identified as “productive resistance.”

This recognition signifies a crucial shift, which we identify as the third phase in the responses to anti-gender mobilizations. As previously discussed, the initial phase was characterized by an underestimation of the severity of anti-gender threats. This was followed by the reactive phase, marked by immediate responses to these mobilizations. However, we are now observing the emergence of a new phase of “productive resistance.” In this phase, feminist and LGBT+ movements are not limited to merely reacting to anti-gender initiatives. Instead, they are proactively developing a broader social vision that transcends these confrontations, even in the face of ongoing neoconservative attacks.

A key characteristic of this phase is the relatively low level of direct engagement with anti-gender actors. This does not indicate a lack of activity but rather a strategic shift. As detailed in the eight types of strategies previously discussed, feminist and LGBT+ actors are increasingly concentrating on developing and implementing proactive, future-oriented policies rather than becoming entangled in direct opposition to anti-gender mobilizations.

While many of the strategies identified are not entirely new, their application within the framework of “productive resistance” represents a significant innovation, yielding several notable outcomes. For instance, feminist and LGBT+ movements have successfully contributed to legislative reforms and have thwarted efforts to pass regressive policies. Their efforts have heightened public awareness of equality issues and have reinforced community cohesion in response to escalating anti-gender mobilizations. Additionally, these movements have forged alliances not only within feminist and LGBT+ networks but also across broader civil society, official institutions, and transnational coalitions. Importantly, they have empowered vulnerable social groups and minorities through tangible support in response to anti-gender attacks.

However, this optimism must be taken with a grain of salt. While the proactive shift in the responses of feminist and LGBT+ groups is significant, it is important to recognize that resistance can only be truly productive when it operates within more or less functioning democratic institutions. Without this foundation, breakthroughs become more difficult, and

anti-gender movements specifically aim to undermine these fundamental pillars. The irony lies in the fact that they often use democratic tools, such as referenda, to achieve this.

Testimonies from activists in Hungary illustrate how, within the context of illiberal democracy, one is left without the institutional support or leverage needed to advance demands and proactive efforts. This is not to suggest that authoritarian regimes do not have cracks through which productive resistance is possible, but such resistance is significantly constrained and often carries serious risks, including threats to life.

Thus, we cannot naively claim that the threat posed by the anti-gender project is not real—it certainly is. However, the successes of the anti-gender movement should not lead to despair. Rather, they provide an opportunity to rethink feminist and LGBT+ politics. As our research indicates, these challenges can also be used to explore new productive forms of resistance against neoconservative initiatives. In this, coalition building and solidarity are key. The role of feminism and the LGBT+ movement in the twenty-first century is, therefore, to create new spaces of freedom, which can only be achieved through joint proactive engagement.

REFERENCES

- Ahmed, S. (2004). *The cultural politics of emotion*. Routledge.
- Böhmová, L. (2024). We are civil society!: Strategic practice used by the Croatian feminist movement to address the controversy around the right to abortion as a response to growing conservatism. *Intersections. East European Journal of Society and Politics*, 10(2), 132–150. <https://doi.org/10.17356/icejsp.v10i2.1273>
- Butler, J. (1997). *Excitable speech: A politics of the performative*. Routledge.
- Çağatay, S., Göker, Z. G., Hünler, O. S., & Polatdemir, A. (2023). Collective resilience and resistance in hybrid times: Gender struggles in Germany, Turkey and Sweden. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 31, 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2023.2226362>
- Caravantes, P., Elizondo, A., & Lombardo, E. (2024). Gendering democracy: Feminist parliamentary responses to opposition against gender equality. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 34(5), 749–763. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2024.2427200>
- Carbin, M., Carlsson, E., & Nilsson, B. (2024). Telling feminist stories in an affective atmosphere of anti-genderism: Swedish gender scholars reflect upon their position. *NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08038740.2024.2413987>

