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The Rise of Anti-gender and Anti-feminist Discourses in International Politics

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Editorial Note

The Global Rise of Anti-Gender Movements and Feminist Resistance Strategies: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been a noticeable surge in anti-gender and anti-feminist discourses in international politics. Politicians, policymakers, and diverse societal actors in various countries challenge or reject feminist ideas and gender-related concepts, as well as support policy changes that erode the structures and institutions that have been instrumental in upholding women's rights, promoting gender equality, and protecting the rights of LGBTQ people. The special issue of Politikon: The IAPSS Journal of Political Science seeks to explore the multifaceted nature of these discourses, examining their origins, implications, and potential impacts on domestic, regional, and international levels. Additionally, it aims to identify strategies and opportunities for feminist resistance and advocacy in the face of the backlash.

Keywords: Anti-gender Movements; Feminist Resistance; Feminist Movements; Gender Politics; Transnational Solidarity; Right-wing Populism

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Introduction

With the multiplying global divisions around feminism and gender equality in recent years, pro- and anti-gender equality discourses play an increasingly meaningful role in national and international "politics of belonging" (Yuval-Davis 2006). A growing number of states incorporate pro-gender equality principles not only into their domestic agendas but also into their foreign policies and diplomatic practicies (Aggestam, Rasamond, and Hedling 2024). Many international organizations—from the United Nations to the World Bank—

institutionalize and mainstream gender equality discourses, weaving them into the fabric of international development strategies. At the same time, nationally and internationally a diverse array of political actors contests these normative changes.

Authoritarian states, such as Russia, act as "normative antipreneurs," actively resisting the assimilation of pro-gender equality norms and feminist concepts, not only within their borders but also on the international stage (Edenborg 2023; Kuteleva 2024; Voss 2019). In many democracies, norms tied to anti-feminism and patriarchy—homophobia, transphobia, and anti-abortion stances—are experiencing a resurgence, closely intertwined with the rise of far-right ideologies (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). Various transnational movements actively challenge same-sex marriage, sex education, and other phenomena they perceive as dangerous manifestations of "gender ideologies" (Harsin 2018; Rothermel 2020). Populist politicians further exploit these sentiments during election campaigns, capitalizing on criticism of feminist and gender equality movements (Avelar et al. 2022; Junn 2017; Vučković Juroš, Dobrotić, and Fleg 2020). Moreover, by allowing the convergence of agendas between conservative actors in the religious and political fields, the anti-gender discourses function as a "symbolic glue," giving ideological binding to reactionary initiatives and facilitating systems of alliances (Kováts and Põim 2015; Corrêa, Paternotte, and House 2023).

This special issue *Politikon: The IAPSS Journal of Political Science* stands at a critical juncture, examining these trends through six scholarly contributions. The studies reveal shared mechanisms in the operation of these movements, including media normalization and transnational circulation of anti-gender narratives, while situating them within specific socio-political histories. They also highlight feminist responses and resistance strategies, from digital media activism to grassroots organizing, showing how feminist movements navigate between institutionalization and radical politics while building transnational solidarity networks. The tensions between these opposing forces—anti-gender mobilization and feminist resistance—emerge as key sites for understanding contemporary gender politics.

Structure and Methodological Approaches

The issue opens with Sona Baldrian's organizational autoethnography examining Armenia's women's NGOs after the 2018 regime change. Her firsthand account of how increased foreign aid has reshaped NGO-state relations provides crucial insights into NGOization processes. Similarly, Mariana Fagundes-Ausani conducts multi-site ethnography of feminist media outlets in Brazil and France, enriching her analysis with in-

depth stakeholder interviews. She examines structures and hierarchies within feminist communities and emphasizes strategies they develop to promote gender equality and combat hate speech online.

Anamaria Hanžek's, Ugo Laquièze's and Jo Church's contributions further highlight that online spaces emerge as crucial sites for shaping and disseminating contemporary socio-political discourses. Laquièze's study highlights Twitter as a platform where anti-gender narratives are propagated by heterogeneous coalitions, ranging from conservative to far-right actors, leveraging digital tools for visibility and mobilization. Similarly, Church examines how trans-exclusionary radical feminist (TERF) Facebook groups foster "intimate publics" by generating a sense of belonging rooted in exclusionary and reactionary ideologies. Hanžek complements this perspective by analyzing Croatian online media's role in framing and mainstreaming conservative ideas, particularly through its portrayal of the "Be Manly" men's rights movement. Collectively, these studies underscore the dual role of online spaces as tools for mobilization and as sites where public perceptions of gender and social movements are constructed, contested, and negotiated.

Finally, Nađa Bobičić and Vanja Petrović employ discourse analysis to examine key historical documents from 1990s Serbia, revealing how post-socialist transitions shaped gender politics. Their work demonstrates how historical context remains crucial for understanding contemporary anti-gender movements and how seemingly "new" anti-gender rhetoric often recycles and repackages older nationalist, religious, and militarist ideologies.

The six contributions employ diverse yet complementary methodological approaches to study anti-gender movements and feminist responses. This methodological diversity enables examination of anti-gender movements from multiple angles, combining traditional qualitative approaches with innovative digital methods and integrating researcher positionality.

Evolving Landscape of Anti-Feminist and Anti-Gender Movements

This special issue explains how opposition to the so-called "gender ideology" serves as a unifying force, bringing together seemingly disparate actors and agendas. Contributors identify a complex landscape of anti-feminist and anti-gender actors across different contexts, revealing both continuity with traditional opposition to gender equality and the emergence of new forms of resistance.

Religious institutions, conservative political parties, and right-wing media continue to spearhead anti-feminist and anti-gender movements, with social media enabling broader

coordination of local, national, and transnational campaigns. Digital activists and influencers have become central figures in these efforts. The findings confirm that movement's focus has notably shifted from opposing same-sex marriage and adoption to targeting transgender rights, frequently employing "child protection" narratives to forge new coalitions.

Drawing on theoretical frameworks developed by Judith Butler (through 2024) and Andrea Pető (2015), contributors demonstrate how these movements mobilize diverse groups—including parent organizations, self-described "gender-critical" feminists, and some LGB advocacy groups—through tactics that exploit fear and moral panic while masking their fundamental opposition to feminist advancement and gender equality. Church's analysis of TERF communities in Australia reveals how they build collective identity around a phantasmic threat to "biological women," while Bobičić and Petrović trace how Serbian nationalist discourse construct "gender ideology" as a phantom menace to national survival and traditional family structures. Bobičić and Petrović argue that anti-feminist and anti-gender discourses incorporate the "rhetoric used to justify regional wars" and racialized demographic anxieties. Bobičić and Petrović's analysis resonate with Laquièze's examination of Francophone anti-gender campaigns that amplify their messages, integrating transphobia with anti-wokism and anti-Islam narratives. Together, Church, Bobičić and Petrović, and Laquièze show how anti-feminist and anti-gender movements strategically deploy overlapping systems of exclusion to consolidate their support among diverse reactionary actors.

These contributions also demonstrate how theoretical engagements with right-wing populism, nationalism, and fascism can help to unpack the political stakes and implications of anti-gender movements. By situating anti-feminist and anti-gender movements within broader political trends, the authors are able to critique not just their immediate targets (like transgender rights or reproductive freedoms) but also their wider political functions in bolstering conservative, patriarchal, and racialized power structures. The use of concepts like fascism (Butler 2025; Stanley 2018) and "fachosphere" (Albertini and Doucet 2016) provides powerful theoretical lenses for illuminating the authoritarian and exclusionary logics at work in many anti-gender discourses and mobilizations.

The evolution of anti-gender discourses has also affected established feminist spaces. In Serbia, Bobičić and Petrović note that even longstanding feminist organizations have seen some members adopt gender-critical positions. This shift within established feminist spaces signals the movement's ability to influence previously progressive organizations. Similarly, in Armenia, Baldrian describes how some feminist NGOs avoid addressing transgender rights

under the guise of specialization. She argues it is "a strategic fault to assume Armenian women's NGOs are open to queer issues." Fagundes-Ausani's study of feminist digital media in Brazil and France highlights how conflicts between trans-inclusive and trans-exclusionary feminists can weaken feminist movements' ability to mount effective opposition to anti-gender campaigns. These internal divisions within feminist spaces weaken collective resistance against conservative forces, as anti-gender movements strategically deepen these rifts to undermine feminist solidarity.

Feminist Resistance Strategies and Challenges

How feminist movements respond to opposition varies significantly by context. This special issue highlights various feminist and queer resistance strategies across different contexts, revealing tensions between institutional and grassroots approaches.

Solidarity emerges as critical focus, underscoring its role as a cornerstone of feminist resilience in the face of adversity, while also acknowledging the challenges to unity within feminist movements. Fagundes-Ausani shows how confronting anti-feminist violence, notwithstanding its emotional toll, fosters cohesion and mutual support within feminist collectives. Similarly, Bobičić and Petrović document enduring solidarity in Serbia's feminist scene, where activists maintain unity and shared purpose despite decades of opposition.

However, Baldrian's analysis of Armenia presents a contrasting reality where solidarity is often fractured. Armenian women's NGOs frequently compete rather than collaborate, with institutionalization and professionalization creating tensions that impede collective action. Baldrian's piece reveals the complexities within feminist movements, where external pressures and internal dynamics can either foster cohesion or deepen divisions. Together, these perspectives across Armenia, Brazil, France, and Serbia underscore the pivotal yet fragile role of solidarity in shaping the trajectories of feminist activism.

Another crucial theme emerging from the analysis of feminist resistance is how feminist movements navigate hostile environments through strategic self-silencing. Baldrian shows how Armenian women's NGOs avoid public spaces in favor of state-level advocacy, trading grassroots engagement for reduced risk of anti-gender attacks. Fagundes-Ausani documents personal strategies among feminist activists, from maintaining private social media profiles to avoiding feminist identification in NGO work. These strategies reveal the complex trade-offs between safety and visibility in contemporary feminist activism.

Conclusion

This special issue illuminates the complex dynamics between rising anti-gender movements and feminist resistance strategies across diverse global contexts. The contributions collectively demonstrate how opposition to gender equality has become a powerful unifying force, bringing together various conservative actors while simultaneously creating new divisions within established feminist spaces.

The research reveals several critical insights about contemporary gender politics. First, anti-gender movements have evolved significantly, shifting their focus from opposing same-sex marriage to targeting transgender rights, often through sophisticated digital strategies and "child protection" narratives. These movements demonstrate remarkable adaptability in building coalitions across religious, political, and ideological lines, effectively leveraging social media and digital platforms to amplify their message.

Second, the impact of these movements extends beyond their immediate targets, affecting the cohesion of feminist spaces themselves. The cases of established feminist organizations adopting gender-critical positions highlight how anti-gender discourse can infiltrate and fragment previously progressive spaces. This internal division presents a significant challenge to feminist solidarity and collective resistance.

Third, feminist resistance strategies vary considerably across contexts, revealing a complex balance between institutional survival and grassroots activism. While some movements have maintained strong solidarity in the face of opposition, others face fragmentation due to competition and institutional pressures. The emergence of strategic self-silencing as a survival mechanism, while potentially effective for individual safety, raises important questions about the long-term implications for feminist visibility and advocacy.

Looking forward, these findings suggest that the future of feminist movements will depend on their ability to navigate several key challenges: maintaining solidarity while acknowledging internal differences, balancing safety with visibility, and developing effective strategies to counter sophisticated anti-gender campaigns. The research also underscores the importance of understanding these struggles within their specific historical and social contexts while recognizing the transnational nature of both anti-gender movements and feminist resistance. In sum, this special issue ultimately contributes to our understanding of how gender politics shapes and is shaped by broader political trends, from right-wing populism to digital activism, while highlighting the ongoing importance of feminist solidarity and resistance in the face of organized opposition.

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Interweaving Story and Theory: Confronting Anti-Feminism and Anti-Genderism in the NGOized Women's Movement in Armenia

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Abstract

Based on organizational autoethnography, this article provides a personal account of how the women's movement in Armenia has navigated the influx of democratization aid following the 2018 regime change. It examines how the overflow of development aid has transmuted the relationship between women's rights NGOs and the Armenian state, leading to the further bureaucratization, professionalization, and institutionalization of the women's movement. Drawing on the author's personal experiences within the NGOized movement, the article explores the specific ways in which the political economy of gender aid has facilitated anti-feminist and anti-class struggle agendas, showing how close collaboration with the state and donor organizations has shrunk spaces for feminist organizing, impeding critical knowledge production and public mobilization efforts. It also examines the anti-gender dynamics within the local movement, highlighting how the concept of gender has been stripped of its revolutionary essence and operationalized for grants in essentialist and rather conservative terms. The article concludes by advocating for a critical reassessment of the NGO form, arguing for the need to explore alternative forms of feminist organizing that resist and move beyond the limits posed by NGOization.

Keywords: Armenia; Gender Aid; Critical Development Studies; Women's Movements; NGOization

Background

As with the rest of the post-Soviet space, Armenia has been a destination for development interventions carried out by the global North. The collapse of the Soviet Armenian state resulted in rampant privatization, austerity, and free-marketization, which led to a dramatic decrease in standards of living (Platz 2000), economic and political crises, and turbulence for decades. Post-Soviet Armenia was born out of political violence—the First Nagorno Karabakh War that lasted from 1990 to 1994—which was brought back home. Therefore, the disintegration of women's welfare and labor rights and masculinized militarization became integral to the (neo)liberal democratization and economic restructuring of the country.

Successive governments in post-Soviet Armenia came to power through electoral fraud and political corruption (Broers and Ohanyan 2020). For decades, mass protests seemed ineffective against state repression and police brutality. Nevertheless, in the spring of 2018, nationwide anti-regime protests erupted in reaction to then-President Serzh Sargsyan's attempt to become Prime Minister (PM). After changing the governing system from presidential to parliamentary in 2015, Sargsyan essentially attempted to secure a third term in power. Since the public was highly dissatisfied with the regime and the oligarchical class it was associated with, this attempt to transition from president to PM served as an opening in the political opportunity structures (Broers 2020; Ohanyan 2020). Following month-long nationwide protests that successfully toppled the government in May, Armenia was described as an emerging democracy, having left behind "a corrupt and illiberal" government (Jennings 2019). In response, development aid increased to support local nongovernmental organizations (hereafter NGOs) and nonprofits in advancing "democratic values" such as the fight against corruption (Eastern Partnership 2017; Swedish Embassy in Yerevan 2019; USAID 2020).

Nevertheless, drawing on personal experience, oral history interviews, and personal communications within Armenia's civil society sector during and after the mass movement, I learned that global North countries were not enthusiastic about the 2018 mass protests and only supported the movement after its success. Within civil society circles, the explicitly anti-oligarch stance of the movement had reportedly been a major worry for Western embassies in Yerevan, which, during meetings with NGO representatives, expressed fears that a government opposed to the free market would come to power. These fears proved unfounded, much to their relief. After the regime change, the protest leadership who replaced the regime included individuals from civil society and NGO backgrounds. Thus, this regime change was widely popular and supported by NGOs and the broader civil society sphere.

Before 2018, women's rights NGOs were frequently targeted by both the state and anti-gender groups who labeled them as "grant-eaters" (*grantaker*). Their efforts to strengthen laws on domestic violence and violence against children faced anti-gender mobilizations. At the same time, their advocacy for the peaceful settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict triggered an ethnonationalist backlash. However, the 2018 regime change shifted this dynamic, as the state welcomed the inpouring development aid and, by extension, work with local NGOs, opening doors for closer cooperation. While anti-gender groups persisted, often funded by the previous regime's actors, this close cooperation with the Armenian state transformed the women's movement by further institutionalizing and professionalizing it,

which resulted in heightened competition between NGOs and estrangement from street-level movement actors.

Since NGOs often emerge from contradictory political projects, their analysis requires localized examination of specific cases to avoid deterministic conclusions about their work and the subjects they produce and reproduce. In recent years, scholars such as Saida Hodžic (2014) and Sonia Alvarez (2014) have cautioned against categorically labeling all NGOs as agents of neoliberalism, instead advocating for nuanced analysis of work done by women's rights advocates, particularly in dangerous political contexts. Indeed, NGOs do not always produce (neo)liberal subjects, as evidenced by research done by Lauren Leve (2014) on Nepalese NGOs whose educational campaigns, despite being USAID-funded, resulted in a Maoist insurgency when educational materials drawn from revolutionary and anti-colonial thinkers such as Paulo Freire were utilized.

The Armenian case of NGOized civil society continues to evolve amid constant domestic and international challenges that reshape Armenia's status as a post-socialist, so-called developing country. Understanding the evolution since 2018 requires extensive research that locates the Armenian case within its broader geopolitical context, examining NGOs' institutional characteristics, their ability to mobilize mass support, and the ideology of actors who translate development agendas into the local context(s).

Taking into account the unique post-socialist materiality of Armenia and my work experience within the Armenian NGO sector, this article argues that due to their increasingly bureaucratized, professionalized, and institutionalized structures in the post-2018 era, Armenian women's rights NGOs have become disconnected from grassroots needs and estranged from street-level actors, focusing instead on political agendas shaped by larger geopolitical power structures and shifts. I argue that the promotion of liberal democratization and imposition of global gender agendas has shrunk the spaces for the women's and feminist movements in Armenia, as women's NGOs have become issue and policy-oriented, fiercely competing over grants and gender expert roles. The regime change and subsequent collaboration with the state have led NGOs toward complacent policy-making, curtailing the anti-state politics of past movements.

Continuing, this article argues that the NGOization of women's movements compels movement actors to operationalize gender to secure grants, while their collaboration with the masculinist and neoliberal state strips the concept of gender from its revolutionary essence. Gender, in this context, becomes a symbolic glue for NGOized civil society actors; however, its essentialization prevents it from serving as a uniting or revolutionary force. The

gender economics infused in development grants promotes neoliberal solutions to economic disparities, while state advocacy leads to censorship among NGO feminists with respect to the donors, the state, and the public.

Throughout this article, I refer to a "women's movement" in Armenia instead of a "feminist" movement. This distinction is deliberate, as most women's rights NGOs in Armenia do not identify with the term feminist. Their reasons range from ideological to practical: they view feminism as too radical an ideology, and/or they fear losing access to both state and donor resources if perceived as too "extreme." While feminism has different forms and manifestations, classifying all these groups under the label of "feminist movement" would be inaccurate. This logic aligns with the theorization that feminist movements are always part of women's movements, but not all women's movements are feminist (see Tong 2019 for more). Nonetheless, these women's NGOs remain vital stakeholders in the women's movement in Armenia. Therefore, I use "feminist NGOs" to highlight the ideological inclinations of the discussed subjects and "women's NGOs" as an umbrella term for organizations engaged in women's rights advocacy, including feminist NGOs.

I do not name the organizations where I have worked or the movement actors I analyze. This choice is made, first, to mitigate the potential harm to the organizations and their stakeholders, such as their staff members, volunteers, beneficiaries, and others. I also avoid mentioning critical personal communications within the sector, as the speakers could be identified and potentially reprimanded. Secondly, I aim to critically analyze the NGO institutional form and the analysis of gender it produces, rather than single out individuals who work in these organizations. The only time I directly cite movement actors is when statements were made in group discussions, the participants of which could attest to my recollection of these events.

Methodology

This article is based on organizational autoethnography: my work at local feminist NGOs from January 2018 to December 2023. I have worked at three different women's rights organizations, where my work has encompassed projects on feminist oral history, rights advocacy, reproductive justice, and sexual violence. More importantly, my work has focused on monitoring and documenting anti-gender mobilizations in Armenia. I have done media monitoring and conducted personal and group oral history interviews on anti-gender and anti-feminist mobilizations. Additionally, I have edited a storybook based on oral history

interviews with women human rights defenders, curated an exhibition for the International Day for Women Human Rights Defenders, and developed a feminist map of Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, chronicling the relationship between women's NGOs and public spaces over the past two decades.

Organizational autoethnography has its roots in decolonial scholarship (see Herrmann 2020 for more). This is relevant in the case of NGOs in the global South because of the power dynamics at play in democracy promotion. As Andrew Herrmann (2020, 27) puts it, "organizational autoethnographers use personal experiences to comment on, critique, and imagine more liberating and empowering organizational beliefs and practices." I rely on my memory; research notes from May 2023 to February 2024; my two work notebooks from 2022 to 2023; a 2023 personal essay; and a group oral history interview from March 2024 to give "thick" descriptions of the organizations where I have worked.

I rely on feminist theory to elicit memories and put my lived experiences into context. Having read Victoria Bernal and Inderpal Grewal's *Theorizing NGOs: States, Feminisms, and Neoliberalism* (2014) edited volume at the beginning of 2023, I have adopted a systematic approach to analyzing and critically reflecting on my experiences in the NGO sector in Armenia. From May 2023, I have notes in my research notebook comparing and contrasting my experiences to those described in *Theorizing NGOs*. Subsequently, between October and December 2023, I produced a 30-page unpublished manuscript on my experiences at women's NGOs in Armenia, and certain parts of this article were written as a part of that personal non-fiction essay.

I wish to clarify my *positionality* in writing this article: I make my arguments as a political theory researcher but also as a feminist, worker, and activist who is a direct participant in the feminist and women's movements in Armenia. By doing so, I am granting insider access to a sector that outsiders could not otherwise have access to because of the hegemonic structures and insular relationships that dominate it. Self-reflexivity and criticisms by other feminist activists inform my analysis about being a so-called gender expert in the NGOized women's movement in Armenia. As Elizabeth Ettorre (2016) begins her book, *Autoethnography as Feminist Method*, "Autoethnography is an ideal method to study the 'feminist I'. Through personal stories, the author reflects on how feminists negotiate agency and the effect this has on one's political sensibilities."