- Corrêa, S., Paternotte, D., & House, C. (2023). Dr Frankenstein's hydra. In *Routledge handbook of sexuality, gender, health and rights* (pp. 484–493). Routledge.
- Cullen, P. (2021). From neglect to threat: Feminist responses to right-wing populism in the European Union. *European Politics and Society*, 22(4), 520–537. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2020.1801183>
- Damir-Geilsdorf, S., & Milich, S. (Eds.). (2020). *Creative resistance: Political humor in the Arab uprisings*. Manuscript.
- della Porta, D., & Diani, M. (2006). *Social movements: An introduction*. Blackwell Publishing.
- Edström, J., Edwards, J., Skinner, C., Lewin, T., & Nazneen, S. (2024). Introduction: Understanding gender backlash across regions. *IDS Bulletin*, 55(1), <https://doi.org/10.19088/1968-2024.102>.
- Graff, A., & Korolczuk, E. (2022). *Anti-gender politics in the populist moment*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003133520>
- Kantola, J., & Lombardo, E. (2024). Feminist institutional responses to anti-gender politics in parliamentary contexts. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 26, 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2024.2366478>
- Korolczuk, E. (2020). Counteracting challenges to gender equality in the era of anti-gender campaigns: Competing gender knowledges and affective solidarity. *Social Politics*, 27(4), 694–717. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxaa021>
- Krizsan, A., & Roggeband, C. (2018). Towards a conceptual framework for struggles over democracy in backsliding states: Gender equality policy in Central Eastern Europe. *Politics and Governance*, 6(3), 90–100. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v6i3.1414>
- Krizsán, A., & Roggeband, C. (2021). Opposing the Istanbul Convention: Actors, strategies, and frames. In *Gender and politics* (pp. 55–119). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-79069-1_3
- Kuhar, R., & Paternotte, D. (Eds.). (2017). *Anti-gender campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against equality*. Rowman & Littlefield International.
- Kurylo, B. (2022). Counter-populist performances of (in)security: Feminist resistance in the face of right-wing populism in Poland. *Review of International Studies*, 48(2), 262–281. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210521000620>
- Lombardo, E., & Caravantes, P. (2024). Co-creating inclusive intersectional democratic spaces across Europe (CCINDLE): Counteracting anti-gender through feminist knowledge. *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly*, 52(1–2), 145–156. <https://doi.org/10.1353/wsqs.2024.a924313>
- Luna, Z. (2020). *Reproductive rights as human rights: Women of color and the fight for reproductive justice*. NYU Press.
- McCaffrey, D., & Keys, J. (2000). Competitive framing processes in the abortion debate: Polarization-vilification, frame saving, and frame debunking. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 41(1), 41–61. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-8525.2000.tb02365.x>

- Mouffe, C. (2013). *Agonistics: Thinking the world politically*. Verso.
- Mouffe, C. (2018). *For a left populism*. Verso.
- Näser-Lather, M., Beck, D., Lenz, I., & Grenz, S. (2023). Counterstrategies against antifeminism: Academia meets practice. *Berliner Blätter*, 88, 117–133. <https://doi.org/10.18452/27985>.
- Pajnik, M. (2023). Transformations of the media sphere: Amplifying opportunity structures for populism. In P. Diehl & B. Bargetz (Eds.), *The complexity of populism: New approaches and methods* (pp. 161–177). Routledge.
- Paternotte, D. (2020). Backlash: A misleading narrative. *LSE Blog*. Retrieved September 10, 2024, from <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/gender/2020/03/30/backlash-a-misleading-narrative/>
- Paternotte, D. (2023). Victor Frankenstein and his creature: The many lives of ‘gender ideology’. *International Review of Sociology*, 33(1), 80–104. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03906701.2023.2187833>
- Paternotte, D., & Verloo, M. (2021). De-democratization and the politics of knowledge: Unpacking the cultural Marxism narrative. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, 28(3), 556–578. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxab025>
- Peroni, L. (2024). Mobilising in times of gender equality backsliding: International human rights responses to anti-gender discourse. *Utrecht Law Review*, 20(3), 42–55. <https://doi.org/10.36633/ulr.1080>
- Pető, A. (2024). Strategies of progressive actors against anti-gender movements. *GATE: Global Action for Trans Equality*. Retrieved September 10, 2024, from <https://gate.ngo/knowledge-portal/article/strategies-of-progressive-actors-against-anti-gender-movements/>
- Polletta, F. (2006). *It was like a fever: Storytelling in protest and politics*. University of Chicago Press.
- Rédai, D. (2023). Lesbian resistance through fairytales: The story of a children’s book clashing with an authoritarian anti-gender regime in Hungary. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 28(3), 443–459. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2023.2255044>
- Roggeband, C., & Krizsán, A. (2020). Democratic backsliding and the backlash against women’s rights: Understanding the current challenges for feminist politics (p. 35). UN Women. Retrieved September 10, 2024, from <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2020/Discussion-paper-Democratic-backsliding-and-the-backlash-against-womens-rights-en.pdf>
- Smrdelj, R., & Lenarčič, B. (2024). When worlds collide: Sociality between physical and cyberspace during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Sociologija i prostor*, 62(1), 143–163. <https://doi.org/10.5673/sip.62.1.7>
- Tilly, C. (2004). *Social movements, 1768-2004*. Paradigm Publishers.

- Waldner, D., & Lust, E. (2018). Unwelcome change: Coming to terms with democratic backsliding. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 21(1), 93–113. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-050517-114628>
- Wardle, C., & Derakhshan, H. (2017). *Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making*. Council of Europe.
- Wodak, R. (2015). *The politics of fear: What right-wing populist discourses mean*. Sage.
- Yüce, Ö. D. D. Ç., & Çatalbaş, D. (2023). Fighting against patriarchy with tweets and hashtags: Social media activism of the women’s movement and reactionary counterpublics. *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 122(4), 763–778. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-10779442>
- Zavella, P. (2024). *The movement for reproductive justice: Empowering women of color through social activism*. NYU Press.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if you modified the licensed material. You do not have permission under this license to share adapted material derived from this chapter or parts of it.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter’s Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter’s Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.



INDEX¹

A

ABCD de l'égalité, 85

Abortion, 32, 34, 36, 41–44, 46, 48,
60, 61, 64, 67, 68, 110–112,
114, 116, 117, 120–124, 127
rights, 146, 171, 174, 192

Active Dads, 200, 201, 205–209, 214

Activism, 256, 257, 261, 265,
268–269, 271

Activist coalitions, 187, 188

Affective communication, 63, 72

AKP government, 138–142, 146

Aliancia za rodinu (Slovakia), 5

Alimony rights, 144, 155

Alt-right, 199–201, 204, 206, 209,
211, 215, 219–222

American Christian Right, 3

Anti-abortion campaigns, 203,
204, 215–218

Anti-abortion groups, 68

Anti-abortion movements, 94, 183

Antifeminism/anti-feminism, 82–84,
93, 137–158, 208, 209, 219,

229–233, 235–237, 240,
241, 243

Antifeminist rhetoric, 231, 242

Anti-gender activism, 168, 232

Anti-gender actors, 82, 83, 87, 91–94,
96, 99, 101, 108, 109, 116–118,
120–123, 125, 126, 137, 138,
144, 146, 147, 156, 234,
241–245, 248, 250, 251, 255,
260, 261, 263–273

Anti-gender backlash, 219

Anti-gender campaigns, 255

Anti-gender coalitions, 137–158, 172

Anti-genderism, 208

Anti-gender mobilization, 1–17,
53–77, 107–129, 229–251,
255–261, 263–265,
268, 271–273

Anti-gender movements, 25, 28–30,
32–37, 39, 45, 47, 48, 82–85,
87, 92, 95, 97–99, 137, 143,
156, 158, 167–171, 173, 174,
178, 182, 186, 192

¹Note: Page numbers followed by 'n' refer to notes.