I aim for this article to be not an indictment of the NGOized women's movement in Armenia but a testimony and starting point for further discussions and debates on issues that have been less problematized due to the aggravated preoccupation with liberal

democracy promotion. Despite conducting nine personal and three group oral history interviews since 2020, I have chosen not to cite my previous fieldwork for this article. I only cite one instance from my most recent group interview, as my specific analysis is informed by a participant's observation, which was so graciously shared with me.

With this, I acknowledge that autoethnography has limitations and is often criticized for being less rigorous than other qualitative methods (Herrmann 2020). I understand that by concentrating on my own memories and experiences, I am depriving the subjects that I have discussed of the opportunity to correct the accounts I have produced here. However, considering this article critically accounts for institutional power and unequal personal dynamics in the workplace, I must let my story and critical reflections stand alone *for the time being*. In writing this article, I aimed to enable myself to articulate my truth on my own terms. I do not claim to be an authority on the Armenian women's movement, and I acknowledge that my experiences exist in the "web of human relationships," (Chapola and Datta 2023), and thus they are those of many. However, I believe that:

> Speaking one's truth or truths, through an autoethnographic lens, allows us to address the tensions between truths, whether personal or epistemological, in a political and hopeful act. It is political because it opens others' eyes to new realities of oppression and traumas; it is hopeful because it offers a chance for change (Giorgio 2009, 165–66).

I also understand that this article is, at times, theory-heavy. Reading and making sense of these theoretical debates has been essential to overcoming the alienation and burnout I experienced due to my work. This article is theory-heavy because it is an attempt at sensemaking, which has been crucial in healing my epistemological wounds. As bell hooks has so poignantly put it,

> I came to theory because I was hurting—the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend—to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing (hooks 1994, 59).

The Anti-Feminism of the Gender Aid Regime

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the post-Soviet space was theorized to have weak civil societies, accompanied by a fervent promotion of liberal democratization (Ishkanian 2008; Stefes and Paturyan 2021; Timmer and Wirtz 2022). During a period of economic deprivation and precarity, the development agenda emerged to take on the responsibilities of the retreating state. In the early 1990s, new liberal elites did not capitalize on the gender equality legacy left by the Soviet Union (Pollert 2003). As women's political

participation declined, through the human rights-based development approach, women's rights issues were identified as critical social issues to invest in (Hemment 2007; Ishkanian 2008). The American government was the largest donor of the NGO sector in Armenia through USAID (Ishkanian 2008). Foreign donors engaged in civil society building, which Armine Ishkanian (2008) labels as "genetically engineered civil society" that subsequently enjoyed low trust with the Armenian public (Paturyan 2020).

Feminist scholars and activists alike have long been critical of development approaches and how aid transforms women's movements, especially in the global South. As the NGO form requires professionalization, institutionalization, and bureaucratization (Lang 2022), critics argue that with the rise of neoliberalism, development aid in the form of NGOization has "[…] reformulated feminist goals, replacing sociopolitical transformation with complacent policy making" (Hodžic 2014, 225). State and donor-imposed agendas limit political imaginations as "neoliberalism becomes the condition of possibility for most NGO work" while requiring "production of knowledge through development frameworks and neoliberal assumptions" (Bernal and Grewal 2014b, 115–16). For instance, Julie Hemment's (2014; 2007) ethnographic work on women's NGOs right after the collapse of the Soviet Union shows the social and economic dislocation experienced by Russian women due to shock therapy policies and their struggles with the new development aid regime that depoliticized economic issues.

Sonia Alvarez (1999), a pioneer in this field who coined the term "NGOization," critically analyzed the NGO sector in Latin America in the 1990s, arguing that the NGO boom had resulted in the state seeing feminists as "gender experts" on whom it could offload women's programs for implementation. Thus, Alvarez (1999) argued that NGOization had forced feminists into formal roles limited to tending to culturally and politically appropriate social issues. As Robyn Wiegman puts it, "critiquing the state as the end logic of political reform" (as quoted in Hodžic 2014, 226) is promoted as the only way to enact political change. Similarly, Choudry (2010, 20) argues that "critics reluctant to name capitalism as the problem typically advocate building a citizen's lobby to urge reforms within a capitalist framework."

After 2018, women's NGOs also took advantage of the democratization aid coming to Armenia. These NGOs had previously mobilized for campaigns against violence against women and girls and made efforts to translate transnational campaigns into the Armenian context. After the 2018 regime change, the gradual split between women's NGOs and street-level actors has significantly weakened the women's movement in Armenia despite the

increase in funding and resources. I recall frequently hearing from colleagues that "The feminist movement in Armenia is divided" or "There is no feminist movement in Armenia." The reasons they cited ranged from personal grievances to political differences that took over the movement over time.

My colleagues were often nostalgic about the "sisterhood" that existed during past protests and grassroots organizing events, where street-level actors and NGO staff could cooperate in what Glasius and Ishkanian (2015, 2633) call "surreptitious symbiosis"—"in the context of growing government repression, it [was] only the human rights NGOs that [were] providing support to activists." They often looked at the past with nostalgia for the solidarity and the diversity of protest actions they had organized with various groups of women, taking up public spaces and disturbing the patriarchal order of the public sphere, culminating in the mass movement in 2018, when women's participation reached unprecedented numbers.

However, these were examples of romanticizing a past that was more complex than it was being remembered. Before 2018, less professionalized NGOs allowed multiple crossings of people, practices, and ideas. After 2018, with the deepening cooperation between foreign donor organizations and the Armenian state, local NGOs were forced to cooperate with the state, and these spatial and temporal diversities became rare. Fragmentation in the women's movement and divisions between street-level feminists, NGO staff members, and different NGOs had always been present in the women's movement, as discussed by Tamar Shirinian (2022), who cites independent movement actors as being extremely dismissive of women's NGO work. These divisions only deepened after 2018 as a result of the further professionalization of the movement, which disempowered non-professional activists while increasingly privileging the voices of professional advocates.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to say women's NGOs were "forced" to cooperate with the Armenian state as it implies there was structural pressure against unwilling agents when, in fact, most women's NGO staff members were satisfied with the regime change because they would be able to do "real advocacy work" on the state level—a phenomenon I have observed not only through my work and research but also during conferences and workshops. This trend was especially highlighted by the increased number of capacity-building workshops organized by women's NGOs in the past seven years. Most actors in the NGO sector, the majority of whom are women, do not see a problem with the professionalization of the women's movement and instead welcome the opportunity to emulate Western-style advocacy. The resources of women's NGOs are no longer used for marches and street actions but for conferences and networking events with the state.

As the NGOs became further professionalized, radical and critical voices became marginalized again—this time within the women's movement itself. As more professionalized staff took over, expert knowledge replaced life experience. This professionalized form of women's rights advocacy, referred to by some as "femocracy" (Hodžic 2014), paves the way for stripping gender of its radical contents to cooperate with the conservative Armenian state and creates a middle class of affluent women whose role is providing expert, rather than experience-based, knowledge about Armenian women as a stable category (more on this in the following section).

The further professionalization of women's initiatives and their cooperation with the state has led to bitter debates among Armenian feminists regarding what constitutes political change in Armenia. Independent and street-level movement actors often criticized feminists working in NGOs for taking a less antagonistic stance against the masculinist state and cozying up to donors by supporting their "neocolonial and neoliberal agendas"—a criticism also directed at my work. The political struggle between street-level feminist activists and NGOs constantly contests what it means to be a feminist in Armenia, with feminist identity being subject to constant reappropriation through continuously contested languages and worldviews.

These contentious debates also happen within feminist NGOs. Where I worked, there was an unspoken acknowledgment that a major part of our jobs included bureaucratic paperwork. We even read critical feminist works, from bell hooks to Sara Ahmed, and engaged in debates around topics pertaining to our work (debates from which street-level actors were always absent). However, as the organizations became more professionalized due to increased funding, we had less time for these debates and discussions. As the office space grew, the distance between employees and management also widened. With each new floor, the hierarchies grew and were enforced rigorously. The spatial choreography of the staff members was tightly supervised, even by security cameras, and spatial disciplining was performed to ensure efficiency.

I recall the first staff meeting at the new, much bigger office in January 2022. Employees were introduced to the new administrative and organizational structure. We were informed that the new donor required full-time staff not to work at other organizations. The rationale was that juggling multiple jobs could lead to burnout, making it harder for everyone to focus on their roles. However, this did not account for other forms of grassroots organizing staff members might have been engaged in. When I inquired about joining an ongoing protest against the Amulsar mountain being turned into a goldmine with streel-level

feminist activists who were part of the leadership of the protests, the room fell silent, and the topic was never addressed again. This memory was evoked as I read Tamar Shirinian's ethnography of Armenian feminists protesting at the Amulsar mountain, in which she references the participants labeling NGO feminism as "a brand of liberal feminism that omits class critique." (Shirinian 2023, 736).

Being conscious of critical discourses about NGOs and the NGOization of social movements can result in guilt and self-blame among NGO feminists. I remember committed colleagues frequently experiencing burnout as their strong ideological and political dedication drove them to overcorrect and overextend themselves. Alexandra Ana (2023, 53) writes similarly about the Romanian experience: "High commitment to the cause, the sense of responsibility but also the guilt for earning money out of a social cause, favour self-precarization and overwork that lay the ground for burnout." Something that was frequently said to me by the NGO management was that I "needed to do the neoliberal and bureaucratic work first to bring in funding for my passion projects next." However, this approach resulted in exhaustion and burnout as I would spend my weekends working on passion projects because I did not have time for them during the weekdays.

The employment situation of feminists working in NGOs hinders their ability to produce knowledge that is critical of their working conditions. Moreover, the idea of feminist sisterhood obfuscates the class and hierarchical dimensions of these formal institutions. In these workplaces, knowledge of and commitment to feminist agendas are secondary to technical and bureaucratic skills, such as legal analysis, grant proposal and report writing, networking abilities, and advanced English proficiency. The official hierarchies in these workplaces make them highly unequal and result in decision-making processes that are not participatory. After my colleagues and I voiced concerns about organizational direction, our superiors repeatedly responded: "If you do not like it, leave. Nobody is irreplaceable." This dismissive response undermined my financial security and sense of belonging, and the possibility of redundancy fostered a sense of disposability contradictory to feminist principles of organizing.

In 2024, months after leaving my position as project manager of a research group, I conducted a group oral history interview with four of the researchers I had supervised. This interview ultimately turned into an autopsy of the project I designed and managed for two years. In an environment where I no longer held institutional power over them, one of the researchers made a striking observation that took me years as an NGO feminist to understand: "These NGOs mistake form for content." These words reminded me of all the

events we had organized simply because they were allocated in the budget, without much consideration for content or presentation methods. Creative cultural interventions – performance, visual arts, street action to name a few – were constantly in tension with our work. The ultimate goal was to get the event registration forms filled; the ultimate presentation was for the donors. Moreover, any attempt by individual staff members to produce interventions using the NGO's resources, as I learned the hard way, risked being turned into a mass-produced shell of its intended political form, taken out of historical context and without any references to its initiators. "Form, not content." These words made me think of the disappointed feminists in the audience of these events. However, discussing this issue was strenuous as it risked implying that the employees responsible for these events were either not competent or not committed feminists. Eventually, with more professionalization, these discussions ceased altogether as even long-time staff members became disillusioned with their ability to influence organizational decision-making.

Fractured relationships persist throughout the NGOized women's movement in Armenia. The women's movement is divided not only across the fault lines of street-level actors and NGO staffers (which are not always clear-cut) but also across organizational boundaries. The increased professionalization and specialization of the movement have come with the cost of mutual alienation. As organizations' agendas are often demarcated by foreign donors, NGOization comes with a sense of entitlement to the NGO's specialization. If one women's NGO works on violence against women and girls, it views others working on the same issue not as partners but as competitors—both for grants and expert authority in the field. This issue-oriented and narrow-focused approach discussed in *Theorizing NGOs* (2014) creates animosity within the sector and stifles cooperation and coordination within the women's movement. Since 2018, women's NGOs have become even more disconnected and specialized, and their interactions only occasionally occur at the highest levels. The ideological glue that keeps them together is donor agendas that require cooperation on a certain level as a predicament of a "vibrant civil society," for which NGOs are convenient surrogates. Consequently, women's NGOs do not have robust networks to counter anti-gender groups that target them indiscriminately.

In recent decades, feminist scholars have observed how right-wing governments position themselves as fighters of neoliberalism by being anti-gender (Graff and Korolczuk 2022; Graff 2021; Rawłuszko 2021). The rise of the gender aid regime that promotes neoliberal governmentality gives footing to anti-gender groups to position themselves through pro-natalist policies as the saviors of family values and fighters against individualism.

As Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk argue, the success of anti-gender rhetoric is "at least partly due to the rise of neoliberal feminism, which abandoned the realm of care and economic justice, thus leaving these issues vulnerable to right-wing exploitation" (2022, 28). The pro-natalist welfare chauvinist policies of the ruling elites in the global South are only anti-capitalist and anti-neoliberal in name. On Armenian right wing mobilizations, Shirinian (2021, 961) writes, "Within this framework, right-wing nationalists advocate for an anti-imperialism against Western-domination, but frame this domination culturally even if with intonations of effects on political and economic sovereignty and inequality." In this context, Graff argues, "anti-genderism should be interpreted as a response to a vacuum created by a receding welfare state and lack of alternatives on the left" (2021, 272).

In Armenia, NGO politics and public relations have replaced grassroots organizing and public mobilization. Most NGOs lack a dedicated base that would mobilize in case they are attacked by anti-gender groups and/or by the state. They have beneficiaries but have failed to build constituencies. Innovative cultural interventions are incompatible with the NGO form. Their online presence continues to be for donor reports rather than awareness raising and movement building, while their in-person work is constrained by their professionalized commitments.

Operationalization of Gender: Genderist Not a Feminist

Neoliberal ruling elites are not the only ones depoliticizing economic issues and engaging in anti-politics, NGOs, by virtue of their developmentalist design, also operate in such ways. The lack of public mobilization work done by women's NGOs depoliticizes class and feminist issues and turns them into individualized social and cultural issues under the guise of gender mainstreaming and empowerment, catalyzing an appropriate face of domesticated feminism. As the worldwide NGO sector is highly gendered and feminized, it has led some scholars to argue that, in the private vs. public sphere dichotomy—where the state is masculinist while the NGO is feminized—the NGO functions as the private sphere (Bernal and Grewal 2014a).

In my opinion, the NGO not only replaces the retreating welfare state in the post-socialist context—the women's NGOs also replace the private sphere, operating according to the logic of neoclassical economics, where the *homo economicus* reigns supreme. Programs promoting women's entrepreneurship (especially among displaced populations), financial responsibility, and employability are proclaimed as ways to overcome economic precarity, while "healing the self" through therapy, yoga, and other self-care treatments are positioned

to be the same as changing the system. Furthermore, the supposed safety of this private sphere is weaponized to halt critical feminist discussions, framing them as full of conflict and, therefore, unsafe.

In the political economy of gender aid, local actors—both state and non-state—operationalize gender in alignment with gender economics. As opposed to feminist economics, which criticizes neoclassical economics, gender economics actively promotes it (see Becchio 2019 for more). Done through managerialism, the operationalization of socioeconomic issues breaks them into measurable segments for measurable solutions (Lewis, Kanji, and Themudo 2020). The NGOization of women's and queer movements creates a class of gender managers who work in an elitist, exclusionary, and technocratic manner with the state (Rawłuszko 2021; Bernal and Grewal 2014b). These gender experts, or "genderists" as characterized by some feminist scholars, theorize women as stable subjects with shared experiences of the patriarchy (Bernal and Grewal 2014b; Wilson 2015). As a result of state advocacy, the gendering of governmentality is often concocted through heteronormative, binary, and cis-centric definitions while sidelining, if not completely erasing, and depoliticizing class issues.

This gendering of governmentality fosters classist dynamics and social stratification in NGO work. In 2020, during and after the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, thousands of displaced Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians arrived in Armenia, prompting women's NGOs to shift their focus to humanitarian aid (a shift mandated by donors, to be clear). In December, my colleagues and I visited a shelter where multiple families, each occupying a single room in a former Soviet boarding school, lived under challenging conditions, sharing common bathrooms. During a needs assessment with a woman in her mid-50s, whose husband and two daughters were present, her husband approached us with a kind request: "Could you help me find a winter coat? The one I have is too old." Requests like his were common in the shelters, where everyone—women, men, and children—turned to aid workers for help. I responded, "I will see what I can do," but my colleague quickly turned to him and said, "We *only* work with women." This moment filled me with guilt and made me reflect on the power dynamics between aid workers and displaced populations. Later, I shared my unease with my colleagues about focusing exclusively on women and girls in the context of widespread dispossession and economic precarity and how that would be against the do-no-harm principle. One colleague, though sympathetic, explained that donor budget lines dictated our aid distribution.

One of the biggest foreign aid donors in the world is the EU, whose gender equality and mainstreaming policies have long been analyzed by scholars interested in the biopolitics of the organization. Jemima Repo (2015, 134) writes on this, "Gender equality was deployed in EU policy as a new modality for the reoptimization of population and productivity, especially in the context of the reconciliation of work and family life, which is at the core of EU gender equality policy." Unsurprisingly, EU policies have been translated into the local contexts in terms of increasing women's productive labor, while state policies on reproductive labor have undergone little to no change. Repo (2015, 134) continues by writing about how the EU constructs the "female" subject through its policies:

> The accompanying attempt to induce female subjects to 'make choices' that allow them to 'free' themselves from the antiquated baggage of gender roles to both reproduce the species and create capital only makes sense in the context of neoliberal governmentality.

As a donor organization, the EU imposes its technocratic policies on the local grantee organizations. International agreements on trade and social cooperation policies also impose these agendas on the Armenian government. Under these conditions, NGO work is not about addressing grassroots concerns but identifying policy gaps which can be deemed appropriate for the state and the EU to work on. As a result, grassroots organizing around gender issues becomes secondary or even irrelevant to technical policy-making work.

The feminist NGOs I worked for did not apply for EU grants on the premise that the EU forces too many pointless bureaucratic measures on the grantees, which do not leave room for agency. However, as long as we were required to work on state advocacy by other donors, regardless of being EU grantees, these interstate agreements were the context in which our work transpired. For instance, if the Armenia-EU Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) required legislative approximation, then as women's rights advocates, we identified the directives that could become directions for policy advocacy. This meant that geopolitical power structures mandated the scope of our agendas. The options and channels through which NGOs advocate for change are limited by the structures supposedly supporting reform and change.

In 2017, the EU was one of the international actors pushing for the passage of the law on domestic violence. This is also when I, as a junior college student, first became familiar with anti-NGO discourses through the campaign anti-gender groups were waging against the law. They were accusing women's rights advocates of promoting "Western norms and values," often through misogynist and homophobic language and imagery. That year, a public hearing on the matter —which was attended by the Justice Minister, the Human Rights

Defender, clergymen, and various human rights NGOs—was disrupted by right-wing groups who accused the government of giving in to the demands made by the EU. The then-Justice Minister stood his ground, claiming that he would not want his "grandchildren and children to experience violence in *any* family," which is why the law should be passed (Lazarian 2017). Ironically, after the government was overthrown in anti-regime protests the following year, the then-Justice Minister's party shifted its rhetoric, accusing the new government of the same dealings they themselves had been accused of in 2017. Geopolitical calculations were evident in 2017 as Armenia was balancing between the EU and Russia with its "complementary foreign policy"—sometimes making concessions to Russia, other times to the EU (Broers and Ohanyan 2020). In this case, passing the domestic violence law with a less "controversial name"—violence in the family—was a concession to the EU.

Writing about the Polish experience with anti-gender groups, Marta Rawłuszko (2021, 3) argues that "if gender equality measures are promoted because of international commitments and are left mainly in the hands of bureaucrats, they unintentionally provide the impetus for antigender mobilization." The absence of grassroots organizing around gender-related issues, such as reproductive rights, sexuality education, and other issues stemming from gender and sexuality, concedes ground to right-wing conspiracy-making about the cloistered advocacy done by NGOs. On these technocratic and closed-loop processes, Sangeeta Kamat writes, "NGOs are being re-inscribed in the current policy discourse in ways that strengthen liberalism and undermine democracy" (as quoted in Choudry 2010, 20).

Rawłuszko's (2021) argument about out-of-touch policymaking is pertinent as anti-gender mobilizations also affect how lawmakers approach gender-related issues in Armenia. The ruling party and its lawmakers have consistently embraced political stances perceived as less controversial over the past seven years to avoid public backlash. As a case in point, after anti-gender groups mobilized against the ratification of the Istanbul Convention in 2019, the government dropped its initiative to ratify it. Additionally, it has selectively adopted the less controversial articles of the convention into law, discouraging NGOs from conducting their own public advocacy in an effort to avoid the public backlash often associated with NGO involvement. Hence, the degendering happens on multiple levels at the hands of foreign and local bureaucrats who negotiate the terms of agreements with each other.

NGOs use these commitments Armenia makes through bilateral agreements as leverage in their advocacy work. I have seen how local NGOs pressure the Armenian government by referring to foreign donors if the government refuses to cooperate on a

specific advocacy issue. This appeal to foreign donors is based on the premise that the implementation would benefit the donor state or organization. In this framework, women's rights advocates are reduced to watchdogs for the successful implementation of interstate agreements. However, a donor's willingness to take action on NGO concerns depends entirely on its diplomatic relationship with Armenia—and currently, donors view Armenia as a reliable partner. On the other hand, the Armenian state has exploited a loophole in its unequal relationship with the EU: while it complies with legislative approximation, there is no state funding for enforcing most of these laws related to women's rights. Such was the case of the 2023 law on workplace sexual harassment, which lacked the institutional capacity for state-wide implementation.