Anti-gender narratives, 124
 Anti-gender organizations, 58, 75
 Anti-gender protests in France
 (2012–2013), 6
 Anti-gender strategies, 60,
 82, 95, 101
Antigones, 87, 91
 Anti-Islam, 83
 Anti-LGBT+ discourse, 202
 Anti-migrant, 83, 89

B

Backlash, 257, 258, 261, 272
 Backlash against the backlash, 12
 Beijing World Conference on Women
 (1995), 3
 Big Family Gathering, 137, 153
 Big Life Gathering, 138
 Biological reproduction, 60, 61
 Black Protests, 191, 256
 Boycotts, 114, 122–124
 Burqa, 81

C

Cabaret performances, 66, 67
 Catholic Church, 84, 110, 167,
 170, 173
 influence in politics, 31
 Child custody law, 204
 Children's rights, 62, 204, 206,
 208–209, 214
 Child sexual abuse, 153, 156
 Cities of change, 116
 Civic service, 92
 Civil society, 55–58, 56n2, 58n3, 61,
 181, 199, 210, 215, 220, 221
 Clericalisation, 58
 Coalition building/coalition-building,
 119, 120, 256–258, 271, 274
 Collective action, 109

Collective resistance, 258, 263
 Colombian peace agreement
 (FARC), 13
 Confrontational and non-
 confrontational, 29,
 34–35, 40–48
 Confrontational tactics, 118–119,
 128, 129
 Conservative governments, 111,
 112, 125
 Conservative politics, 142, 188, 204,
 219, 220, 233
 Counter-framing, 258
 Counter-movements, 108, 109,
 117, 127
 Counter-protests, 63, 65–68, 72, 73,
 76, 263, 264
 Courtroom activism, 153
 Criminalization of LGBT+ activism,
 143, 152
 Crisis of masculinity, 11
 Cultural campaigns, 124
 Cultural Marxism, 2
 Cultural production, 257
 Cyberharassment, 91

D

Decidir nos hace libres, 119
 Democratic backsliding, 256
 Demographic winter, 61
 Digital activism, 181, 184, 190, 191,
 211, 268–269
 Digital communication, 115
 Digital media, 64, 65, 71, 73, 77, 241
 activism, 154, 155
 Digital security, 95
 Direct social action (DSA), 28,
 29, 40–47
 Discourse, 55, 57–63, 65–67, 71, 74
 Discursive actions, 257
 Divorce legislation, 144

E

Early marriage, 156
 Economic crisis, 27, 197
 Educational campaigns, 168, 192
 8M feminist strike, 128
 El tren de la libertad, 120, 125
 Emotional politics, 269
 Empowerment, 271–272
 Equality fatigue, 11
 Equality politics, 53–55, 57–64, 58n3, 68, 69, 76, 77
 Erdogan, Recep Tayyip, 140, 143, 151
 Escrachas, 122–124, 123n7
 Estrela report (rejection of), 13
 European elections (2024), 1
 European Union, 213
 Euthanasia, 60, 61

F

Fake news, 93, 96, 97
 Family Code reform (Slovenia), 57
 Family values, 3
 Far-right media, 200
 Far-right politics, 234
Femellistes, 90
 FEMEN, 88, 88n4, 90, 90n6
 Femicide, 151, 153, 155
 Italy, 26
 Feminism, 82, 82n2, 83, 87, 89, 91, 98, 100, 102, 107, 108, 113–115, 117, 118, 121, 128, 197–200, 203, 207–208, 274
 Feminist activism, 168, 178, 183–187, 191, 231, 242, 243
 Feminist coalitions, 120, 150, 222
 Feminist institutional responses, 257
 Feminist knowledge, 257, 258, 260, 270
 Feminist movement, 74, 108–110, 112, 113, 115–129, 168, 176–178, 180, 181, 183, 184, 187, 189, 190
 Italy, 25, 26, 28, 30, 40, 46

Feminist protests, 120
 Feminist responses, 145, 148–157, 197–222, 229–251
 Feminist strategies, 138, 148, 157, 169, 175, 177, 178, 180, 182–184, 186–189
 Feminist strikes, 120
 Femonationalism, 87, 89, 91
 Fertility conference, 217–218
 Fidesz party, 1
 France, 6, 14, 16
Frente Nacional por la Familia (Mexico), 5