In the previous section, I discussed how NGOization results in competition and division among women's NGOs in Armenia. Each women's NGO works with a specific type of woman it constructs through its specialization - domestic violence, sexual violence, rights advocacy, poverty relief, disability rights, lesbian and trans rights, sex worker rights, and more. In this case, each one is specialized in the woman it represents and presents itself as an authority on the group. Resulting from this is a bastardized version of identity politics: representation politics—a form of identity reductionism that leads each NGO to map its sphere of responsibilities through often essentialized terms and conditions.

This schism between women's NGOs brings us to the question of alliances between women's and queer movements. These specializations give an excuse to non-queer rights women's NGOs not to take queer issues seriously under the pretense of not overstepping their sphere of responsibilities. It is a strategic fault to assume Armenian women's NGOs are open to queer issues and see it as a part of their struggle, in fact, homophobia and transphobia are a covert part of the everyday workings of most women's NGOs, even the feminist ones. Unfortunately, this is not limited to Armenia, as elsewhere, some advocates have even suggested stopping the use of the term gender altogether and using women instead (Paternotte 2020).

Tamar Shirinian's (2020; 2021; 2022) ethnography of the Armenian women's movement from 2012 to 2013 captures the frustration of non-NGO movement actors who critiqued NGO efforts on domestic violence for focusing on reforming—rather than challenging—heterosexuality and the traditional family model (Shirinian 2022). Shirinian (2022) analyzes the heterosexual desire that is dominant in women's NGO work in Armenia, arguing that lesbian women are often marginalized in women's and queer rights organizations. While her ethnography covers the early 2010s and despite certain

improvements in this area over the past decade—mostly resulting from donor agendas requiring representative (intersectional) cooperation—lesbian and queer women, especially those who are non-professional, are still marginalized in women's NGO spaces.

In Armenia, it is primarily donor organizations that fund knowledge production on anti-gender mobilizations. This hinders the researcher's ability to produce knowledge critical of the donors and their politics, while, as Choudry (2010, 23) has put it, "texts are sites of real struggles." This is especially problematic when these donors are often the only ones supporting scarcely funded programs such as those related to reproductive justice. Research conducted by femocrats on anti-gender movements is often done to vindicate the donors against right-wing conspiratorial rhetoric without any critical reflections on the donor's political and ideological stances. To borrow David Paternotte's (2020) observation, this "narrow focus on the scope of destruction" hinders the ability of progressive groups to view the whole battlefield.

Patternotte (2020) observes that if activists believe that anti-gender backlash follows progressive campaigns, they will engage in self-censorship to avoid confrontation that will hinder their work. This has already been a recurring reality in Armenia for the past 15 years, since at least 2009, when the first mass anti-gender attacks happened. Since 2018, with the worst anti-gender attacks taking place in 2019, women's rights advocacy has become less about awareness raising and more about state-level advocacy. In my experience, for many, the issue of anti-gender counteraction is a convenient excuse not to engage in public mobilization campaigns and form constituencies because it would not be a respectable function for a professional advocate. Admittedly, most also lack these skills because public relations not mobilization is prioritized during capacity-building workshops. However, forming a critical mass around feminist issues should be paramount in volatile times such as the one Armenia is currently experiencing, where the threat of war and the rise of an extreme right-wing government persists.

The biggest reason women's NGOs self-censor is, of course, the state, namely, national security. Both for not sabotaging their relationship with the state but also as a result of buying into state-sanctioned security narratives. National security and militarization are male-centric and masculinized concepts. The relationship between the state and NGOs is why the issue of women's empowerment in the global South is often discussed in the context of nationalist interests: women performing more productive labor, thus enhancing the country's economic capabilities. This makes it inevitable for women's NGOs to have a reckoning about, as the editors of *Theorizing NGOs* put it, the nationalist factors that make

their existence possible but may also hinder their advancement (Bernal and Grewal 2014a). In Armenia, regressive nationalism was resurgent after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the political restructuring, such as rampant privatization and austerity measures enacted by right-wing governments, made room for the development agenda and the NGO sector. Ironically, these same nationalist ruling elites tightly constrained women's NGO work for so many years, aiding and abetting anti-gender and anti-feminist groups.

The logic behind national security concerns becomes more evident with programs and projects specifically focused on peacebuilding. One is the UN Security Council Resolution 1325, credited for mainstreaming the "Women, Peace and Security" agenda and often criticized for essentializing women's role in peacebuilding initiatives (see Pratt and Richter-Devroe 2011 for more). The Armenian state's attempts at localizing the agenda have mostly been to empower the military, such as by increasing the number of women in military service. In 2023, the government proposed a law on women's voluntary conscription into the armed forces. During preliminary meetings, women's NGOs were divided on whether this was a progressive or exploitative move, particularly since many had worked with the government as gender experts to make this reform a reality.

One of the organizations I worked at did not view the widespread integration of women in the armed forces as a progressive reform. The committee discussion at the National Assembly showed that the government did not consider it as such either as it was simply trying to recover from the major losses suffered in 2020. I was part of a team that produced criticism of the proposed law, and it mostly addressed the technical issues that other government bodies had already voiced. We also mentioned the reproductive-productive labor dichotomy, highlighting that this would only increase women's workload in the formal economy without proper compensation for reproductive labor. This knowledge was produced for the state, which meant we had to be "rational, not overly emotional" and legal in our phrasing of the issue. Hence, the reliance on the arguments already presented by different government bodies. The criticism did not include queer issues or critical feminist reflections on the state security apparatus, even though, during discussions when the document was drafted, queer rights NGOs had voiced their concerns. This tame critique did not stop the state from ultimately ignoring us, as even the modest criticisms of women's role in the Armenian patriarchal society were subordinated to "national security interests," and the law was passed. The respectable language of public relations did not result in an outcome the way perhaps street action and public mobilization would (see Baldrian 2024 for more).

This ideology of pragmatism is often dominant in NGO work, resulting in inclusion without influence (Choudry 2010). Women's NGOs in Armenia neither significantly influence the government nor their foreign donors despite their continuous concessions to both. The resulting degendering of gender is only logical in the neoliberal governmentality game that NGOs play. An overreliance on an NGO-friendly government will eventually backfire when there is no popular support for social justice issues in the long term. Who is to say that the next government will not reverse the laws NGOs managed to pass by cooperating with the current government? And if this happens, will there be a critical mass around feminist and gender-related issues to resist reactionary and conservative attacks?

Conclusion

The anti-feminism the neoliberal aid regime promotes is a threat to feminists, feminist movement building and knowledge production. It fails to offer a viable alternative to right-wing supposedly anti-neoliberal policies. Disenfranchised masses find solace in the right-wing rhetoric because of its populist nature that entices them into blaming different minorities and oppressed groups for the fallout from capitalist and exploitative material conditions. As NGOization is a historical process, for feminists in Armenia, it is crucial to learn from the experiences and developments of contexts with more advanced and complex manifestations to avoid making similar mistakes.

In a recent article, Sabine Lang (2023, 40) states that "resisting NGOization as well as producing alternative mobilization strategies has become a central modality of gender activism today." Globally, there are increasing numbers of funding opportunities for feminist organizers and groups committed to feminist movement building. This helps local groups worldwide move away from funding that promotes neoliberal governmentality. However, it is also vital to move beyond these foreign-funded organizing structures and start financing social movements locally through fundraising efforts and mutual aid. It is paramount to be critical of development projects and the imposition of their ideas and practices that promote hegemonic common-sense solutions.

This article is, first and foremost, driven by my desire to produce feminist knowledge about Armenia. I wrote this article to grieve and let go of the idealist and *naïve* feminist in me, even if to the detriment of my career in the NGO sector. I have witnessed firsthand how former employees can be blacklisted from the human rights sector—locally and globally—over their critical views. I am well aware of how anti-feminist and misogynistic these difficult discussions can become and the type of vitriol that critical feminists can face from various

human rights NGOs. I have seen the vile competition that local NGO feminists engage in before foreign donors, which once again establishes the latter's hegemony and control over us.

While I believe in and am fully committed to debates around the issues I have raised here, I do not believe those debates should be happening behind closed doors in small NGO circles or exclusionary email chains with donors. I aimed to provide a personal snapshot and publicly document the women's movement within this specific temporality and spatiality, at a moment when Armenian feminist NGOs internally contemplate renouncing their feminist affinities to evade the persistent critiques that such declarations provoke. I welcome all engagement and criticism of my testimony from Armenian feminists and feminist theorists, as I strongly believe that feminist theory and organizing are born out of public debates and contestations.

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Combating Anti-Feminism and Building Strategies for Gender Equality: The World of Digital Feminist Media Activism in Brazil and France

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Abstract

This study examines digital feminist media outlets in Brazil and France, exploring their strategies to promote gender equality and combat hate speech. Focusing on three outlets from each country, the research employs a multi-site ethnographic approach, including 63 in-depth interviews with content producers, support teams, and audiences. The findings reveal that discovering sexist and exclusionary sociopolitical structures often catalyzes engagement in feminist activism, with emotional responses—particularly anger and frustration—serving as primary drivers for action. Engagement in digital feminist spaces fosters collective exchange and creates connections extending beyond the digital sphere. The research highlights the complex interplay between digital platforms, feminist ideology, and grassroots activism in shaping contemporary gender equality movements, contributing to our understanding of how digital feminist media navigate online activism challenges while fostering community and driving social change.

Keywords: Digital Feminism; Media Activism; Online Harassment; Anti-feminism; Feminist Journalism; Cyber-violence; Emotional Labor; Collective Identities

Introduction

The article analyzes transnational strategies for combating anti-feminist narratives and promoting gender equality through engaged feminist information production projects, based on digital feminist activist media outlets in Brazil and France. The integration of feminist media activism into the social world[1] (Becker 1982; Morrissette et al. 2011) exposes its practitioners, contributors, and supporters to various forms of violence[2] in both the digital and physical spheres, as well as organizational violence (Le Cam et al. 2021). Additionally, it

[1] Becker (1982) proposed the concept of the social world as a dynamic entity. This interactionist view sees society as continuously evolving through interactions between individuals. These interactions, and the mutual interpretations that shape them, constantly compose and recompose the social fabric (Morrissette et al., 2011).
[2] This refers to the sexist and sexual violence experienced by the interviewed women, particularly focusing on symbolic violence, which occurs without leaving explicitly visible marks or traces (Bourdieu 1980).

subjects them to potential attacks from anti-feminist and/or traditionalist groups that oppose the expansion or strengthening of the rights of women and feminized people - which includes also queer individuals.

Actions of the anti-feminist movement have become an inherent element of digital activism and feminist media activism. This opposition impacts both the experiences of feminist media activists and the practice of producing gender-focused content. The increased visibility of digital feminism has led to a rise in aggressive cybersexism, as Jouët (2018) points out, emphasizing that in all Western countries, feminists are facing resurgent reactionary forces that claim feminist causes threaten values linked to the ideal of Christian family (Cruz and Dias 2015). These anti-feminist discourses are gaining traction in a political and social context where neoliberalism and neoconservatism combine to reinforce reactionary ideals (Devreux and Lamoureux 2012). Consequently, a tension exists between feminism's growing influence and the intensifying conservative forces in Western societies. This clash pits feminism's expansion against anti-feminist movements that oppose women's pursuit of equal rights. A multi-site analysis of the transnational circulation of the phenomenon of digital feminist media activism indicates that these forces are also at work in the Global South, and resistance actions have been spearheaded by countries located there. As a Latin American researcher, by proposing a dialog between feminist and media activist practices based on cases from Brazil and France, I am trying to build paths that can show the North how to reach the South and how to learn from and with it.

Confronting anti-feminist violence evokes a range of emotions in the collective of those engaged in feminist information production: shock, fatigue, and disgust, but also a sense of solidarity and cohesion. This shared experience underpins the group's sociability and allow its members to create a shared social, political, moral, and emotional space (Andrade 2020). The collective project of feminist media activism includes and is strengthened by uniting against the sexist socio-structural elements that affect the community as a whole. Paradoxically, the violence becomes a catalyst for producing engaged feminist content.

The World of Feminist Media Activism

Over the past decade, diverse feminist initiatives have emerged on the internet. While representing various ideological currents, these initiatives share a common approach: using digital tools to disseminate content (Jouët 2022). This new wave of activist and combative feminism has emerged globally, combining digital tools with traditional social movement

strategies such as strikes and street demonstrations. This transnational current has spread to diverse countries, with globally resonant slogans circulating as hashtags (Arruzza et al. 2019). The movement, however, is gaining particular momentum in the Global South (Pinheiro-Machado 2019), where it is evolving to localize and reinvent the meanings of the international #MeToo movement.

This phenomenon has been evolving since the 2010s and continues to develop, representing a model of activism still under construction (Castro and Abramovay 2019; Paveau 2020; Perez and Ricoldi 2019; Pinheiro-Machado 2019; Oliveira 2019). This form of activism is characterized by a strong presence of its members on various digital media platforms, organization through collectives, and demonstrates an increased focus on diverse social factors intersecting with gender, embodying intersectional feminism (Perez and Ricoldi 2019). It organically integrates class, gender, and race, addressing different systems of oppression in its action strategies (Castro and Abramovay 2019, 24).

Digital feminist media activism has emerged as a key component in the reconfiguration of feminist activism. Despite its name, it is not limited to the online environment but extends street-level engagements and involves activists' interactions with journalism and with each other (Braighi and Câmara 2018). This concept transcends the simple fusion of media and activism, manifesting not only through words and techniques but above all through people's actions. In this context, media activism is marked by both embracing and rejecting journalistic conventions. It produces content characterized by collaboration, advocacy for social causes, and engaging the public in debates (Santos and Miguel 2019). Employing digital activism strategies, it aims to generate diverse and inclusive (Bentes 2015).

I use symbolic interactionism as a theoretical framework to reflect on the engagement strategies of media activists promoting gender equality and countering anti-feminist discourses. This perspective views the social world as a dynamic entity, constantly being shaped and reshaped through the interactions between actors and the cross-interpretations that organize the exchanges between them (Becker, 1982; Morrissette et al. 2011). By applying this lens, we can better understand how are formed and maintained engagement strategies of media activists aimed at promoting gender equality and combating anti-feminist discourses.

Methodological Paths

This paper employs ethnographic methodology to examine the strategies and tools of feminist activism and gender equality promotion. The research is based on fieldwork and in-depth interviews. The fieldwork involved an ethnographic effort of digital and in-person monitoring of media activists, feminist activists, and journalists covering gender debates. Additionally, 63 in-depth interviews were conducted between October 2020 and November 2022, with 30 in France and 33 in Brazil. Participants represented various roles within feminist media activism, including reporters, editors, columnists, readers, and accounting and fundraising team members. The study's significance lies in its comprehensive approach, providing valuable insights into feminist media activism in Brazil and France through in-depth accounts of participants' trajectories and observations of their collective strategies in countering anti-feminist agendas.

The digital technoculture of feminist media activism operates in a complex landscape. The global rise of reactionary political-ideological currents has emboldened sexist discourse both online and offline. While the internet offers opportunities for social emancipation, it simultaneously provides fertile ground for groups that attack social minorities and reinforce existing power structures (Jouët et al. 2017). However, the backlash from "trolls" and "haters" paradoxically indicates that feminist voices are heard online. This suggests that feminist media activism is at the center of transformations with the potential to challenge the established order.

I analyze feminist and digital media activism projects, specifically online outlets producing journalistic content with a feminist perspective and focus on gender debates. In Brazil, 18 relevant projects were identified through the *Agência Pública*'s mapping of independent journalism. In France, I identified 14 outlets based on bibliographical research and studies mapping gender activism and journalism over recent decades (Bard and Chaperon, 2017; Blandin, 2017; Hache-Bissette, 2017; Olivesi, 2017; Jouët, 2022). From these, I selected projects that were particularly significant during the "Feminist Spring"[3] (Alves, 2017), based on their social media profiles, interactions (measured by engagement metrics like likes, shares, and comments), and follower counts. The chosen projects in Brazil are the non-governmental organization *Think Olga*, the magazine *AzMina*, and the website *Lado M*. In France, the selected projects are the collective *Georgette Sand*, the newsletter *Les Glorieuses*, and the magazine *Madmoizelle*.

[3] The "Feminist Spring" refers to a series of protests in 2015 that sparked feminist actions and mobilizations on social media.

My study draws on a multi-site ethnographic approach, combining online and in-person observations of feminist media newsrooms and offices. Digital ethnography involved monitoring interviewees' social media activities, including posts, shares, likes, comments, and personal narratives, providing insights into the trajectories of media activists and their audiences. I made face-to-face visits to shared offices and newsrooms when possible, considering COVID-19 restrictions and the physical existence of these spaces. In-depth interviews complemented the ethnographic process, aiming to understand the beliefs, attitudes, values, feelings, desires, and motivations driving individuals' behaviors in specific social contexts (Gil 1987; Bauer and Gaskell 2002; Dantas and Lima 2018). Detailed information about the selection of interviewees, interview procedures, recording, processing, and questionnaires are available in Appendix.

To analyze the involvement of feminist media activists in their social world, I apply Unruh's (1980) four categories of actor involvement. The first category is "strangers". These actors, while not directly belonging to the world in question, must be considered by its inhabitants. They remain on the periphery of the central world. In the context of feminist media activism, this category includes writers, artists, politicians, and renowned personalities who engage with or oppose the feminist cause. Though external to the world of feminist media activism, these figures serve as important reference points for those creating content to disseminate feminist information.

Unruh's (1980) framework further categorizes participants as "tourists" and "regulars" in social worlds. "Tourists" are spectators occasionally present in the world, connected to it out of curiosity but with little long-term commitment. In the studied group, Mathilde from *Georgette Sand* exemplifies this category. As a historian and university professor, she indirectly collaborates by allowing reproduction of her academic content, but does not directly produce content for *Georgette Sand.* "Regulars" are habitual participants fully integrated into the world's ongoing activities, demonstrating significant commitment. In feminist media activism, this group includes paid professionals linked to content production processes. Examples are reporters, videographers, podcasters, and support staff such as administrative assistants, fundraising managers, and PR professionals. This category comprises 14 of the study's interviewees.

In the context of feminist media activism, an intermediate category emerges between Unruh's (1980) "tourists" and "regulars." This group, which I call "floating team" includes mainly columnists and volunteer reporters. They maintain an occasional presence within the world as there are no strict deadlines for content delivery or specific demands on their time.

This flexibility allows them to contribute on their own terms while still remaining integrated into the space's ongoing activities. Although they are engaged in feminist activism, they have to adjust their routines to carry out conventional paid work in shifts opposite to the volunteer work. These individuals often balance their activism with conventional paid work, reminiscent of Becker's (1982) concept of "day work" in the art world. This category comprises 14 interviewees in the study.

The final category in Unruh's framework is "insiders." These are individuals deeply embedded in the organization, possessing privileged information and a high level of involvement. Insiders have the authority to control or shape the structure and character of the social world. Their role includes creating and maintaining activities for other participants and recruiting new members. In feminist media activism, the insiders are typically the creators and directors of projects. They control restricted information, such as the initiative's financial history, and possess in-depth knowledge of the group's operational mechanisms. These insiders determine who joins or leaves the editorial team and regulate access to team interaction environments, like WhatsApp groups.

This distribution of social roles and varying forms of engagement contribute to the formation of the analyzed world. To be part of the inner circles of regulars or insiders, one must master both journalistic and activist conventions and/or have symbolic/cultural capital. Tourists who remain on the periphery—historians, artists, or writers—provide conventions that help shape the studied practice.

Violence against Media Activists

The analysis of interviews with actors from the social world reinforces that violence and attacks against feminist media activists have emotional consequences. Intimidation and fear emerge as primary tactics used by individuals and social structures attempting to maintain dominance and limit the reach of media promoting gender equality. The most prevalent forms of violence identified in this study include cybersexism, gaslighting, bullying, attacks on the LGBTQ+ community, and conflicts within family and social circles. These forms of violence often manifest as threats, aggression, and harassment. The specific consequences of these experiences for the interviewees are detailed in the following sections.

Digital attacks are the most prevalent form of violence among the interviewed media activists. Out of 33 participants, 17 directly reported experiencing cyber-violence as a consequence of them producing feminist content. Social media platforms, particularly

Twitter/X, seem to provide fertile ground for gender-related controversies due to their techno-semiotic properties, including concise statements, simultaneous circulation of texts and images, and the use of hashtags. These features appear to facilitate the production of controversial discursive entities and reinforce the polarization between opposing viewpoints on gender issues (Julliard 2016).

For the interviewed media activists, attacks primarily occur through comments and private messages received by email, social media, or on the websites of feminist outlets. The latter is less common, as these projects often have hate speech policies that effectively shield their teams, according to the interviewees. This pattern of harassment extends beyond individual contributors, affecting the institutional structures of feminist media outlets as well. These organizations face attacks through their websites and social media platforms, and regularly endure hacker attacks, especially when addressing more sensitive issues in public debates, such as abortion rights.

Anthony, a black and queer journalist from the Paris region who works for *Madmoizelle*, experiences cyber harassment on a regular basis, typically once a month. He emphasizes that this violence significantly impacts mental health. According to Anthony, the majority of the aggressors self-identify as masculinists and "on Twitter, they are much more virulent and also much more organized." Despite the seemingly dire context of recurring aggression, Anthony notes that those who experience it eventually develop a degree of resilience (Anthony, 20 July 2022).

Twitter/X remains one of the most popular social media platforms in Brazil and France, despite losing ground over the last decade. Characterized in the digital environment as a space that reinforces gender and racial inequalities (Messias et al. 2017), Twitter/X is frequently cited by interviewees as a common setting for cyberattacks. These accounts are supported by a 2021 survey coordinated by *AzMina* magazine, with the support of the International Center for Journalists. The survey reveals that women journalists in Brazil receive more than twice as many offensive comments as their male colleagues on Twitter. However, interviewees also mention other digital platforms as settings where harassment and violence occur, including YouTube, Instagram, and even Wikipedia.

Mathilde, a historian associated with *Georgette Sand* and a prominent French feminist activist with a large social media following, reports receiving numerous violent comments and even threats, especially on Twitter/X, where she has over 125,000 followers (interview, 2 August 2022). Her reactions vary depending on her mood and disposition. Sometimes he chooses not to respond at all. At other times, she mocks those spreading hate speech. In

these instances, Mathilde employs strategies such as sending satirical images to her "hater," such as a drawing of herself created by a feminist illustrator, featuring the phrase "Drink my menstruation." Mathilda's approach illustrates how media activists strategically adopt humor as a militant weapon (Breda 2022), using playful responses as a counter-discourse to anti-feminist groups.

Some attacks, however, prove too severe for such defense strategies to provide adequate security or peace of mind for the victims. Two interviewees, Amanda (*AzMina*) and Rebecca (*Les Glorieuses*), shared personal accounts of harassment involving death threats. Their experiences suggest certain factors that may make some media activist profiles more vulnerable to intense digital harassment.

Rebecca, as the creator and spokesperson of her feminist newsletter, has greater media and online visibility. Other interviewed publication directors or coordinators similarly report facing more intense aggression compared to collaborators not in leadership positions. Amanda, a columnist for *AzMina* magazine, draws attention from anti-feminist groups, even though she does not hold a managerial role or does not serve as an institutional representative. Her prominence stems from her work as a sports journalist, a field traditionally associated with male audiences, exposing her to constant hostility from various "haters." In the most serious incident, she received death threats and faced virtual harassment from a group of soccer fans, who disputed her claim that a coach's remark during a match was sexist[4]. The threat extended to Amanda's then-husband and family members.

The manifestations of cybersexism described above are not limited by national borders. Across the Atlantic, journalist Marguerite (*Georgette Sand*) reports similar experiences of cyber-harassment following her soccer articles. The experiences of these reporters demonstrate ongoing resistance to women's participation in activities traditionally perceived as masculine, such as sports journalism, particularly in soccer coverage.

The prejudiced nature of these attacks extends beyond gender issues, often intensifying when the victim is associated with other socially marginalized groups, such as Black people and people with disabilities. For example, Leandra, an *AzMina* columnist who is a disabled woman writing about the rights of disabled women, experienced a hacking attack on her livestream just she was about to give a presentation on her genetic bone disease. Similarly, structural racism is aggressively reflected in the experiences of Black media activists. Cris, an *AzMina* columnist and television presenter, faced severe digital attacks after

[4] The coach had commented that the team was playing so poorly that even a pregnant woman could score against them.

publishing a photograph of herself participating in a Black feminist campaign. Her image went viral, resulting in both misogynistic and racist attacks:

> I ran a campaign that featured a photo of me with a sign that read "My name is not the brown-skinned girl. My name is Cris Guterres." This photo generated a virtual attack. The image was shared more than 200,000 times. It was a photo with a text attached talking about the intersection of racism and sexism, how people called me a brown-skinned girl invalidated my existence, and objectified my body. It was very brutal! (interview, 3 September 2021)

The emotional toll of this violence is evident in how media activists reorganize their routines. Cris recounts that after this particular incident, she avoided leaving her house out of fear of exposure and of being recognized and attacked on the street, as well as feeling shame. While she maintained her social media profiles, she stopped publishing content and tried to distance herself from the internet for a period. Rebecca, founder of the newsletter *Les Glorieuses*, shares a similar experience (interview, 22 September 2022). She reveals that at one point, her fear was so intense that she removed her surname from the intercom to avoid being identified.

Media activists often consider seeking legal support, as both Amanda and Cris did. However, they frequently conclude that the potential financial compensation does not overweight the emotional strain of legal proceedings. Moreover, victims' responses to these attacks are influenced by a range of emotions, including humiliation, embarrassment, lack of confidence, and low self-esteem. These feelings, which form the comprehensive core of society's emotional culture (Koury 2018), shape how victims behave and position themselves in the world after such attacks. As a result, they tend to reduce their social media engagement and may even question their career choices and professional paths.

It is noteworthy that women who report not experiencing what they consider "more serious" violence—namely, incidents causing physical and/or psychological trauma—often describe themselves as fortunate. This element of interviews highlights the micro-political dimension of emotions in this context. In an environment where the relationship between humiliation and gender is frequently exploited to undermine the political activism and digital engagement of the actors within the studied social world, perceiving oneself as a "non-victim" evokes a sense of relief. Moreover, occupying this position creates an impression of privilege.

In sum, the cyber-harassment experienced by feminist media activists is typically associated with several key factors that amplify the scale of these attacks. The most prominent factors, as highlighted in the interviewees' narratives, are political events, identity factors, and increased visibility. Political events include national elections or prominent

international debates on gender-related issues. Identity factors encompass ethnic-racial background, cultural identity, or sexual orientation, such as identifying as Black and/or LGBTQ+. Increased visibility refers to instances where an activist's name or a feminist publication is mentioned on far-right channels or in journalistic projects with wider reach than the surveyed media, including other media activist channels.

The persistence of attacks on feminist projects is closely linked to the cyclical nature of content and debate surrounding their issues. As media activists' published information fades from web circulation, the attacks tend to diminish correspondingly. Similarly, the outlets most frequently targeted by hate speech propagators are those with the highest national profiles. Highly publicized controversies have the unique ability to be tailored for different audiences, depending on the media outlet and target demographic. This adaptability allows conflicts to be framed in various ways (Cervulle and Julliard 2018), enabling controversies to gain prominence in specific media channels and focus on particular audiences.

Interviewees generally confirm that attacks by anti-feminist groups tend to occur on specific occasions, corresponding to the relevance of an issue in social and political debates. Among the testimonies collected, the most emblematic case of this process involves an article by *AzMina* explaining how a safe abortion is performed—an episode cited by more than half of the women interviewed related to the magazine as readers or staff.

This article, based on a WHO technical guideline for safe abortion, explains abortion procedures in Brazil, as well as in countries where it is fully legalized. *AzMina* contributors report that movements opposing abortion decriminalization in Brazil—including Catholic and evangelical religious groups, right-wing and far-right politicians, and anti-feminist movements—interpreted the article as an abortion tutorial. Beyond provoking outrage among reactionary segments of Brazilian society, the case led to personal lawsuits against the reporter and editor responsible for the article. It also resulted in public condemnation via social media from members of Jair Bolsonaro's then-government.

In terms of violence, more than a third of the media activists interviewed report experiencing psychological abuse perpetrated by men in various forms and spaces, both digital or physical. When analyzing the nature of violence faced by the group, two prominent patterns emerge. First, media activists routinely suffer verbal aggression aimed at offending them by highlighting physical characteristics. They are called ugly, fat, old, or have specific elements of their bodies or faces particularly for criticism. Second, they experience verbal aggression that seeks to offend by using slurs associated with passive sexual behavior (such

as "whore," "bitch," "slut," or "stag"). This language serves to demarcate spaces in which men and women are expected to operate, reinforcing the dominant male position (Zanello and Gomes 2011).

The digital environment's mechanisms facilitate the spread and amplification of hate speech, making insult-based attacks on social media a routine occurrence. This dynamic appears to be fueled by the relative anonymity of those who initiate these attacks (Julliard 2016). As media activists gain prominence through their activism and professional activities, their bodies increasingly become targets for social media attacks. Consequently, the more voice and space these activists acquire, the more intense online harassment becomes.

In more subtle ways, these activists also experience situations where their intellectual and psychological capacities are questioned. This occurs at various levels. One example comes from Marília (interview, 18 August 2021), a journalist from *AzMina* magazine. She represented the publication on a radio program to discuss an app created by the media outlet to combat domestic violence. Marília noticed that the presenters displayed a lack of interest in both the topic she was invited to address and in her as an interviewee. This was evident in their apparent lack of preparation for the discussion and in getting her name wrong. Such incidents exemplify how these women are not listened to or taken seriously, even in professional settings where they are invited as experts.

More extreme episodes occur where the sanity or skills of these professionals are directly questioned. They are often labeled as crazy, stupid, or unprepared. Vanessa, a reporter for *Lado M*, frequently experiences this. She maintains a website focusing on cinema and films made by women, where she regularly receives messages from men claiming that she and her colleagues are unfit to analyze certain films or series. As Vanessa explains, "they make it seem like you don't understand the film because you are a woman and therefore have no references" (interview, 19 July 2021).

Finally, media activists routinely face sexist discourses claiming that their feminist activism and information from a lack of romantic or sexually involvement with men. Anti-feminist groups and individuals employ this reaffirmation of androcentric positions as a tactic to intimidate the action of these media activists. They resort to gender-based humiliation, seeking to reinforce ideas of hierarchical power positions between men and women.

Having outlined the most common forms of violence against media activists, we can observe that the emotional fallout from these experiences is complex. It encompasses feelings and actions of fear and intimidation in response to attacks but also firmness and determination to continue their work. Many media activists experience psychological

exhaustion due to constant psychological attacks. However, their strong sense of identity and belonging to the group, coupled with their commitment to feminist and gender agendas, often motivates them to remain active in this social world.

Resistance to Anti-Feminist Violence

Media activists' fight against sexist violence their community experiences focuses on two strategic approaches. First, the editorial teams of feminist media implement systematic measures to combat cyber sexism and other forms of violence against contributors. Second, interviewees adopt individual strategies in their daily routines to protect themselves from potential aggression, supported by networks built through feminist interaction and engagement.

Feminist project coordinators strive to shield their teams from attacks, particularly in the digital environment where information produced in their social world primarily circulates. All publications face periodic hacking attempts, which are primarily addressed by team leaders and IT staff. These individuals provide guidelines to their colleagues on protective measures and procedures to be adopted by all team members, focusing on optimizing password protection and securing access to shared digital workspaces.

The interviewees who discussed anti-cyber-sexism measures emphasized feeling protected by the shielding strategies employed in their projects. Comment moderation and the reduced exposure to insults and aggressive messages for reporters and columnists provide a sense of relief. Generally, these individuals prefer to avoid encountering attacks on their work or themselves. However, there are exceptions, such as journalist and video artist Emilie from *Madmoizelle*. Emilie expressed indifference towards negative comments her videos and publications receive on social media (interview, 22 July 2022).

Media activists develop personal strategies to shield their private spaces on social media from haters and anti-feminist aggression. One such strategy involves refraining from explicitly mentioning their work in feminism, though this approach inadvertently contributes to the silencing of feminist voices. For example, Paula from *Think Olga* usually identifies as a professional working in NGOs, omitting her direct association with a feminist project (interview, 13 August 2021). Rayana from *AzMina*'s financial fundraising team, shares a nuanced approach (interview, 28 July 2021). While she does not feel intimidated or ashamed to identify as a feminist, she consciously avoids using the term "feminism" in environments she perceives as less conducive to debate. Instead, she engages in discussions about gender equality and advocates for women's rights without explicitly labeling her stance.

Some media activists, particularly those in support teams and leadership roles who frequently encounter violent content and attempted attacks, opt for restricted profiles on social networks instead of public ones. This protective measure sometimes extends to the type and format of information shared in digital spaces. As such, Megan, a journalist for the newsletter *Les Glorieuses* reveals that she refrains from publishing photographs of her face online and minimizes personal exposure to avoid drawing attention as an activist. However, these strategies are not always viable for professionals in the field. Given their work in communication and media, many depend on social media platforms to promote their work.

Other media activists choose to ignore attacks directed at them. For instance, Océane from *Madmoizelle* recounted an incident where her colleagues alerted her about a member of a masculinist group sharing her images online alongside content she had produced for the magazine (interview, 22 September 2022). Rather than investigating the situation, Océane consciously chose not to explore what was being said and shared about her in anti-feminist spaces. Her reasoning behind this decision was that if the target of an attack remains unaffected, the aggressor fails to achieve their desired outcome.

Media activists employ self-preservation tactics and strategies to combat sexist attacks while avoiding reinforcement of violent mechanisms. These approaches mitigate the intensification of negative emotions like anger, humiliation, frustration, and stress triggered by harassment and gender-based aggression. Emotional management is crucial for professionals working on women's rights and issues affecting feminized individuals. By adopting these protective measures, activists can sustain their digital activism and feminist militancy efforts despite ongoing challenges.

Interviewees report that emotions within editorial teams and newsrooms are less restricted than in traditional journalism environments, influencing the structure of their professional spheres. This approach contrasts with conventional organizational handling of emotions and affections, which often associates them with disorder, partiality, excess, amateurism, slowness, and time-wasting, suggesting that affections should remain outside the work environment (Jeantet 2021).

In pursuit of an achievable utopia through alternative lifestyles within engaged media proposals (Andrade and Pereira 2022), the outlets included in this study tend to encourage contributors to take ideological positions, such as openly identifying as feminist. They also promote emotional exchange among team members through various means: group therapy processes, convivial gatherings like lunches or "happy hours," and social interactions that encourage sharing of feelings, such as weekly team meetings dedicated to discussing personal

experiences rather than work matters. This approach represents a significant departure from traditional media environments, embracing a more holistic and emotionally open workplace culture.

Confronting anti-feminist violence evokes shock, fatigue, and disgust, while also awakening feelings of solidarity and cohesion in the collective. This dynamic underpins the group's sociability, leading members to establish a shared social, political, moral, and emotional space (Andrade 2020). The common project uniting media activists is amplified by their collective fight against sexist socio-structural elements affecting them. Consequently, violence becomes a component fostering the action of producing engaged feminist content.

Tactics for Promoting Gender Equality

Media activists employ diverse engagement strategies to promote gender equality and combat hate speech and anti-feminist movements. They focus on producing quality information and establishing activist projects as reliable sources and references in debates on inclusion and feminism. The six outlets utilize various formats — from apps and newsletters to social media campaigns — to reach their audiences. *AzMina* develops tools like the PenhaS app for combating domestic violence, while *Lado M* focuses on creating a space for learning and debate on women's issues. *Think Olga* created the social innovation advisory service Think Eva to find solutions for gender inequalities through both digital and non-digital strategies. In France, *Georgette Sand* uses humor to challenge societal representations of women, *Les Glorieuses* shares weekly newsletters on diverse feminist topics, and *Madmoizelle* employs a lighter tone with memes and gifs to address socio-political issues. Their content ranges from serious discussions on workplace inequality to body positivity and inclusive feminism. These outlets extend their impact beyond digital spaces through events, consultancies, and partnerships, creating a multifaceted approach to feminist media activism that blends online and offline strategies to challenge societal norms and promote gender equality.

Before approaching feminism, media activists and their audiences typically identified with other forms of activism related to class, race, and diversity issues, rather than engaging in feminist media activism or traditional political activism associated with parties or social movements. Digital activists generally have solid experience with various forms of political mobilization, combining both online and offline actions (Breda 2022). These individuals become familiar with engagement discourses through family, academic, and professional environments and are accustomed to navigating activist spaces.

The majority of interviewees reported a gradual immersion into collective feminist activism, yet, for some, this process was more challenging due to class and racial contexts, age-related factors, or specific personal experiences. Pain usually appears in the context of the private, as a solitary experience (Ahmed 2014). Through activism, however, interviewees reframe this concept, giving a collective dimension to their individual pain and that of other women and feminized individuals.

Structural situations of gender violence or prejudice (racial, gender, sexual orientation) emerged as background elements in all interviews. These experiences generated anger, sadness, and frustration in the interviewees, but also a desire to share their experiences and transform pain into activist or militant engagement. In feminist contexts, denouncing or sharing past violence serves as a strategy for collectivizing experiences that affect the group as a whole and generate activist social mobilization. It expresses hope for another kind of world, another way of inhabiting the world (Ahmed, 2014). Emotions—anger, acceptance, empathy, revolt, sadness, fulfillment—typically lead the interviewees to engage in feminist action and, subsequently, to act within digital feminist media activism.

Feminist actors in media activism seek rewards beyond career advancement, including personal and professional non-material benefits (Enriquez 1990; Becker 2008; Gaiger 2016; Andrade 2020). These individuals engage in producing feminist content and information about gender equality, which serves multiple purposes. Through this engagement, they position themselves in relation to others and develop relationships within their activist circles (Bernard 2017). The process generates emotional experiences and cultivates a sense of belonging through their activism. This involvement with the social world through media activism enables feminists to become part of a larger community and find purpose beyond traditional career goals.

Media activism is not merely a professional choice or a career-related area of activity. It is enshrined in the routine of these individuals as a lifestyle, where work time merges with other life activities, and the interactions among group participants form a vital space of community activity (Malini and Antoun 2013). Intersecting journalism and feminism, this engaged practice appropriates the characteristics and action strategies of social movements, building an inventive and performative news production environment.

Ethnographic research focusing on transnational connections and spaces, particularly in Brazil and France (Saunier 2004), reveals that feminist media activist groups form solidarity networks. Their cooperation practices strengthen members' sense of belonging to a broader collective. In this context, the internet and particularly social media are integral to this social

world. These socio-technical devices shape collective experiences, presenting both challenges and opportunities for feminist communities while transforming the boundaries of interaction and identity formation (Hine 2017). Digital activism and online communication provide crucial support for engaged media, functioning as networks that nurture these projects with the backing of their audiences.

Contributors to the studied publications have established a support network for women, defined in Bourdieu's terms (1980) as the product of efforts to create and maintain beneficial group relationships. Readers' personal messages expressing gratitude for feminist media's impact reinforce these networks. This feedback highlights the mobilizing power of personal narratives as a key political tool in networked feminism (Joeüt 2018; Hollanda 2019; Pinheiro-Machado 2019).

"The longer the community lasts, the stronger the identity" (Enriquez 1990, 150), a principle evident in the shared identity among feminist media activists that sustains their social world. The longevity of these outlets enhances their visibility, creating a cyclical effect that further supports their continuity. Cooperation within this sphere is built on emotional expressions aligned with community sentiment, serving as a central strategy to promote gender equality and counter hate speech and anti-feminist movements.

This research reveals that feminist media activism projects have successfully reached previously non-feminist readers through engaged content. These media outlets are actively diversifying their collaborators across social, ethnic-racial, economic, and territorial backgrounds, thereby expanding their audience reach. However, interviewees acknowledge the constraints of their activist efforts, particularly in reaching male audiences and women outside their immediate circles. The discrepancy between the actual circulation of content and expectations leads to frustration among activists. As a relatively new social movement, feminism faces challenges beyond media competition, economic models, and organizational practices. Feminist movements struggle to keep their issues and discussions consistently visible and important to their audience because the digital landscape changes so quickly and constantly demands new content. Digital activism, while a tool for change in the political-institutional sphere, has limitations (Bonfim and Nunes 2017) tied to various factors. These include socioeconomic conditions determining web and social media access, age-related differences in digital literacy, and the influence of algorithms in redirecting online interactions. Technology thus has a dual impact on feminist media activism. It accelerates the spread of feminist information and facilitates the organization of engaged actions,

promoting gender equality. Simultaneously, it constrains the potential reach of media activist production due to its inherent limitations.

Both producers and consumers of digital feminist information question the internet's potential for equalizing of power. They recognize that algorithms, marketing strategies, and advertising practices increasingly limit content circulation. These factors tend to amplify extreme—and often hateful—discourses while pushing users with different political views further apart. The use of digital tools by independent media activists to promote social justice and democracy requires careful consideration because, to spread their online content, activists must navigate systems imposed by hegemonic institutions. Tech giants like Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, Microsoft, and Twitter/X control software, search engines, social media, and other key online spaces (Lanham 2007; Smyrnaios 2017), creating an oligopoly in the digital sector and effectively restricting broad web access.

Jouët (2018) argues that digital feminist activism emerges from contemporary neoliberalism, driven by individuals seeking recognition in neoliberal societies. This means that digital practices and feminist engagement stem from global liberal principles, even as feminists critique these same principles. In this context, we must be wary of techno-optimism and technological determinism, recognizing that the internet is not a free space. While social movements use the internet to advocate for social justice, other actors also appropriate it for their interests, such as governments that employ technology to map and monitor activists (Sousa, 2017).

In the realm of feminist media activism, therefore, the challenge is to use cyberspaces to expand communication and exchange multidisciplinary knowledge among activists, fostering feminist consciousness through technology (Bañón 2013). Importantly, to reach diverse audiences and broaden the gender debate, activists must act both online and offline. This multi-site activism moves fluidly between streets and networks, employing parallel techniques in digital and physical spaces to maximize impact and engagement.

Feminist media activists experience moments of doubt and fatigue, grappling with anguish, frustration, and discouragement when faced with the need to constantly reiterate their messages. Despite this, they find renewed motivation through their interactions with the public, both online and offline. The interviewed activists assert that their work in producing feminist content and information about gender equality makes a tangible impact on their communities and countries. This sense of meaningful contribution through their professional efforts reinvigorates their commitment to the cause.

Comparative Insights on Feminist Media Activism in Brazil and France

The comparison between Brazilian and French feminist media reveals notable differences in team composition and fundraising strategies. Brazilian outlets in the study maintain all-women teams, sparking ongoing debates. Some activists advocate for women-only spaces in feminist discourse and content creation, while others push for male inclusion to broaden understanding and engagement. This debate often evolves when team members become parents, especially to sons, prompting reassessment of gender inclusion in feminist spaces. French feminist media projects, conversely, often include men on their staff. Leaders and team members of these publications view male participation as both valid and valuable, seeing it as crucial to their mission of promoting gender equality.

Fundraising approaches also differ significantly. French non-voluntary media actively pursue sponsorships and brand partnerships for financial stability. Brazilian projects, however, show greater reluctance to link feminist agendas with private companies, a hesitation rooted in both journalistic principles and activist ideologies.