G

Gallardón affair, 119
 Gender-based violence, 27, 28, 110, 114, 116, 125, 127, 128, 141, 143, 149, 150, 155, 156
 Gender-critical feminists, 28
 Gender equality/gender-equality, 138, 141, 144, 146–149, 151, 152, 156, 167, 168, 169n1, 170, 171, 173, 182, 187, 188, 190, 192, 197, 199, 200, 204, 206, 207, 213, 215, 219, 221, 230, 231, 234, 236, 237, 239, 240, 245, 247, 249, 251, 256–258, 264, 270
 Gender equity, 144, 147, 156
 Gender ideology, 1–8, 10, 11, 13–15, 27, 30, 32, 38, 170, 171, 173, 198, 204, 230, 234n3
 Gender mainstreaming, 4
 Gender studies, 230, 233, 234
 Gender theory, 58n3, 59–61, 59n4, 69, 72, 82, 84, 85, 89
 Gender violence, 199, 201, 203–205, 219
Génération Identitaire, 86, 89

Global feminist strike (March 8), 28
 Golden Dawn, 199, 201, 219
 Grassroots movements, 259
 Greek Orthodox Church, 199, 202, 215, 219

H

Hate speech, 66, 70–72
 Hazte Oír, 111, 112, 122, 124
 Heteronormativity, 61, 142, 212
 HIV-positive women, 202, 219
Hoministes, 89, 90, 90n6
 Homotransphobia, 32
 Human rights, 55, 58, 61, 69, 182, 192, 258, 265, 270, 271
 Hungary, 1, 2, 13

I

Illiberal democracy, 9
 Institutional advocacy, 129
 Institutional engagement, 264
 International Day against gender-based violence (November 25), 28
 In vitro fertilization, 60
 Islamophobia, 86, 89, 92
 Istanbul Convention, 139n2, 143, 144, 149–151, 153, 154, 156, 157
 Italy, 5, 14, 16

J

Joint custody law, 211

K

KADEM, 143, 144
 Knowledge production, 260

L

La Manif Pour Tous (LMPT), 82, 84–86, 89, 98, 101
 Law and Justice Party (PiS), 167, 170, 171, 178n3
 Legal interventions, 264, 265
 Legislative strategies, 167, 178, 185, 188, 189, 192
 LGBT+ actors, 56n2, 57, 63–66, 68, 70–73, 77
 LGBT+ movements, 255, 259, 261–265, 267, 268, 271, 273, 274
 LGBT+ rights, 26, 28, 34, 40, 47, 82, 83, 108, 124, 127, 138, 143, 156, 167, 168, 169n1, 170, 171, 173, 174, 180, 188, 192, 197, 198, 200, 202, 203, 233, 234, 237
 Lobbying, 111, 119, 122, 264
 Local governments, 152, 157

M

Madrid regional government, 121
 Mandatory joint custody law, 199, 201
 Manif pour tous, 5, 6
 Mapping the gray zone, 179, 181
 Marriage equality, 56, 57, 59–62, 59n4, 75
 Masculinist identity politics, 11
 Masculinity norms, 242, 245, 246
 Medically Assisted Procreation (MAP), 82, 85, 90, 101
 Men's rights groups, 141, 145, 152, 153, 205, 210, 236n4
 Mexico, 5
 Mobilization strategies, 114
 Moral panic, 5, 9, 13, 60, 62, 63, 74, 173, 174
 Movement-counter-movement, 260

N

Nationalism, 141, 219, 233, 238
Nemesis, 81, 82, 87, 89, 97, 101
 Neoconservatism, 261, 268, 273, 274
 Neoliberalism, 10, 150
 New Democracy (ND), 200, 201, 204, 205, 220
 Non-confrontational tactics, 118, 124
 Non-engagement, 63–65, 72, 74, 76
 Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), 69
 Non Una di Meno (NUDM), 27, 28, 29n1, 34, 36–40, 43, 45, 46
NousToutes, 81, 94, 96, 97, 99–101