In both France and Brazil, the complexities surrounding the monetization of publications pose a significant challenge for teams striving to balance activism with professionalism. Feminist outlets often turn to donor funding as a strategic approach to mobilize communication, raise public awareness, and encourage collaboration to sustain content production. This strategy also serves as a means to circumvent limitations imposed by advertisers. However, for feminist-engaged media in both Brazil and France, relying solely on donor support may not be a viable or sufficient solution, prompting media activists to explore alternative methods to ensure the continuity of their social impact. The financial burdens associated with engagement frequently constrain the capacity for action among contributors to these outlets. This is particularly true for volunteers who, despite their desire to dedicate more time to media activism, must maintain regular employment to support themselves.

The interactive spaces that form the social world of these feminist media communities serve dual purposes. Firstly, they create personal and emotional support networks for contributors and readers. Secondly, they facilitate networking among professionals from various fields, political activists, and digital activists. These networks facilitate global feminist interactions and collaborations. They provide participants with access to job opportunities, professional referrals, and recommendations for relevant services and products. Additionally, these networks connect individuals who share an interest in gender issues, thereby enriching and expanding the broader discourse on gender equality.

Feminist engagement and the production of content aimed at gender equality broaden the actors' circles of contacts and strengthen their socialization, both online and offline, guided by intersectional feminist ideals. Offline interactions involve family, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances, which activists try to bring closer to the feminist agenda. Online interactions take place via social media with acquaintances and strangers, as well as through publications and other content. The group's interactions transcend the internet, functioning as an "incorporated, embodied and everyday phenomenon" (Hine 2017, 17). This blurs the boundaries between material and virtual realms, causing various media to intersect and resonate with each other (Batista and Souza 2020). Interviewees from both Brazil and France strive to exercise their political-ideological activism in their social groups and usual spaces of operation. For them, digital feminist media activism is more than just a job, hobby, or means of exchanging information. They view this social world as a collective network with transformative potential and, above all, tangible hope.

Tracing Individual Journeys in Collective Feminist Projects

The ethnographic research and interviews with members of the feminist media activism social world reinforce a key insight: the feminist movement's organization allows individual stories to represent a broader, collective dimension of this space structured to combat gender violence. Despite the diverse personal and professional trajectories of media activists, a set of common factors unites these actors within this social world, creating a convergence of narratives.

Feminist media activism borrows and adapts practices from various fields to create a functional and sustainable model. Group members implicitly commit to following conventions that organize participation, task division, and interactions. These conventions constantly interact with other spaces, primarily journalism, from which media activists draw most of their operational practices. Additionally, feminist media activists, especially insiders involved in creating publications and those responsible for fundraising and recruitment, must learn conventions from other fields. These include entrepreneurship, administration, and organizational communication, which are necessary for making projects viable and maintaining them.

Internal divisions within teams shape actors' involvement in media activism, reflecting both formal work relationships and personal ties that pre-exist or develop over time. These dynamics reveal hierarchies within feminist media based on professional and emotional connections. Consequently, the space becomes limited to a profile of media

activists primarily comprising urban, white, highly educated women from prestigious institutions.

The organization and task distribution in feminist media activism involves "insiders," "regulars," and some "floating team." Interviewees describe their social world as being based on high team integration and constant dialogue to align activities across information production, fundraising, social media content, artwork, and design. In all outlets studied, contributors routinely monitor and edit each other's work across all media platforms. Regarding public involvement, interviewed readers alternate between the categories of "tourists" and "regulars," predominantly falling into the latter category based on reports and field observations. These individuals demonstrate continuous commitment to this social world, collectively contributing to its maintenance through engagement and producing original content aimed at promoting gender equality.

In sum, the analysis of trajectories as the organizing axis of social action in feminist media activism reveals that collective identity and a sense of belonging foster engagement and continuity. This shared space functions not only as a work environment but also as a supportive network, inspiring hope for transformative potential through personal connections.

Interviewees collective narrative reinforces the inherently community nature of digital feminist media activism, aligning with Becker's (1982) concept of social worlds. This practice relies on support staff, with audience feedback serving as a primary motivation for media activists. The social world's structures also highlight forms of violence and domination affecting both activists and their audiences. These groups mobilize various forms of capital—social, cultural, economic, and symbolic—to engage in producing or consuming gender-perspective information. The Bourdieusian approach provides a theoretical framework to reconceptualize gender as a social category, offering insights into the consequences of viewing gender as socially constructed. This perspective incorporates everyday details into a broader social analysis of power (Moi 1991). While contemporary women's positions in power structures are more complex than Bourdieu's theories suggest, this theoretical lens helps understand the forces directly influencing the studied practice.

Power structures play a crucial role in the creation and maintenance of feminist media, contributing to their stability and continuity. Media activists often leverage their positions of power to advance feminist projects. The socio-economic backgrounds, geographical locations, and educational institutions of key members, especially founders, significantly influence the visibility, recognition, and direction of these projects. These factors

shape the composition of the group in terms of class, race, and territory. Hence, a key finding of this study challenges the notion of horizontality often associated with feminist activism. The studied outlets reproduce business hierarchies within their structures. This results in power imbalances where designated leaders or coordinators wield more influence, while others have limited voice or space. Consequently, some employees feel less valued or heard than others. The study also uncovers co-optation mechanisms (Juban et al. 2015) in recruitment processes. Media outlets frequently select new members from existing networks or acquaintances. This practice limits the diversity of profiles, stories, and experiences within digital feminist media activism.

Anger emerges as a central motivating force for digital activism and political engagement among the interviewees. This emotion arises when they observe or personally experience gender inequalities, spurring them to engage in the production or consumption of feminist content and information about social justice. In this context, emotions are transformed into tools or techniques, as described by Ahmed (2014), and a new form of action is created from pre-existing feelings, sensations, or emotions. The actions of both media activists and readers are driven by a complex emotional landscape, including outrage at the persistent lack of gender equality (anger), concerns that hard-won rights may be lost (fear), and joy and fulfilment derived from the belief that their actions are positively impacting other women and feminized individuals. Notably, satisfaction appears to be the predominant emotion, encouraging both media activists and their audience to maintain their engagement with the social world of feminist media activism.

The interviewees' narratives consistently reveal a desire to transform social structures. These actors aim to counter the attacks on solidarity-based forms of organization—such as the promotion of individualism and social distancing—led by institutions aligned with neoliberal principles of wealth and power concentration (Chomsky, 2017). Through their activism, they seek to transform the various social worlds they inhabit. This shared desire for change acts as a unifying factor, motivating both media activists and their audiences to invest in engaged actions. Although interviewees recognize the limited impact of their productions or dissemination efforts, the experience of collective mobilization provides the necessary incentive to continue their engagement with feminist agendas, despite these limitations. As noted by Pinheiro-Machado (2019), once individuals experience the power of being, organizing, and living in a community, they develop a strong sense of belonging that makes leaving these spaces undesirable and nearly impossible.

The feminist media activist groups operate on multiple fronts, ranging from amplifying readers' testimonies to give voice to previously silenced women, to engaging in institutional actions and campaigns that influence state-level policies to combat sexism. This article's primary contribution is presenting the world of digital feminist media activism, which emerged primarily from 2015 onwards, from the perspective of its constituent actors. The research serves as a platform for welcoming and listening, where information producers, support teams, and audiences can express themselves and share their experiences with feminist content engagement. The functioning and participation processes within this practice are founded on cooperative forms whose continuity is linked to shared emotional expressions of euphoria, pleasure, solidarity, and hope. These socialized emotions sustain the maintenance of the space and the engagement of its participants.

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Appendix: Research Design and Interview Questions

Interviewee Selection

Interviewees were selected from project websites, social media profiles, and professional networks. For readers, I identified profiles on Facebook and Instagram that interacted through comments with the studied publications. I then accessed each of these profiles, analyzed the published content, and liked posts connected to feminist agendas (in text or images) to create links and affinities with potential interviewees. This process only applied to open profiles or those with some open content. I kept my social media profiles open to the public so that these women and (a few) men could find out more about me, and see who I am and what I identify with. I let potential interviewees get to know me so that they would feel more comfortable introducing themselves.

Interview Timeline and Process

I conducted interviews between October 2020 and November 2022, with 33 in Brazil and 30 in France. For each publication, I interviewed approximately five contributors and five readers. Interviews were primarily conducted remotely via various digital platforms, with a few in-person interviews in France.

All interviews were recorded with permission and later transcribed. A total of 58 hours and 20 minutes of interviews were recorded across both countries. Interviews were conducted in the native language of each country, with two exceptions in France where English and Spanish were used.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were addressed, including obtaining consent from participants. Media activists agreed to be named, while readers' identities were partially anonymized as per their preferences. In cases where personal information needed to be protected, testimonies were presented without naming individuals.

Interview Structure

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used, based on pre-prepared scripts but allowing for flexibility. Three types of scripts were developed: for content producers, support team members, and audience members. The interviews covered personal and

professional trajectories, experiences with feminism, and interactions within the social world of feminist media activism.

Examples of Interview Questions

1. Core Questions (for all participants)

1.1. Demographics

- Gender
- State (where you live)
- Age
- Profession
- Education/Training

1.2. Feminist Identity

- Are you a feminist? Why are you a feminist?
- What does being a feminist mean to you?
- When and how did you discover that you had an affinity with the feminist agenda?
- Do you participate in feminist activist groups? Which ones? What is/was it like?
- Do you feel in any way bullied for identifying with the feminist cause?
- Have you ever suffered threats or any kind of violence for aligning yourself with feminism?

1.3. Media and Feminism

- How do you think the media in general approaches the issue of violence against women?
- Does the media address structural sexism in society? If so, how?
- And how does the media approach the issue of decriminalizing abortion?
- What about the position of women in the labor market?
- How do you think fake news affects the feminist movement?

1.4. Pandemic Impact

- How has the pandemic affected your work?
- In your opinion, what impact has the pandemic had on the feminist movement?
- In your opinion, what impact has the pandemic had on feminist media initiatives and/or similar initiatives?

2. For Media Professionals (Editors, Columnists, Support Team)

2.1. Career Path

- Can you tell us about your professional career until you joined the independent feminist media project?
- Why did you decide to work for an initiative that does feminist journalism?
- Is this a financially viable choice for you?
- What is different between the feminist initiative and your previous work?
- What are the similarities between your previous work and your work in the feminist initiative?
- Do you enjoy what you do?
- How would you rate your professional career to date?
- Who are the people responsible for maintaining the website, building and updating the page, posting on social media, raising money, and funding to keep the initiative going? Do you have contact? What is this relationship like?
- In your opinion, what keeps the initiative going?

2.2. Work Dynamics

- What is a typical working day like?
- What tasks do you perform and how do you organize yourself to carry them out?
- Who do you interact with on a daily routine?
- How are tasks distributed among the team? Are there agenda meetings? Are there content production targets?
- Does the initiative have a physical space in which to carry out its work?
- How are working hours organized?
- What is your relationship like with your colleagues who also work for the initiative?
- How is the team's relationship with sources?
- Who do you write for? What is your reader's profile?
- Does the initiative have haters? How is your relationship with them?
- What is the team's relationship like with other independent media and feminist media groups?
- What role do technology and the internet play in the development of the group's activities?

2.3. Content and Impact

- Is what you do journalism?
- How does dealing with sensitive issues such as violence against women affect your routine?
- How do you think your work affects society?

- How does the initiative deal with the current situation of widespread dissemination of fake news?

2.4. Personal Reflections

- How does work affect your family life?
- Has your view of feminism changed since you started working in feminist journalism?
- Has your relationship with your partner changed?
- How do you feel when you carry out activities for the feminist initiative?
- What gives you the most satisfaction at work?
- What makes you most dissatisfied at work?

2.5. Additional Questions for Specific Roles

For Editors/Columnists

- Who are the people responsible for maintaining the website, building and updating the page, posting on social media, raising money, and funding to keep the initiative going? Do you have contact? What is this relationship like?
- In your opinion, what keeps the initiative going?

For Support Team

- How does the dynamic of cooperation between the team work?
- How important are the activities you carry out for the group as a whole?

3. For Public/Readers

3.1. Engagement with Feminist Media

- What motivates you to follow the work of the feminist journalism initiative?
- When and how did you find out about the initiative? And how did you start following the work?
- Do you also read/watch/listen to content from other similar initiatives?
- Which device do you use to access the content of the feminist media initiative?
- How do you access this content (portal, social media)?
- Where do you access it from (home, work, street)? How often do you access it? And what days and times do you access it?
- Can you name any subject/content that made an impression on you?
- Do you usually interact with the initiative (through comments, shares)?
- During the pandemic, did you start to follow the initiative more or less? Why?

- In your opinion, what impact has the pandemic had on feminist media initiatives and/or similar initiatives?
- As a reader, how do you deal with the current situation of widespread dissemination of fake news?
- In your opinion, how does fake news affect the feminist media initiative and/or similar initiatives?

3.2. Comparative Analysis

- What differences do you see between the coverage of this initiative and that of the traditional media?
- And what similarities do you see between the two covers?
- Do you think the initiative interacts with the public? Why?
- What positive features of this initiative would you highlight? Why?
- And what negative characteristics would you highlight? Why?

3.3. Personal Impact

- How has this identification with feminism affected your life?
- Do you live with other people who share your point of view? How is your relationship with them?
- How is your identification with this cause reflected in your relationship with your family?
- And how is this reflected in your relationships with friends? And in the workplace?

Mainstreaming Conservative Ideas Through Media Coverage: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Croatian Online Media Reporting on the "Be Manly" Men's Rights Movement

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Abstract

This study examines how Croatian online media coverage of the "Be Manly" men's rights movement contributed to mainstreaming conservative ideas. "Be Manly" emerged in 2022 as a Catholic men's movement conducting public prayer protests to advocate for male authority and traditional gender roles. Using critical discourse analysis, this research analyzed 72 articles from five major online news outlets (Index.hr, Jutarnji.hr, 24sata.hr, Večernji.hr, and Dnevno.hr) during the movement's first year. The findings reveal an ideological divide: Index.hr and Jutarnji.hr demonstrated negative coverage, while 24sata.hr, Večernji.hr, and Dnevno.hr portrayed the movement positively. However, all outlets participated in mainstreaming conservative ideas through three mechanisms: temporal-spatial normalization, agenda setting, and trivialization. This study provides the first systematic analysis of media representation of men's rights activism in Croatia, revealing how ideological bias in media coverage can facilitate the mainstreaming of conservative ideas.

Keywords: Men's Rights Activism; Be Manly; Mainstreaming; Critical Discourse Analysis; Croatia; Online Media

Introduction

Gender equality issues in post-Socialist Southeastern European countries remain tethered to their socialist past. While politics, economy, and society have undergone significant modernization, conservative ideas are gaining prominence, particulary pro-life causes in the Balkans (Veljan and Čehajić Čampara 2021, 10). This study examines Croatia, where conservative causes are heavily influenced by its Catholic heritage and the contemporary institution of the Catholic Church. This influence is a consequence of the Church's role during the 1990s War of Independence, when it served as a beacon of anti-communism and a builder of collective identity.

Modern-day Croatian conservative movements emerged in the 2000s, opposing the sexual education school curriculum (Petričušić et al. 2017, 67). Since then, these movements

have advocated for anti-abortion policies, opposed same-sex marriages, and promoted a return to traditional societal values rooted in Catholicism.

This trend is not unique to Croatia. Many countries have experienced a similar rise in religious conservatism, with some serving as incubators for these movements. Whenever societies undergo rapid modernization, conservative right-wing movements tend to radicalize (Minkenberg 2018, 524). One such response is men's rights activism (MRA), which emerged as a backlash against feminist efforts to improve gender equality. MRA entered the mainstream discourse in the 2010s, advocating for patriarcahal gender roles and claiming that feminist progress threatens traditional masculinity. Although MRA originated in North America, its ideas have spread globally.

In Croatia, the prominent mainstream MRA movement is the "Be Manly" initiative. This group organizes public rosary prayers for causes such as restricting women's autonomy in dressing and abortion rights and promoting a return to Catholicism-based patriarchal values. Since 2022, participants have gathered on the first Saturday of each month, kneeling in prayer at city squares.

The Be Manly movement offers a distinctive case of MRA mobilization, a phenomenon understudied both globally and in Croatia, particularly compared to online MRA communities. Existing studies focus on online MRA communities in Western contexts, leaving a dearth of research on offline mobilizations and their interactions with mainstream media. This study aims to address the gap by examining how Croatian online media portray the "Be Manly" initiative and participate in mainstreaming its conservative ideas.

Media coverage analysis is crucial as media representation and perception reflect what is accepted in the public arena. This guides the research questions:

1. What does the discourse used by Croatian media in reporting about the men's rights activist organization Be Manly say about media attitudes towards radical ideas on the right?
2. Are there mainstreaming mechanisms in Croatian online media reports about the Be Manly organization, and if so, which ones?

Mainstreaming is a key concept in this research because of the media's potential to move topics from the margins to the mainstream. Importantly, recent studies have shown that popular news outlets' coverage of populism has helped normalize far-right ideologies (Brown and Mondon 2021). Brown and Mondon (2021) identify three mechanisms of

mainstreaming—deflection, euphemization and trivialization, and amplification—which provide the analytical framework for this study.

The study uses critical discourse analysis that provides tools to uncover the attitudes embedded in media texts. This method is particularly suited for revealing the implicit and explicit attitudes within media texts, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of bias and ideological leanings. Drawing on Machin and Mayr's (2012) framework, the analysis focuses on how language and grammar choices shape meaning and audience perceptions.

This research emerged from observations of divergent media coverage surrounding Be Manly protests in Croatia. Some outlets characterized participants as "prayers," while others called them "kneelers." The protest paradigm theory, which posits that media coverage tends to emphasize protests' disruptive or negative elements (McCurdy 2012), provided a theoretical framework for analyzing these contrasting portrayals.

The study examines coverage of Be Manly from five mainstream Croatian media outlets representing various ideological perspectives: *Index.hr*, *Jutarnji.hr*, *24sata.hr*, *Večernji.hr*, and *Dnevno.hr*. During the first year of Be Manly's mobilization, these outlets published 72 articles relevant to the movement.

Through this analysis, the study illuminates the complex relationship between media coverage and conservative movements in contemporary Croatia. Despite the country's modernization efforts, the findings suggest that media framing continues to play a crucial role in shaping public discourse around social movements and traditional values.

Theoretical Background

Men's Rights Activism: Ideological Foundations and Perspectives

MRA is a contemporary subcategory of men's groups. In his analysis of US-based men's groups, Kenneth Clatterbaugh (2018) identified eight distinct perspectives, including conservative, profeminist, men's rights, mythopoetic, socialist, gay, African American, and evangelical. These groups conceptualize masculinity distinctly based on their sociocultural identities and lived experiences. For this research, I focus specifically on conservative, profeminist, mythopoetic, and evangelical groups, as these align most closely with contemporary MRA movements in Croatian cultural context.

Conservative advocates maintain that gender roles follow a natural binary between men and women, with hardline positions asserting immutable biological differences between sexes. The profeminist movement emerged in the 1970s as a counterpoint to these views (Clatterbaugh 2018, 10). Profeminists conceptualize masculinity as a social construct

maintained through systemic male privilege and women's oppression, while acknowledging that traditional masculine norms can negatively impact men themselves. Some profeminists, concerned for men's endangerment, created the men's rights perspective, concluding that traditional masculinity harms men more than women. However, Clatterbaugh (2018, 11) argues that since male privilege is the backbone of every feminist perspective, men's rights activists are indisputably antifeminist. Their platform reflects what scholars term "new sexism," focusing on perceived discrimination against men in specific domains: divorce proceedings, child custody decisions, domestic violence prosecution, and sexual harassment policies.

Like conservative groups, evangelists advocate for maintaining or returning to traditional gender hierarchies. They focus on family and church as places where men need to take charge once again. Their teaching lies in metaphor: "Men are to women as Jesus was to the Church" (Clatterbaugh 2018, 14). Mythopoetic groups encourage men to strive for a deeper understanding of masculinity through fraternalized, ritualized connections with other men. Emerging from Robert Bly's literary works, these groups posit that while feminism enabled women to reconnect with feminine identity, it simultaneously alienated men from authentic masculinity. Mythopoets strive to get in touch with their masculinity, while underlyingly antagonizing femininity.

These US ideological frameworks have significantly influenced global discourse on masculinity, though their expression varies considerably across cultural contexts. They are reflected in contemporary movements by implying male dominance and positioning traditional male and female roles (Schmitz and Kazyak, 2016).

The concept of "backlash" coined by Susan Faludi in 1991 provides a crucial theoretical framework for understanding these movements' emergence and evolution. Dragiewicz (2011, 2) explains, while resistance to feminism has a long history, the strategic adoption of "men's rights" and "fathers' rights" terminology represents a relatively recent development. Consequently, these groups emerged from the tension between feminist efforts to involve men in parenting and antifeminist attempts to reinforce the patriarchal family, repackaging traditional father-rights ideas in both progressive and reactionary ways (Dragiewicz 2011, 13–14).

Current antifeminist mobilization happens on two levels: the political one, where elites, such as political and religious actors, oppose feminism through their right-wing populist discourse, and the civil-society one, where activists resist the progress of the feminist

movement (Eslen-Ziya and Bjørnholt 2023, 213). This level is where MRA groups like "Be Manly" act.

Men's rights activism is a "backlash movement characterizing a conscious, collective, organized attempt to resist or reverse social change (Mottl 1980, as cited in Eslen-Ziya and Bjørnholt 2023, 214). It serves the interests of white, heterosexual men by promoting traditional, hegemonic definitions of masculinity and femininity, and the preservation of patriarchal gender roles. Jonathan A. Allan (2016, 25) characterizes MRA as fundamentally reactive and politically ineffective, noting its distinctive social dynamics. The movement attracts men seeking homosocial bonds while explicitly rejecting homosexuality, positioning feminism and women's advancement as the primary source of masculine anxiety. Central to MRA discourse is what Allan (2016, 28) identifies as its core narrative: "something has gone horribly wrong, society has failed boys, and men are lacking."

The movement's rapid mainstreaming in the mid-2010s marks a crucial historical juncture (O'Donnell 2020), as it established a common rhetorical framework transcending national boundaries. This shared discourse enables the identification of diverse movements like "Be Manly" as part of the broader MRA phenomenon, despite their distinct cultural contexts. The integration of marginal antifeminist ideology into mainstream digital spaces has facilitated its migration from online forums to everyday discourse, both virtual and physical.

The Politics of Masculinity in Right-Wing Ideology

MRA can be considered a subcategory of radical right-wing[1] social movements due to their overlapping ideas and goals. It is framed as a counter movement, a typical approach for radical right-wing movements (Mottl 1980, as cited in Eslen-Ziya and Bjørnholt 2023, 214). As shown in Table 1, while MRA emerged specifically as a backlash against feminist progress, it shares key characteristics with broader right-wing movements, including populist rhetoric and an antagonistic view of feminism that frames feminist progress as dangerous and threatening to masculinity.

Empirically, MRA cannot be easily placed in political categories because they often combine "elements of left-wing and right-wing philosophy with populist language and rhetoric" (Caiani and Della Porta 2018, 485). However, their core focus on establishing

[1] The meaning of "radical" shifts with the goals of individual right-wing movements and public acceptance at the time. In the context of MRA as a social countermovement, Eslen-Ziya and Bjørnholt (2023, 214) note that these movements are also called "the new right," "neo-conservativism," and "radical right." The lack of contemporary political science works that would clear boundaries between overlapping ideologies makes categorizing MRA difficult. However, labeling MRA as "radical right-wing" is necessary to distinguish it ideologically from moderate or center-right views.

traditional gender roles and preserving patriarchal values aligns closely with right-wing ideology, which emphasizes traditionally defined masculinity as dominant over femininity.

Radical right-wing research has so far focused on political parties rather than movements. Radical right-wing parties and movements share ethnonationalism rooted in myths about the past, ethnic homogeny, and a return to traditional values (Rydgren 2018, 23). Law, order, and family values lie at the heart of their ideology. During modernization, some people respond to pressures with rigidity and closed-mindedness. While these views are usually in the mainstream, rapid change can radicalize them, leading right-wing movements to propel political philosophies that promise simplified visions of a better society by romanticizing the past (Minkenberg 2018, 524).

Table 1: MRA as a Radically Right Movement

	Radical right-wing movements	**Men's rights activism**
Focus	Return to traditional values in all political, societal and economical questions	Establishing traditional gender roles, preserving patriarchal values
Strength	Depending on the topic, political strategy and prominence, can become influential or remain weak	Reactive and politically weak
Origin	Roots in ethnonationalism	Backlash against feminist progress
	They grow in response to societal changes	
Rhetoric	Populist	
View on feminism	Antagonistic, framing feminist progress as dangerous and threatening to masculinity	
View on masculinity	Traditionally defined, dominant over femininity	

Source: Author

Gender analysis is crucial for understanding extremist groups since right-wing discourse on male vulnerability is fueling new forms of patriarchy marked by nationalism, anti-immigrant rhetoric, and misogyny (Veljan and Čehajić Čampara 2021, 1). While exploring gender and the global right, Graff et al. (2019) claim that antagonizing feminism is central to right-wing ideology and political strategy. The global right is a wide spectrum of trends whose common denominator is global antifeminism (Graff et al. 2019, 541–42).

Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI, warned in 1985 that feminism and its goal of complete gender equality were dangerous. Gergorić (2020, 154) argues that Ratzinger's book marks the beginning of the war against gender. Gender politics is becoming a key point on the right-wing radicals' agenda, while the antigender movement creates its own enemy by coining the term "gender ideology," inducing moral panic amongst the masses and limiting progress (Gergorić 2020, 154).

Antigender movements in Eastern and Southeastern Europe are based on three elements: the Christian doctrine about human nature, a pessimistic narrative describing the degenerated West, and conspiracy theories that frame health and human rights advocacy as a neo-Marxist globalist agenda (Gergorić 2020, 155). Through an alliance of religious institutions and right-wing political actors, activist networks and the Catholic Church have emerged as key opponents of gender reform, advocating instead for traditional gender hierarchies.

Conservative Movements in Croatia

In Communist Croatia, while gender equality held constitutional status, the ruling party's approach was contradictory: promoting equality to mobilize women while simultaneously endorsing traditionalism for social stability (Anić 2015). This historical ambivalence has influenced current gender and sexuality issues (Juroš et al. 2020).

During this period, two influential institutions took opposing yet equally limiting stances on women's rights: the Catholic Church viewed women's rights as a departure from family values, while the Communist Party dismissed feminism as a Western, liberal ideology. True feminist development in Croatia began in late socialism, tied to anti-nationalism and anti-church sentiments (Anić 2015). The 1990s War of Independence marked a turning point, as the Catholic Church gained political and social influence, through collective identity building and anti-communism (Hodžić and Štulhofer 2017, 59). This historical moment established the Church as a central force in modern Croatian social movements, particularly in debates over gender equality, which conservative groups now frequently frame as battles against "gender ideology."

Petričušić et al. (2017, 67) pinpoint the onset of conservative mobilization in Croatia to 2006, when the "Voice of Parents for Children" (*Glas roditelja za djecu*, GROZD) launched opposition to sexual education curriculum, advocating for Catholic-rooted abstinence-based teaching. This marked the emergence of religious-political movements that strategically use religious symbols for political ends and espousing a far-right ideology. Such mobilization,

which originated in the United States and spread across Europe as a response to secularization, is guided by three core principles: the preservation of traditional families, the right to life, and religious liberty (Petričušić et al. 2017, 66–67). This pattern aligns with broader Balkan trends of rising pro-life associations (Veljan and Čehajić Čampara 2021, 10).

Contemporary Croatian religious-political movements promote Catholic values, advocate for pro-life activism, oppose abortion, support marriage exclusively between a man and a woman, and reject the state's autonomy to dictate curricula on sensitive topics like contraception and gender roles (Petričušić et al. 2017, 67). Several factors facilitated these movements' rise in the late 2000s and early 2010s: distrust in mainstream politics and political institutions, economic decline, and widespread corruption (Petričušić et al. 2017, 75). Čepo (2017, 17) contextualizes this conservative surge in Croatia as a response to post-war societal liberalization and political modernization, particularly during European Union accession negotiations and periods of left-wing electoral success. The movements rely on right-wing radical parties and diaspora returnees, implicitly supported by the Catholic Church.

Initiative In the Name of the Family (*U ime obitelji*), led by Željka Markić, pushed for a referendum to constitutionally define marriage as between a man and a woman in 2013, opposing the Civil Partnership Act. Conservative parties and the Church backed the initiative, while the ruling left-wing coalition, liberal organizations, and most media opposed it (Petričušić et al. 107, 69). The initiative prevailed with 66% support (Petričušić et al. 2017, 62). The Civil Partnership Act was still passed by the government, but this emboldened other conservatives and is still the greatest success a conservative movement achieved in Croatia.

This success helped establish a network of conservative organizations focused on marriage and traditional family values, including the Association for Promoting Family Values (*Udruga za promicanje obiteljskih vrijednosti 'Blaženi Alojzije Stepinac'*), Center for Natural Family Planning (*Centar za prirodno planiranje obitelji*), Family Enrichment (*Obiteljsko obogaćivanje*), Reform – Association for the Promotion of Ethics, Morality, Family Values, and Human Rights (*Reforma-udruga za promicanje etike, morala, obiteljskih vrijednosti i ljudskih prava*), and In the Name of the Family. In the educational sphere, the Association for Comprehensive Sex Education Teen Star (*Udruge za cjeloviti spolni odgoj Teen star*) focuses on youth programs, while the Center for the Renewal of Culture (*Centar za obnovu kulture*) works to develop future conservative leaders. Moreover, a significant number of organizations concentrate on anti-abortion activism, including Voice of Parents for Children (*Glas roditelja za djecu*), Vigilare, and Croatia for Life (*Hrvatska za život*). Many of these groups participate in

larger coalitions such as the Croatian Alliance for Life "CRO-VITA" (*Hrvatski savez za život "CRO-VITA"*) and I Was an Embryo Too (*I ja sam bio embrij*).

During Lent in 2014, members of 40 Days for Life (*40 dana za život*) prayed in front of hospitals that perform abortions, coordinated by the International Ecumenical Prayer Initiative for Unborn Life (*Međunarodna ekumenska molitvena inicijativa za nerođeni život*). The movement found new expression in the annual Walk for Life, initiated in 2016 under Željka Markić's leadership and held each May. Earlier attempts at formal political organization included Catholic NGOs' formation of a political party in 2010, which, though initially unsuccessful, later reorganized into a new, currently active party (Petričušić et al. 2017, 68).

Hodžić and Štulhofer (2017, 71) argue that Church-backed anti-gender mobilization in Croatia has flourished through a combination of factors: rising public religiosity, robust organizational networks, international connections, and effective rhetoric. This success highlights a fundamental tension in Croatian society: while the country maintains strong legal protections for gender equality, its social fabric remains deeply patriarchal (Anić 2015, 21).

Be Manly: A Traditionalist Response to Social Change

Be Manly is a part of a global movement in traditionally Catholic countries where secularization and liberal ideas are gaining strength. In June 2022, Be Manly and Croatia for Life initiated rosary prayers outside Zagreb Cathedral (muzevnibudite.com 2023). Their activities gained wider public attention after an October 2022 gathering at Ban Josip Jelačić Square, which evolved into a regular monthly event and has since expanded in both participation and geographic reach.

Men also gather in Dubrovnik, Karlovac, Osijek, Slavonski Brod, Split, Šibenik, Trogir, Vinkovci, Virovitica, and Zadar (muzevnibudite.com 2023). In Zagreb, they are led by the fraternity Knights of Mary's Immaculate Heart. They state that they pray for:

> Homeland, peace, and Croatia's people's conversion; men—to become spiritual authorities in the family; premarital chastity; dressing and behavioral chastity; the restoration of Catholic marriages, ending abortions; holy, authentic, and uncompromising church pastors; new spiritual vocations; souls in purgatory and for personal purposes (muzevnibudite.com 2023).

While the movement has drawn counter-protesters, its organizers maintain they are neither anti-women nor politically motivated. They emphasize their spiritual focus and deny receiving external funding or having formal affiliations with Catholic or right-wing groups (muzevnibudite.com 2023).

Since 2022, public prayers have been happening in Australia, with many Croatian diaspora members participating (Kenny 2022), and Ireland (Burger 2022). One of Be Manly's leaders, Krunoslav Puškar, explicitly acknowledged these international influences, claiming that

> [Our initiative] was instigated by many photos and videos we saw in recent years, first from Poland[2], then Australia, and other countries. We saw many men kneelingly praying for the conversion of their people and the whole world, and for a long time we had the incentive in our hearts to start something like that in Croatia. (Duhaček 2022)

While Be Manly claims an apolitical stance, their actions consistently align with MRA principles, as detailed in Table 2. Their approach fits Mottl's definition of a backlash movement (Eslen-Ziya and Bjørnholt 2023, 214), as they actively resist feminist and democratic progress in Croatia. They seek a homosocial community rooted in traditional beliefs (Allan 2016, 27), despite denying anti-women sentiment. Their complex relationship with women is evident in excluding women from organizational rituals and advocating for restrictions on women's dress and reproductive rights, while prominently featuring Virgin Mary imagery in their messaging. This paradoxical approach aligns with multiple characteristics identified in Table 2, including the preservation of patriarchal gender roles and traditional definitions of femininity and masculinity.

Be Manly embodies traits from Clatterbaugh's (2018) men's groups, encompassing the men's rights perspective outlined earlier. They engage in mythopoetic practices to explore masculinity and ritually bond with other men. Like evangelists, they emphasize family and religion as domains where men should lead, implying inherent male dominance and reinforcing traditional gender roles (Schmitz and Kazyak 2016).

Their ideology aligns with radical right-wing currents emphasizing law, order, and family values (Rydgren 2018), while viewing liberalism and the left-wing as primary adversaries. Be Manly affirm this stance themselves, positioning liberal-left media as enemies (muzevnibudite.com 2023). They recognize the influence of media and social platforms, strategically avoiding certain outlets. To expand their reach, they utilize Instagram, Facebook, and their website to independently share news and ideas. As Betz (2018, 155) suggests, the radical right-wing capitalizes on societal insecurity or boundary-pushing moments. Amid

[2] The Polish case highlights the success of conservative movements, with public rosary prayers starting a year earlier than in Croatia (Golańska-Bault 2022). With attempts to ban abortion in 2016 and 2018, and the Rosaries to the Boundaries" initiative in 2017 (Kotwas and Kubik 2019, 435), Poland has seen a decline in liberal democracy and independent institutions (Graff et al. 2019, 550). Grzebalska and Pető (2018, 167) note that viewing activism, gender equality, and minority rights as threats helps radical actors normalize extremist ideas in Poland.

modernization, some people react with rigidity, advocating for a better society through a romanticized vision of the nation (Minkenberg 2018, 254), particularly valuing Croatia's Catholic heritage.

Table 2: Be Manly as a MRA Movement

MRA influence	"Be Manly" characteristic
Mottl's MRA definition	Conscious, collective, organized attempt to reverse social change Traditional femininity and masculinity definitions Patriarchal gender roles preservation
Allan's MRA understanding	Longing for homosocial community Anxiety over feminism
Clatterbaugh's men's rights perspective	Viewing women's rights movements negatively influential on men
Clatterbaugh's mythopoets	Seeking fraternalized, ritualistic connection with other men
Clatterbaugh's evangelists	Family and Catholic church are places where men should take charge
Radical right-wing movements	Law, order and family values Antagonizing liberal and leftist views Romanticized view of the nation

Source: Author

Media Reporting on Civil Movements

Media frame events through distinct perspectives shaped by varied interests and agendas (Gamson 1989, as cited in McCurdy 2012, 246). News coverage decisions are driven by key factors including geographic proximity, potential for conflict, and opportunities for sensationalism. Since media both shapes and reflects public discourse, understanding these inherent ideological biases is essential for critical media analysis.

Researchers studying media coverage of anti-Vietnam War protests identified the protest paradigm, where the media frequently portrayed protests negatively by focusing on violence, the unconventional appearance of protesters, or disregarding the protesters' goals (McCurdy 2012, 245). Simultaneously, media appearances themselves validate the issue at hand for debate and enhance the influence of protests (McCurdy 2012, 248).

Cultivation theory suggests that sustained media exposure, especially to television, produces a mainstreaming effect that diminishes attitudinal differences between diverse social groups (Morgan et al. 2015, 179). In media-political contexts, mainstreaming describes how media coverage patterns can elevate formerly peripheral ideas into mainstream discourse (Brown and Mondon 2021).

The convergence of radical right movements and evolving mainstream media has profound implications. Media conditions—technological change, market liberalization, audience competition, and infotainment content—create opportunities for populist messaging that radical movements exploit. Through agenda setting, media coverage amplifies radical right issues while raising fundamental questions about democratic tolerance of intolerant ideologies (Ellinas 2019, 390).

Media's agenda-setting and framing capabilities shape civil movements' coverage and mobilization strategies, with institutional response coverage either catalyzing or inhibiting further activism (Ellinas 2019, 393). At the party level, media coverage can destigmatize extremism and legitimize radical right-wing groups, though these groups often claim misrepresentation while critics argue coverage enables radicalism without accountability.

As a case in point, Brown and Mondon's (2021) analysis reveals three mainstreaming mechanisms. First, extensive coverage demonstrates agenda setting's power, with reporting deflecting accountability from elites to the white working class, perpetuating racial divisions. Second, euphemisation and trivialization normalize radical ideas by softening terminology and trivializing populism's significance. Third, amplification occurs through legitimizing coverage of figures like Steve Bannon, validating associated radical ideologies. Moreover, Mudde (2022, 104) argues that structural changes and crises (9/11, Great Recession, refugee crisis) have normalized far-right positions, allowing extreme ideologies to enter mainstream discourse as radical groups push further right.

These mainstreaming processes illuminate how media coverage of Be Manly could potentially normalize radical right messaging through similar mechanisms—extensive coverage that deflects deeper scrutiny, euphemistic framing that softens radical positions, and amplification that legitimizes extreme viewpoints under the guise of balanced reporting.

Research Design

Data Collection

The analysis examines articles from five major online news outlets: Index.hr, 24sata.hr, Jutarnji.hr, Večernji.hr, and Dnevno.hr. These outlets rank among Croatia's ten

most-read news sources (Peruško 2022, 71) and represent diverse ideological perspectives: Index and Jutarnji attract left-leaning readers, 24sata appeals to centrists, Večernji leans right, and Dnevno serves a predominantly right-wing audience (Peruško and Vozab 2021, 22).

The study covers June 2022 to June 2023, spanning from Be Manly's inaugural public prayer through its first year of activity. Data collection uses TakeLab Retriever, a specialized Croatian media search tool, using the terms "kneelers" and "prayers" which provided the most comprehensive results. While the software's ongoing development may affect complete article retrieval, it provided sufficient data for analysis. Manual filtering refined the dataset by excluding duplicates, reiterations, peripheral coverage, commentaries, and premium content, resulting in 72 articles across the outlets: 16 from Index.hr, 15 each from Jutarnji.hr and 24sata.hr, 19 from Večernji.hr, and seven from Dnevno.hr[3].

Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA), established by Norman Fairclough (1993, 5), examines how language evolves with society and reveals power dynamics and ideologies in discourse. Van Dijk (2011, 394) emphasizes that discursive strategies reflect group ideologies, though contextual limitations mean ideologies often appear abstract. The analysis thus focuses on attitudes, defined as "ideologically-based belief clusters about specific social issues" (Van Dijk 2011, 389).

Machin and Mayr (2012) provide essential analytical tools for examining how media language constructs meaning and influences audiences. Their framework examines verb usage in quotations, character descriptions (or their absence), sentence structure, passive voice, generalizations, and nominalizations that obscure circumstances. They also consider rhetorical devices and hedging techniques that shape audience perception.

This study applies Machin and Mayr's guidelines to analyse media coverage of Be Manly, examining descriptive language, participant naming conventions, temporal and spatial markers, verb choices, and topic emphasis patterns. While CDA faces criticism for its interpretive nature and limited scope, its focus on linguistic value reproduction makes it suitable for analysing how media discourse potentially mainstreams radical ideas. The methodology's adaptation from English to Croatian contexts requires using source examples as structural guidelines rather than direct equivalents.

[3] The dataset for this study is available in Hanzek_Dataset.xlsx, containing all 72 articles analyzed. For each article, the dataset includes publication date, media outlet, URL, headline, article text, word count, presence of key terms (for example, "prayers," "kneelers"), identified mainstreaming mechanisms, and overall article stance toward the movement. This structured documentation enables transparent replication of the critical discourse analysis findings.

Analysis

Index.hr

Index addressed the Be Manly June event after it faced online backlash, using quotation marks around "catholic men" to question participants' identity. In December, *Index* adopted the derogatory term "kneelers" and labeled the event a "controversial Catholic initiative." By January, they began framing activists as "extreme Catholics" and focused on growing counter-protests. In March, they employed sarcastic language such as "kneeling on their little sponges" and "invoke God's blessing." While acknowledging the event's normalization in April, *Index* continued to emphasize counter-protesters. In May, they highlighted verbal conflicts, depicting a prayer supporter as aggressive. In June, they criticized "kneelers" for "occupying" city squares, and published another article using the prayer as a backdrop for a citizen taking pictures nearby.

Jutarnji

During the early coverage, *Jutarnji* neutrally describes participants as "groups of men" praying at the square. Their December coverage contrasted the prayers with the counter-protest Silent Mass in an atmospheric report. The outlet's focus shifted in February toward the anti-prayer gathering, juxtaposing the "two sides of the square." Throughout March and April, *Jutarnji* characterized the event as a "repeated gathering," focusing on counter-protests and maintaining distance from MRA's statements. The outlet adopted the term "kneelers" by May and began describing the event as customary, while maintaining its emphasis on counter-protests. In June, stated that the prayers had "occupied" the Square, continuing its focus on ongoing counter-protests.

24sata

In December, *24sata* reported that the "prayers" were relocated within the square due to the Christmas fair," and separately covered covered the "anti-kneeling." In February, they reported several hundred prayers and opponents, including around 50 women supporting the men's prayer. The outlet relied on unnamed sources and gave prominent coverage to the MRA's messages. In March, *24sata* described "prayers kneeling again" as a tradition, emphasizing patriotic goals over anti-women-centered ones. The April coverage noted police presence for safety, characterized counter-protesters as "distracting", and documented messages MRA posted on social media. During May and June, *24sata* presented the event as "regular" and "traditional," covering protests across multiple cities.

Večernji

In November, *Večernji* reported men "kneeled and prayed again" with women "standing aside," categorizing Be Manly as a "project." Their coverage before the third prayer focused on Veseljko Kralj's SMS invites that resulted in his number being shut down. They estimated 300-350 men and 50 women attended, noting "slight turbulence" from a counter-protest. The January coverage highlighted the organizers' distancing from Ustaša features and included their Facebook post, while another article focused on a dog present at the event. February's report emphasized police security and briefly mentioned counter-protests. In April, *Večernji*'s survey showed "mostly negative" attitudes towards the prayers, though they noted growing support from the Church and participants, and highlighted the prayers' persistence despite distractions. Their May and June coverage described the prayer as routine, noted growing female support, provided negative portrayals of counter-protesters, and announced July's prayer.