O

Online harassment, 247
 Orbán, Viktor, 1
 Ordo Iuris, 171, 172, 174

P

Parental alienation, 85
 Paternal rights, 212
 Paternity leave, 231, 236, 242, 246
 Patriarchal backlash, 191, 197–222
 Peer-to-peer support, 271, 272
Platforma Impacto de Género Ya, 125, 129
 Poland, 2, 13, 14, 16
 Police violence, 150, 152, 153, 202
 Polish politics, 167–192
 Political correctness, 234
 Political opportunity structure, 109, 113
 Political polarization, 260
 Political repression, 152
 Politics of fear, 1
 Polypore state, 7

Populism, 171, 172, 220, 231, 232, 238
 Populist feminism, 256
 Populist, radical right parties, 30
 Post-democracy, 9
 Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), 142, 145
 Pride parades, 141, 152
 Proactive strategies, 259, 260, 262, 263
 Productive resistance, 16, 255–274
 Progressive activism, 139, 147, 148, 158
 Pro-life groups, 8, 15
 Pro-life movement, 31, 39, 46
 Protests, 84, 85, 87–89, 111, 114, 116, 118–125, 123n7, 168, 169, 174–178, 184, 187, 191, 192
 strategies, 29
 Public education, 68–69, 76
 Public protests, 137, 153, 154

R

Radical right-wing parties, 1, 8
 Reactive strategies, 168, 175
 Referendums (Slovenia), 55–57, 58n3, 59, 61, 62, 75
 Regional governments, 113, 120–122, 124, 128
 Reproductive rights, 57–60, 67, 120, 127, 128, 168–172, 178, 182, 190, 199, 203, 218, 266, 271
 Resilience, 258, 261
 Resistance, 255–274
 Retrogressive mobilizations, 7
 Right to choose, 119, 121
 Right-wing media, 173, 220
 Right-wing populism, 231, 232

Roman Catholic Church (RCC), 57,
58, 63, 75
Russia, 3, 8, 9

S

Same-sex marriage, 84, 88, 101, 110,
111, 116, 127, 201, 202
Same-sex partnership rights, 56, 60
Secularization, 110, 113
Secular organizations, 55, 58
Sens Commun, 86
Sex complementarity, 3, 4
Sex education, 239
Slovenia, 5, 14, 16
Socialist government (PSOE), 110,
112, 114, 127
Social media, 54, 59, 61, 65, 71–73,
76, 77, 82, 87, 89, 92, 94, 95,
97, 99, 101, 102, 234, 238, 241,
243, 247
 activism, 181, 191, 218
 campaigns, 143, 152, 155
Social movements, 259, 268
Solidarity, 258, 264, 272, 274
 actions, 65–68, 72, 76
State Pact on Gender-based
 Violence, 128
State violence, 150
StopFisba, 95, 96
Storytelling, 267, 269
Strajk Kobiet (Women's Strike),
175, 179
Strategic communication, 267–268
Strategic litigation, 55, 61, 171, 174,
264, 265
Strategic non-engagement, 63–65,
72, 74, 76
Strategic visibility reduction, 93–94
Subversive strategies, 263, 264
Surveillance, 145, 152, 153
Symbolic glue, 7

T

Toxic masculinity, 69
Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists
 (TERFs), 9, 87, 91
Transgender rights, 60, 76, 82, 82n2,
85, 90, 91, 233
Transnational coalitions, 172, 273
Turkey, 14, 16

U

Ultra-conservatism, 167, 171, 172,
238, 242
Ultra-nationalism, 113

V

Vatican, 2–5
Vélib, 94

W

Wokeness, 231, 233–235
Women's Councils, 187, 187n5, 190
Women's rights, 138, 138n1,
142–144, 151, 156, 198,
202, 203, 211, 216, 217,
239, 246
Women's Strike (Strajk Kobiet),
175, 176, 178n3, 179,
181, 182
World Congress of Families,
28, 33, 38

Y

Youth marriage, 145

Z

Za otroke gre (Slovenia), 5
Zéromacho, 89, 90