Dnevno

Dnevno covered the June 2022 prayer at Zagreb Cathedral, reporting on the start of public prayers with hundreds participating and connecting the event to global context. In November, *Dnevno* reported on the "powerful sights" of men praying in Zagreb, publishing full texts from Be Manly and presenting their goals as "conversion" and "opposition to fornication." They interviewed organizer dr.sc. Krunoslav Puškar. They labeled counter-protesters as "competition" in December. In March, *Dnevno* covered both prayers and counter-protesters, emphasizing the organizers' distancing from "unwanted features." Their April article contrasted Silent Mass with Be Manly, noting about 300 men in Zagreb. In May, *Dnevno* reported on "first disorders," describing "sudden chaos" and suggesting deep societal divisions in Croatia over gender roles and women's rights.

Results and Discussion

Croatian Online Media Attitudes toward MRA

Index systematically labels prayer participants connected to the Be Manly group as "kneelers," a term gaining significance solely within this context. Despite its literal meaning of kneeling, in this context and form, it carries a negative connotation, reflecting *Index*'s disapproval of the MRA movement. This is evident in their descriptions of Be Manly as a "controversial Catholic organization" or "fanatic Catholics," indicating *Index*'s estrangement from the group.

Index employs religious terms like "apparition" ironically to mock participants, while their mention of "little sponges" to kneel on implies disdain for the activists. Their

reference to MRA's prayers as "as they call them, intentions" suggests skepticism and disagreement. *Index* connects an anti-Istanbul Convention protester with the men's rights movement ideologically, writing "of course" he is here too. The outlet portrays a female supporter with negative, emotional language during a quarrel.

Index minimizes coverage of how present female supporters and the police actually were. Their limited presence is only noticeable in comparison to other media that emphasize their involvement. The outlet also avoids describing the size of the protests. The use of negative descriptions and sparse or ironic listing of the movement's goals aligns with the protest paradigm, demonstrating *Index*'s overall negative portrayal of Be Manly.

During the latter months, both *Index* and *Jutarnji* began using military language like "occupying" or "taking over" to describe activists in public squares. However, *Jutarnji* uses neutral terms such as "groups of men," "praying," "Catholic," or "kneeling men," maintaining a mild and neutral tone towards the activists.

Jutarnji's coverage increasingly centers on counter-protests, regularly publishing their complete press releases. This editorial choice to amplify opposition voices signals disapproval of the men's rights movement, though *Jutarnji* avoids direct criticism or ironic commentary.

24sata mostly refers to activists as "prayers" and uses neutral verbs to describe their activities, also indicating neutrality. The single exception is an article about protests in Split that uses the term "occupy." Overall, the outlet portrays the movement sympathetically by characterizing counter-protesters as disruptive to peaceful prayer gatherings. *24sata* also regularly republishes content from Be Manly's Facebook page.

From its initial coverage, *24sata* works to soften the movement's image by consistently highlighting the presence of "wives and mothers," reporting approximately 50 women at events, and emphasizing police maintaining order. However, the outlet's practice of attributing quotes to unnamed groups of women and men, rather than specific individuals, raises questions about journalistic rigor. While *24sata* appears to view the movement favorably, its support is more restrained compared to other media outlets.

Večernji's coverage frames the movement through religious terms, labeling participants as "prayers" and describing Be Manly as a "project" to emphasize its peaceful nature. The outlet elevates the religious legitimacy of the movement by highlighting Priest Božidar Nagy's blessing of participants. In contrast, counter-protesters are characterized as disruptive and confrontational. When describing interactions between the groups, *Večernji*'s

language choices heighten tension. Notably, the term "protesters" is exclusively applied to those opposing the movement, never to the movement's participants themselves.

Following patterns similar to *24sata*, *Večernji* emphasizes both women's involvement and police presence—using female supporters to moderate the movement's image and police presence to underscore public safety. After conducting their own survey revealing public opposition to the movement, *Večernji* suggested potential Church support for the group. The outlet regularly amplifies Be Manly's message by sharing their Facebook posts. Despite the organization's stated policy against media engagement, *Večernji* notably secured an interview with a member involved in the so-called "SMS incident."

Večernji's coverage of MRA movement breaks from traditional protest paradigm reporting by legitimizing and moderating the group's goals and actions. This supportive stance stands in direct contrast to their coverage of counter-protests, which exhibits typical protest paradigm elements emphasizing negativity and social disruption. The outlet further demonstrates its favorable position by publishing the movement's prayer announcements alongside news reports.

Dnevno is another outlet that uses neutral terminology in their coverage, referring to activists as "men," "Be Manly" as a "project," and protest prayers as "prayer events." The outlet's emotional investment becomes apparent in their October 2022 coverage, marked by the enthusiastic declaration "it started." They attempt to build credibility for the movement by emphasizing one organizer's academic credentials ("dr.sc."), though they fail to establish the relevance of this academic title to the subject matter.

In their framing of events, *Dnevno* creates explicit opposition through headlines like "Silent Mass vs. Be Manly," consistently distinguishing between "prayers" and "protesters." The outlet portrays counter-protesters negatively, characterizing them as "competition" intent on disrupting "prayer plans," while suggesting potential for violence. Most notably, *Dnevno* published an article describing "chaos" at an event they did not attend, relying on unnamed sources for their account.

Unlike *24sata* and *Večernji*, which portrayed female supporters in close proximity to the praying men, *Dnevno* specifically noted that women were separated from male participants by a fence. Like other outlets, *Dnevno* regularly shares Be Manly's Facebook content. However, their coverage demonstrates an even more favorable stance toward the men's rights movement than *24sata* and *Večernji*, actively promoting and legitimizing the group's objectives through their prayer coverage. This approach represents a complete departure from traditional protest paradigm reporting. As the summary in Table 3

demonstrates, the five Croatian media outlets showed a spectrum of attitudes toward the MRA movement, ranging from *Index*'s negative coverage marked by irony and protest paradigm elements, through *Jutarnji*'s moderate criticism and *24sata*'s balanced reporting, to *Večernji*'s supportive stance and *Dnevno*'s overtly positive portrayal emphasizing religious legitimacy and activist goals.

Table 3: Croatian Online Media Attitudes about MRA

Media	Event and actions description	Participants description	Emphasized	Avoided/ missing	Attitude
Index	Increasingly tumultuous praying Men appeared Sponges they kneel on They take over and occupy the squares	Kneelers Controversial catholic organization Extreme Catholics	Protesters aggression	Women supporters Number of activists Size of the protest	Negative - irony in reporting, vague goal listings, reporting in line with the protest paradigm
Jutarnji	They take over and occupy the squares Two sides of the square (protesters and counter-protesters)	Groups of men Prayers Catholic men Men that kneel/pray	Counter-protesters and their actions, press releases from the counter-protest organizers	Size of the protest	Moderately negative - mostly neutral reports on the activists, while putting the focus on counter-protesters
24sata	They kneel/pray They took over the square Dedicate Saturday to kneeling Heated debate	Prayers Men that kneel	50ish wives and mothers Direct embedding of activists' Facebook posts	Source on the relationship between women supporters and men Cite sources (group citation sources)	Moderately positive - great importance is given to activist goals
Večernji	Slight turbulence (in ref. counter-protest) The prayer and the protest Protesters disturb prayers	Prayers Prayer gathering Catholic organization Project Male rosary	300 men; 50 women, wives and mothers Police Organizer interviews Church speculation Facebook posts	Data source Source on the relationship between women supporters and men Avoiding using the term protest for prayers	Positive - publishing event announcements, interviewing organizers, reporting in line with the protest paradigm when talking about the counter-protesters
Dnevno	It started Mighty sights Competition (in ref. counter-protest) Silent Mass vs. Be Manly	Men Their supporters Project Prayer event Dr.sc. K. Puškar Postulator B. Nagy	Women outside the fence Hundreds of men (300) Similar sights from other countries First disturbances, worldviews clash	Data sources Several sources told them about the conflict - who?	Extremely positive - prayers were seemingly anticipated, activist goals are greatly important and framed as admirable

Source: Author

Mainstreaming Mechanisms in MRA Reporting

All media outlets contributed to mainstreaming Be Manly's ideas, though to varying degrees. The movement's prayer protests, occurring on the first Saturday of each month, became a regular media focus with coverage before, during, and after each event. The primary mainstreaming mechanisms included specific writing patterns, adverbial markers indicating protest time and location, agenda-setting of MRA topics, and protest trivialization.

The protests' temporal and spatial framing emerged as a key mainstreaming strategy. The June 2022 public prayer received coverage from only two outlets: *Index,* responding to social media criticism, and *Dnevno*, which suggested anticipated continuation with the phrase "it started." However, by June 2023, media outlets consistently highlighted the event's recurring. *Index* described how "kneelers occupy Croatian squares every first Saturday," while *Jutarnji* described each first Saturday as "traditionally reserved for prayers." *24sata* referred to the "kneeling practice" as "already traditional," and *Večernji* noted men had been praying "every first Saturday at Ban Jelačić Square." *Dnevno* used a similar approach, mentioning that "as before, many men gathered on the first Saturday on Zagreb's main square" in May. These standardized expressions in coverage of MRA movement signal its normalization and firmly linking Be Manly to first Saturdays and prominent locations like Ban Jelačić Square. The extent of this normalization was evident as *Jutarnji*, *Večernji*, and *Dnevno* began publishing advance announcements of the prayers.

The second mainstreaming mechanism was agenda-setting through selective topic emphasis. Three outlets—*24sata*, *Večernji*, and *Dnevno*—employed this strategy by highlighting activists and amplifying their messages. These outlets regularly published complete texts from Be Manly's social media and website, potentially increasing the movement's visibility and accessibility to a broader audience. Beyond integrating social media posts directly into articles, they also quoted protesters despite the group's stated policy against media engagement.

Večernji and *Dnevno* further amplified the movement's message by featuring organizers in their coverage. Key examples included reporting on the "SMS scandal" and conveying activists' statements distancing themselves from Ustaša symbols. *Večernji*'s coverage additionally emphasized growing participation, female support, and the church's silence—even after their own survey revealed public opposition to the prayers.

In contrast, *Jutarnji*'s coverage centers on counter-protesters and their messaging, while *Index* employs the protest paradigm to portray the men's rights movement negatively.

Index uses descriptors like "extreme," "controversial," and "fanatic," alongside the term "kneelers" to emphasize the movement's perceived oddity. The outlet also minimizes coverage of the movement's goals while emphasizing negative aspects.

The third mainstreaming mechanism—trivialization—appears in both *Index* and *Večernji*'s coverage. *Index* consistently diminishes the significance of activist goals through implicit trivialization. Their articles follow the protest paradigm pattern, using phrases like "pray, for, as they call them, intentions" to subtly mock these objectives. This trivialization became more overt in June, when an article gave equal weight to a passerby taking photos in the prayer area. *Večernji* engaged in similar trivialization with a January article about a dog "joining" the event. Such trivialization strategies can significantly impact how seriously readers perceive the movement, particularly given the gravity of the events being covered.

As shown in Table 4, these mainstreaming mechanisms aligned with each outlet's overall stance toward the movement, summarized in Table 3. *Index*, which demonstrated the most negative attitude, used temporal markers while emphasizing opposition and employing trivialization. *Jutarnji* maintained its moderate criticism through balanced temporal coverage and counter-protest focus. The more supportive outlets—*24sata*, *Večernji*, and *Dnevno*—used temporal markers while amplifying the movement's message through extensive coverage of their social media content and organizer perspectives, though *Večernji* occasionally engaged in trivialization despite its generally positive stance.

Table 4: Mainstreaming Mechanisms in MRA Reporting

Media	Time and space markers	Agenda setting and attention diverting	Trivialization
Index	Kneelers take over city squares each first Saturday of the month in Croatia	NA	Banalizing activist goals Protest paradigm reports Giving the same value to the protest and a passerby
Jutarnji	The first Saturday of the month is traditionally reserved for prayers	NA	NA
24sata	Kneeling practice is already traditional and regular	"Be Manly" social media and web posts	NA
Večernji	The first Saturday of the month is approaching, and by now it is well known that it is the day on which men gather in the early hours of the morning in the centers of a dozen Croatian cities to pray	"Be Manly" social media and web posts Emphasize on activist messages The survey report	Dog joining the protest - attempting to make the protest look less serious
Dnevno	As before, on the first Saturday of the month, more men gathered in the main square in Zagreb to pray for their goals	"Be Manly" social media and web posts Emphasize on activist messages	NA

Source: Author

Conclusion

The Be Manly movement represents a distinctive shift in Croatian conservative activism, focusing specifically on men's issues while advocating for male authority in religious and family spheres. The movement simultaneously seeks to restrict women's autonomy in areas such as personal dress and reproductive rights. Aligning with broader MRA, Be Manly emerged as a counterforce to feminist advances, promoting traditional patriarchal values (Elsen-Ziya and Bjørnholt 2023, 214).

The movement strategically leverages Croatia's strong Catholic identity through public prayer events, effectively engaging the country's Catholic majority and attracting media coverage. Given right-wing populists' success in advancing radical ideologies in other regions, the emergence of Croatian MRA warrants careful attention.

This study therefore examines how Croatian media discourse surrounding Be Manly reflects radical right-wing ideologies and evaluates whether media coverage has contributed to normalizing these perspectives in mainstream discourse. CDA of 72 articles from five online media outlets reveals distinct editorial approaches to Be Manly coverage (Table 3). In reporting on MRA, Croatian online media contributed to the mainstreaming of radical ideas through three mechanisms: time and space markers, agenda setting and attention diversion, and trivialization (Table 4).

MRA's persistence, evolving forms, and rapid spread through online communities indicate its enduring relevance. The Be Manly case has introduced MRA discourse into Croatian public debate, with sympathetic media outlets particularly quick to normalize it as part of everyday life. They brought their readers into direct contact with the source of radical ideas. This normalization is problematic because the activists conflate general peace prayers with anti-abortion advocacy (muzevnibudite.com, 2023). Given similar causes promoted by other Croatian conservative groups (Petričušić et al. 2017), this mainstreaming raises concerns about the potential acceptance of increasingly radical ideas.

The media's editorial choices appear largely intentional, reflecting a broader tendency toward mainstreaming radical ideas. While all media exhibited some level of mainstreaming, exceptions should be highlighted. Notably, *Jutarnji* reduced Be Manly coverage in favor of highlighting counter-protests. Such an approach can effectively counter the MRA agenda by focusing attention on those affected by the movement rather than amplifying its message. However, other potential counter-approaches —such as critical analysis, expert perspectives, avoiding trivialization, or explicitly identifying the movement's nature—remained unused. Though news coverage serves an important function, outlets could have minimized event announcements to avoid contributing to normalization.

Media outlets are not solely responsible for legitimizing radical ideas. Discourses both reflect and shape social reality, creating a circular relationship between societal norms and media representation. The examined outlets' widespread participation in mainstreaming radical ideas, with minimal resistance, suggests an existing predisposition within Croatian society to accept MRA ideology into mainstream discourse. This underscores the importance of continuously scrutinizing media practices, as they hold the power to either reinforce or challenge dominant ideologies.

The potential broader socio-political impact of Be Manly warrants serious consideration. Croatia's 2013 marriage referendum demonstrated how regressive initiatives can successfully influence policy-making, resulting in the implementation of restrictive

legislation. In this case, a conservative campaign led to a constitutional amendment defining marriage exclusively as a union between a man and a woman, effectively banning same-sex marriage. Similar outcomes from Be Manly's activism remain a distinct possibility.

The movement poses a significant challenge to social progress and threatens gender equality achievements. The mainstreaming of their ideology risks not only undermining existing advances but also impeding future progress. While Be Manly currently lacks overt political power and maintains no public party affiliations, the consistent strength of conservative political forces in Croatia suggests this dynamic requires vigilant monitoring.

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. The sample size and article selection, while informative, cannot be considered fully representative of Croatian media coverage. Despite efforts to provide accurate translations, the analysis of Croatian-language articles may not fully capture linguistic nuances, cultural references, and contextual subtleties. Additionally, CDA as a methodology presents inherent challenges, offering broad interpretative possibilities where researcher bias may influence analysis. While the focus on Croatian media provides valuable context, these findings cannot be generalized to MRA movements in other countries. Rather, this research should serve as a model for country-specific studies or broader cross-cultural comparative analyses.

This study highlights several promising directions for future research on MRA movements. The phenomenon of public prayers as a form of conservative mobilization remains understudied globally, offering numerous avenues for investigation. Future media research could expand both temporally and across a wider range of outlets. Audience research presents another crucial direction, particularly examining how different ideologically-aligned audiences respond to MRA coverage and messaging. The correlation between media representation and audience attitudes warrants specific attention. Beyond media analysis, future research should explore the social and sociological dimensions of the movement, including participants' experiences and motivations. This broader scope of investigation would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of contemporary MRA movements and their societal impact.

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#LGBTpropaganda #GenderTheory #Wokism: Expanding and blurring the boundaries of francophone anti-gender discourse propagated on Twitter

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Abstract

Based on a corpus of tweets compiled from November 2022 to February 2023, this article revisits digital anti-gender campaigns in France, 10 years after debates on same-sex marriage and adoption. Through a critical discourse analysis of 70 key tweets, it maps the semiotic community engaged in anti-gender discourse, revealing a heterogeneous group of actors ranging from the conservative right to the identitarian far right. The article identifies two patterns rooted in the "protect our children" rhetoric, which reshape the symbolic boundaries of anti-gender discourse. First, an expansion is at play, marked by the relative inclusion of LGB and feminist activists to reinforce the exclusion of drag-queens and trans people. Second, a blurring of symbolic boundaries between ethnic, religious and cultural factors emerges. This facilitates the articulation of a national-populist discourse that frames "wokism" and Islam as threats to children, to summon support for a white, Christian and heterocisgender political project.

Keywords

Critical Discourse Studies; Far Right Movements; Conservative Movements; Anti-gender; Anti-trans; Anti-wokism; Anti-Islam; Populism; Nationalism; Social Media; Twitter (X)

Introduction

On April 23, 2013, the French National Assembly adopted a bill that opened marriage and adoption to same-sex couples. On the eve of its adoption, streets and online spaces became privileged sites for the expression of positions in favor of this bill, as well as others firmly opposed to it. Independent websites emerged on both progressive and conservative sides, and social media became an extension of public debate.

The oppositional discourse propagated online manifested in various forms, including openly homophobic speech, such as the hashtag #GaysShouldDisappearBecause[1] (SOS

[1] In this article, all tweets have been translated from French to English. Appendix provides the original French text and English translations for all hashtags (Section 1) and quoted tweets (Section 2), along with information

Homophobie 2014), alongside anti-gender discourses focusing on the fight against "gender theory" (Cervulle and Julliard 2013), the protection of children and the "traditional" family (Cervulle and Pailler 2014), or the defense of religious traditions (Blanc 2016). Studies of these digital anti-gender campaigns have revealed controlled communication strategies, including the rationalized use of hashtags (Cervulle and Pailler 2014) and a lexicon of self-designation (Raschini 2016), as well as the use of formulas such as "gender theory" (Julliard 2022).

All these elements contribute to creating and structuring semiotic communities, which are "communities that share repertoires of signs, types of expression and writing practices" (Julliard 2022, 132). Semiotic communities shaped during these debates were characterized by their heterogeneous composition of actors (political organizations, associations, traditional and alternative media, individuals) (Chetcuti-Osorovitz and Teicher 2017). They were also marked by various political positions, forming "unstable" and "contextual" coalitions ranging from the conservative right to the identitarian far right (Julliard 2022, 150).

A decade after the same-sex marriage debates, social media remains a privileged space for propagating discourse opposing "gender theory," "LGBT propaganda," or the more recent neologism "wokism."[2] This claim is illustrated by the "Protect Our Children" campaign, initiated by the French far-right party "Reconquête!" in September 2022. The campaign operated both offline and through a digital strategy, targeting national educational institutions. This included the creation of the "Parents Vigilants" website and eponymous Twitter accounts, a YouTube broadcast of an interview with the campaign spokesperson, and LinkedIn posts sharing testimonials against public schools. The orchestrated nature of this digital campaign was evident in this statement from the party's president, Éric Zemmour (2022), on his official website: "I want a massive presence on the internet; starting today, and I salute the digital army that we have raised, and which does just as much for our ideas as those who paste posters."

In 2023, as France marked the 10th anniversary of marriage equality, this quote suggests that digital anti-gender campaigns remain a current phenomenon. While existing

about the authors and their roles in the discourse. The complete dataset of original tweets is available in d'Estienne du Bourguet-Laquièze (2023).

[2] Refers to a recuperation of the word "woke", which means to be "awake or aware, especially to racial discrimination and social injustice". This word was hijacked by reactionary voices with the neologism "wokism," to characterize a particular social group (the "Woke"), allowing them to designate by extension all progressive forces, including anti-racist, feminist, and LGBTQ+ movements (Canet and Dupuis-Déri 2022, 28).

studies on these campaigns in the French context rely on discourse corpora collected up to 2017, this article revisits the topic using a corpus of tweets collected from November 2022 to February 2023. The analysis focuses on the following questions: Who contributes to the propagation of francophone anti-gender discourses on social media? What strategies are employed to do so? And what patterns can be identified from anti-gender discourses currently being propagated on social media?

This research stems from the understanding that digital spaces offer crucial insights into the evolution of socio-political discourses. Three key transformations brought about by the Internet and social media are particularly relevant. First, traditional media's communicative power has diminished "by the inability to reach large, captive audiences and by the ready availability of alternative sources of ideas and knowledge" (McQuail 2010, 545), reflecting a democratization of information production that enables social media users to construct their own means of communication. Second, the Internet's ubiquity extends users' social possibilities beyond their immediate environment, facilitating membership in new online groups (McQuail 2010), and thereby promotes the formation of "semiotic communities" as defined above. Third, social media enables users to "answer back" to authority figures or avoid them entirely (McQuail 2010). This last point suggests the emergence of new forms of interaction between entrepreneurs (political, media, or religious) and individual users.

The research questions emerged from two elements in Zemmour's quote. First, the rationalization of this digital campaign and the use of a military lexicon point to a propagandist use of social media—defined as "the deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions and direct behavior in order to achieve a goal that meets the propagandist's intention" (Garth and O'Donnell 2015, 313). Digital propaganda specifically comprises an "evolving set of techniques and mechanisms that facilitate the propagation of ideas and actions" (Sparkes-Vian 2019, 1).

Second, the initiation of the campaign "Protect Our Children" by a far-right party suggests a strategic use of social media for anti-gender discourse. Studies over the past decade have extensively documented how political parties and interest groups use social media as tools for communication, networking, and mobilization[3]. Notable in this context, Baider and Constantinou (2014) demonstrated the role of social media in reinforcing "banal nationalism" (Billig 1995) through their analysis of the Greek far-right party "Golden Dawn."

[3] For further discussion, see: Ackland and Gibson 2013; Lachapelle and Maarek 2015; Bennett and Livingston 2018; Jungherr, Schroeder and Stier 2019.

In the digital age, this concept manifests through everyday narratives circulated via social media to "reach the minds of those who want to believe in a national identity" and foster identification with what Benedict Anderson (1991, 6) terms as "imagined, intrinsically limited, political community" (Baider and Constantinou 2014, 215-17).

Based on these elements of understanding, this article will identify the strategies used in the corpus to facilitate the propagation of anti-gender discourses. It will also map the semiotic community engaged in this type of discourse and retrace its symbolic boundaries, which are redefined through these propagated discourses. The article begins with a description of the methodological approach, detailing the methods used to collect and analyze the corpus of tweets. The findings are presented in three sections. First, the vectors of propagation identified are outlined, revealing a heterogeneous set of actors from media, political, intellectual, and activist spheres. These actors reflect the different shades of right-wing and far-right movements in France, united by their ideological proximity to conservatism, defined here as a "common opposition to liberal modernity and its ideal of an open society" (Albertini and Doucet 2016). Second, analysis of discourses targeting drag-queens and gender detransition reveals an expansion of anti-gender discourse boundaries, reflected in the relative inclusion of LGB[4] and feminist activists within the anti-gender semiotic community to reinforce the exclusion of individuals questioning cisgender norms. Third, through examination of discourses against the Minister of National Education and schools, the analysis shows how anti-gender discourses merge with anti-wokism discourses, leading to a blurring of boundaries between gender, religion, and ethnicity. This pattern facilitates the articulation of a national-populist discourse that claims to protect French Christian identity against the perceived threats of Islam and "wokism," reframed with the "straw person fallacy" (Policar 2022).

Data Collection and Methods

To collect the corpus of tweets, I conducted three months of "peripheral" participatory observation on Francophone Twitter[5], enabling the systematic collection of tweets referring to specific keywords. This participatory observation is defined as "peripheral," being marked "by the desire to interfere as little as possible with the social terrain under study" (Serpereau 2011, 81-2). This approach applies particularly well to

[4] LGB is used to designate groups intentionally excluding trans people from their activism.
[5] The study focused on Francophone rather than French Twitter, as no computer code was available to enable geographical delimitation of the collected discourses, only linguistic delimitation.

Twitter, which "allows one to be at the heart of exchanges, thanks to open and public data, while remaining invisible, on the periphery" (Arsenault 2015, 42).

The data collection process involves accessing the Twitter platform API, configuring the RStudio console with the necessary code packages—primarily "RTweet" for tweet identification and "writexl" for exporting data to Excel—and authenticating to the Twitter API through RStudio. Once these steps were completed, data collection proceeded using four keyword categories, which were selected through triangulation of existing literature, exploratory Twitter surveys, and identification of salient elements from the contemporary francophone socio-political context:

- Wokism: woke, wokism, wokist;
- LGBT: LGBT lobby, LGBT propaganda;
- Gender: gender ideology, gender theory, manif pour tous;
- Others: detrans, detransition, heterophobe, heterophobia, cisphobe, cisphobia.

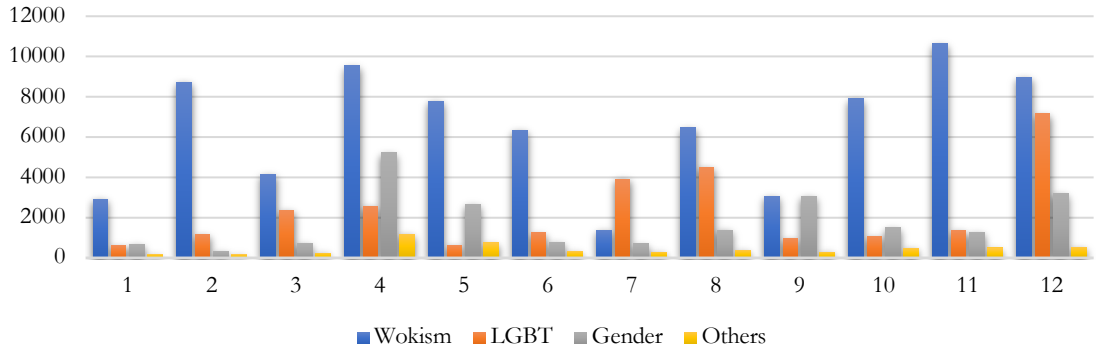
The data collection resulted in a corpus of 133,426 tweets, collected from November 13, 2022, to February 5, 2023. To analyse patterns within this large dataset, I present two visualizations: Table 1 shows the distribution of tweets across keyword categories, while Figure 1 illustrates temporal trends through a grouped bar graph, highlighting production peaks during the collection period.

Table 1: Distribution of Tweets Across Keyword Categories

Category	Count	Percentage
Wokism	78,090	59%
LGBT	27,853	21%
Gender	21,804	16%
Others	5,679	4%
Total	**133,426**	**100%**

Source: Author

Figure 1: Weekly Distribution of Tweets Across Keyword Categories



Source: Author

The generation of word clouds revealed the most frequently used words in tweets, including retweets. This visualization method highlighted particularly prominent tweets, which could be partially reconstructed from the word clouds. This approach enabled the identification of the most widely retweeted content during the collection period. For example, the word cloud representing the first month of data collection (Figure 2) predominantly displays text from two heavily retweeted messages. These tweets focused on two topics: the "Protect Our Children" campaign led by Éric Zemmour and Russia's legislative amendment that expanded its ban on "homosexual propaganda" to include "LGBT propaganda, sex change and pedophilia" (Viktine 2022).

Figure 2: Word Cloud of Most Frequent Tweet Content from December 2022

Source: Author

Through this word cloud analysis, 40 tweets were identified in the word clouds representing the three months of data collection. To provide deeper insights, additional tweets presenting an interdiscursive relationship with the main cases were selected, bringing the total sample to 70 tweets related to the corpus's main themes.

These tweets are analyzed as individual micro-discourses along with their associated meta-data. The analysis draws on Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which traditionally aims to understand how discursive strategies produce and reproduce social inequalities, abuses of power, and domination (Fairclough 2013, 110-2). Fairclough's model conceptualizes discourse as "language in use" within its sociocultural and historical

context (Baider 2019, 15). This framework views discourse as a social practice that shapes reality, relationships, and identities (Baider 2019, 15). In this article, CDA examines strategic dimensions behind tweet propagation, analyzing their main themes and identifying the semiotic community gravitating around anti-gender discourses.

The methodology combines two critical discourse studies approaches: the Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) and Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (SM-CDS). DHA enables meticulous discourse analysis through five analytical questions that examine linguistic designations, attribute assignments, argumentative structures, perspectival positions, and expression modalities (Wodak 2015, 5). These questions guide the identification of five distinct discursive strategies in DHA (Samaie and Malmeer 2017, 4). First, the referential strategy constructs groups of belonging and exclusion. Second, the predication strategy evaluates social actors through positive or negative labeling. Third, the argumentation strategy provides justification for these attributions. Fourth, the perspectivation strategy reveals the speaker's positioning. Finally, the intensification strategy modifies the epistemic weight of propositions.

Given the unique nature of social media data and its collection environment, the study also incorporates SM-CDS. Among various social network discourse analysis approaches, SM-CDS distinguishes itself by offering dual-level discourse contextualization through "media and situational" factors (Tamassy and Géring 2022). Following KhosraviNik and Unger (2016, 214), this approach considers specific medium and situational factors to enable more effective classification and nuanced analysis of social network data. Medium factors shape the technical and structural aspects of communication. These include synchronicity of interactions, methods of message transmission, message persistence, message size, communication channels, privacy settings, and anonymity features that determine how participant identities are represented. Situation factors influence the contextual and social dimensions of communication. These encompass message format and participation structures, participant characteristics (including demographic and ideological attributes), interaction purposes (at both individual and group levels), topic selection, tone (formal or informal), established group norms, and language choices including script selection (KhosraviNik and Unger 2016, 215). I added a "Query" line to the situation factors to identify the keyword used to collect the micro-discourse. Interrogating tweets and their metadata using this analysis grid enriched the analysis, particularly in identifying and defining the propagation vectors behind the tweets analyzed.

Vectors of Propagation: The "Fachosphere" as a Semiotic Community

Previous research on French digital anti-gender campaigns revealed a diverse coalition of actors spanning from conservative right to far-right political positions, including religious groups and conspiracy theorists (Chetcuti-Osorovitz and Teicher 2017; Julliard 2018, 2022). The current analysis identifies similar propagation vectors in the corpus, encompassing political figures, individual actors, traditional and alternative media outlets, journalists, translation services, and both formal associations and activist groups.

The identified political figures are exclusively associated with right-wing and far-right parties: "Les Républicains" (LR), "Les Patriotes" (LP), or "Rassemblement National" (RN). Among party accounts, *@Reconquete_off*, representing Zemmour's party "Reconquête!" founded in 2021, is the only official party account present. The analysis also identifies seven "Reconquête!" members' accounts, including vice-presidents, local elected representatives, and Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), demonstrating how the party has adopted anti-gender rhetoric.

Media identified by previous research reappear here as propagation vectors, such as conservative media *Le Figaro* and *Valeurs Actuelles* (Julliard 2016). The television channel *CNEWS*, which functions as the French equivalent of *Fox News* (Onishi 2021), is prominent both in the propagation of anti-gender discourses from its Twitter account and through the high digital activity of its columnists. *Sud Radio* emerges as another key actor. It is a regional radio station criticized since 2010 for providing platforms for conspiracy theories and far-right ideas in its programs (Conspiracy Watch 2011; 2022).

Among several alternative media sources, the most prominent is *Fdesouche.com*, "France's first political blog" (Julliard 2016). This press site faces criticism for employing a "cut-and-paste" strategy to spread disinformation aligned with far-right themes, such as the defense of French identity against the perceived threats of immigration and Islam (Lukasic and Salou 2023). Out of the 70 tweets analyzed, eight were produced by *Fdesouche.com*.

A significant development has been the emergence of translation accounts. Three such accounts were identified, each targeting a specific type of content to translate. As such, the account *@QuantumLeapTrad* translates conspiracy content, primarily sourced from the original American *@QuantumLeap* account. *@TrumpFrance*, founded by a group of far-right activists including Vivien Hoch, who was one of the main figures opposing marriage equality legislation in 2013, specifically focuses on translating Donald Trump's statements on themes such as anti-abortion movements, conspiracy rhetoric on COVID-19 and vaccines, and migratory and racial issues (Henry 2016; Lecot 2020).

Beyond political and mediatic vectors of propagation, three militant associations and collectives play significant roles. These include the account of *@ParentsVigil*, the collective behind the "Protect Our Children" campaign, alongside the accounts *@femelliste* and *@resistancelesbi*, which represent a *femalist*[6] collective claiming that "being a woman is a biological reality" (Femelliste 2023) and a radical lesbian collective (Résistance Lesbienne 2023) respectively. This unexpected presence of feminist accounts among the identified actors suggests the formation of "unlikely" alliances (Mathieu 1999). The study also identified a private social science institute, the Institut de Sciences Sociales, Économiques & Politiques (ISSEP Lyon), founded in 2018 by Thibault Monnier and Marion Maréchal, both members of the "Reconquête!" party. Individual user accounts, frequently anonymous, displayed identifiable characteristics through pseudonyms, profile and cover photos, and biography. These accounts typically belonged to supporters of the RN or "Reconquête!", individuals expressing patriotic sentiments without party affiliation ("France, my only party" and similar variations), Christian activists, sovereigntists, Eurosceptics, or conspiracists.

Given the political nature of this ensemble, anti-gender discourse appears predominantly concentrated within what Albertini and Doucet (2016) have termed the "fachosphere." This concept encompasses a nebula of actors from the identitarian right and far right, whose common denominator is "a shared opposition to liberal modernity and its ideal of an open society," and who have strategically used the Internet to "bypass the filter of the 'traditional' media and reach audiences directly" through social networks (Albertini and Doucet 2016). Although this denomination needs to be nuanced in light of the "unlikely" alliances identified in the analysis, it allows me to categorize and trace the boundaries of the semiotic community that centers around anti-gender discourses on Twitter (Julliard 2022). My findings reveal two patterns of anti-gender discourse that contribute to redefining the boundaries of this semiotic community, particularly regarding the integration of feminist and LGB activist accounts within the fachosphere. These patterns function as strategies of formation and transformation of symbolic boundaries, involving the expansion of symbolic boundaries, their contraction, and the blurring and modification of their meaning (Wimmer 2013, 49-61).

[6] Femalist is an emic term used to describe feminist movements whose claims are based on a biological conception of being a woman. Members of these movements often identify as gender-critical feminists, with their activism primarily opposing the rights of trans individuals. They also reject the label "TERF", which they perceive as carrying a negative connotation online, and criticize those who use the term to describe them.

"Protect Our Children": Two Patterns of Anti-gender Discourse on Twitter

Research has extensively documented how anti-gender discourses frequently center on the protection of children as a key rhetorical strategy (Husson 2015; Julliard 2017; Olivesi 2017). The continuing significance of this theme is demonstrated by the occurrence of the word "child" in 53% of the tweets in my dataset. My analysis of tweets referring to the protection of children identified two patterns of anti-gender discourse: first, the expansion of the semiotic boundaries of anti-gender discourse, and second, its integration into anti-wokism discourse, a process that blurs the boundaries between "gender," "wokism," and "Islamism."

Expanding the Semiotic Boundaries of Anti-gender Discourse

Existing literature has shown how discourses referring to the protection of children were used to call for the defense of the traditional family model. To justify the opposition to so-called "gender theory," these discourses advanced naturalistic arguments such as respect for "the laws of nature" (Olivesi 2017) and religious arguments such as the preservation of "the order of creation" (Julliard 2016). At the same time, these arguments reaffirmed the difference between genders and the resulting gendered roles within the heterosexual nuclear family (Husson 2015). Although these discourses were mainly focused on opposition against marriage and adoption by same-sex couples, some studies had already identified a second dimension, operating through debates of a physiological nature (Olivesi 2017) and a discourse stigmatizing trans people and "voluntarily indeterminate" bodies (Julliard 2017).

In the corpus analyzed, a shift occurred. Discourses focusing on same-sex families have been replaced by discourses focusing on drag queens and trans people. This shift suggests an expansion of the semiotic boundaries of anti-gender discourse, which, through the integration of LGB and feminist activists, enabled the exclusion of people questioning "gender differences" (Julliard 2017). This pattern has a two-fold structure.

First, analyzed tweets explicitly oppose drag queens story readings to minors:

> 🔞 Drag-queens and the LGBT lobby are relentless: they want to touch children! They are obsessed with children! We say NO! ❌ NO to @SebVincini's Departmental Council of @HauteGaronne hosting a drag reading on February 4 at MJC Roguet in #Toulouse.

Through this tweet, Arthur Cottrel, a member of "Reconquête!", expresses the party's rejection of the "relentlessness" of drag queens and the "LGBT lobby," understood as the threat targeting children. The threatening nature of this statement is reflected in the opening of the text with a "forbidden to under 18s" emoji and the use of words that could refer to a

physical threat ("relentless," "touch," "obsessed"), as well as the repeated use of exclamation marks. This discourse cultivates fear by reactivating the stigma of grooming that has accompanied gay communities since the 1970s both in Europe and North America (Sibalis 2010; Redien-Collot 2023). The text employs "we" to present the group's position, reflecting a strategy of perspectivation (Samaie and Malmeer 2017, 4). This rhetorical approach positions "Reconquête!" as actively opposing what they frame as a threat, emphasizing the party's collective stance through the use of the first-person plural. This opposition is also intensified through the use of capital letters to say "NO," exclamation marks, and a red cross emoji. The text concludes with a predication strategy (Samaie and Malmeer 2017, 4) which holds Sébastien Vincini responsible, thereby pitting the National Secretary of the Socialist Party against the "Reconquête!" party. A tweet from BFM TV news channel reported that the contested event had "finally been deprogrammed by the town hall," revealing one of the objectives of the first tweet: to put pressure on local elected officials to cancel drag queen readings and prevent children's exposure to gender performers.

To understand the dynamics behind anti-drag reading campaigns, it is relevant to turn to American literature, as this type of mobilization has proliferated in the US in recent years. Analyzing 203 anti-drag mobilizations online and offline in the US between 2022 and 2023, Martiny and Lawrence (2023) reveal a heterogeneous set of actors behind these campaigns, including anti-LGBTQI+ groups, far-right and white supremacist groups, parental rights activists, anti-vaxx groups, and Christian nationalists. The main narratives of anti-drag discourses portray drag performers as "groomers," drag shows open to all ages as "child abuse," and LGBTQI+ identities as an "ideology" (Martiny and Lawrence 2023, 17). By reactivating the "groomers" stigma to designate drag queens, a shift takes place in the discourse, moving away from the sexual dimension to focus on the gendered dimension that drag-queens inherently question. Ultimately, this strategy has already rallied cisgender gay men to this rhetoric, as illustrated by the far-right American organization "Gays Against Groomers" (Martiny and Lawrence 2023, 15).

Second, the tweets analyzed put the emphasis on gender detransition, which refers to someone who stop making changes (social, legal, medical) that they made to live according to a different gender to the one assigned at birth (Cambridge Dictionary 2024). Discourses on detransition are often instrumented by conservative and anti-trans movement, as in this tweet: "United States: this former soldier had become a trans icon. Now in 'detransition', he wants to protect children. 'I've been propagandized', 'used', 'naive'."

Published by alternative media *Fdesouche.com*, this tweet includes both a hyperlink to the article on their website and photographs showing the subject as a trans woman and pre-transition in military uniform. The tweet translates the testimony of a "trans icon" who has detransitioned, using a fallacious argument of authority: suggesting that his past notoriety as a trans woman legitimizes his current stance. The three words characterizing his testimony —"propagandized, used, naive"—describe the transition as deception, manipulation, and abuse. The subject positions himself as a victim, deflecting responsibility for their own choices onto those who facilitated their transition—whom they now characterize as threats to children.

Research into this former soldier's online presence reveals that he leads anti-gender campaigns on social media, especially on Instagram, where he combines a Christian nationalist discourse with a conspiracy discourse on pedophilia and Satanism, while also integrating an anti-drag rhetoric by describing drag queens as "groomers."

Another tweet from *@DubreuihlMarcel*, the founder of alternative media *Le Média en 4-4-2*, shared the testimony of Oli London, describing them as an "influencer turned man after his detransition, [who] denounces #woke teaching that targets children." This represents another instance of using detransition testimony as a fallacious argument of authority to construct narratives about threats to children. Additionally, *@DubreuihlMarcel*'s accompanying statement—"this is why drag-queens have been banned from reading about gender to 3–6-year-olds, listen up..." —confirms the interdiscursive relation with the first issue presented.

As with anti-drag campaigns, discourses on detransition initially emerged in the United States, enabling American literature to initiate an analysis of such discourses. Slothouber's research (2020) identified three key narratives accompanying detransition discourses. First, a socio-political climate "too accepting of trans identities" would overlook people who detransition to remain "politically correct." Second, these discourses address the need to protect children from misdiagnosis (and therefore gender transition). Finally, the fear of misdiagnosis would be intensified by the idea that gender dysphoria could be the result of "social contagion" (Slothouber 2020, 90). This research identifies another strategy in discourses on detransition: promoting the idea that people who detransition exist in large numbers (Slothouber 2020, 92). Here, this strategy is illustrated by a tweet from media *Valeurs Actuelles*:

> 🔴 Gender detransition: these ex-trans individuals who regret (and let it be known).
> ➡️ Consequence of the trans phenomenon: many people regret taking the step. These detransitioners warn about the damages of surgery and treatments.

This tweet cultivates fear through a strategy of intensification by numbers, while framing surgery and treatments in terms of the damage these procedures can create. According to Turban et al. (2021), out of 17,000 transgender individuals surveyed, 13.1% reported detransitioning, with 82.5% of these citing at least one external driving factor, such as family pressure or social stigma. These findings bring a much-needed layer of complexity to the idea that "many people regret taking the leap."

Furthermore, discourses on detransition are in line with the pathologizing and medicalizing discourse transgender movements have been fighting against since the 1960s. The tweet below, posted by *@femelliste*, reflects the pathologizing dimension and the victim framing that accompany discourses on detransition:

> 🗣Detransitioner's testimony: 'I just don't want children to be sterilized because they have mental health issues. I receive death threats for expressing this idea'.

These discourses surrounding detransition provide a bridge between conservative and religious anti-gender actors and biological essentialist who support groups like Femelliste, the latter defining womanhood as "for females, those members of the biological sex category who typically produce large, immobile gametes" (Lawford-Smith 2023, 40). In the corpus analyzed, this type of discourse is found in a tweet from a trans-exclusionary lesbian collective *@ResistanceLesbi*: "Recent testimony from a teenage girl who 'transitioned' as early as 13 and then 'detransitioned' at 16 in the US." This tweet is accompanied by hashtags such as *#surgery*, *#topsurgery*, *#lesbians*, and *#transmen*.

Both these examples illustrate renewed divisions within feminist and LGBTQI+ movements. These divisions have led to the formation of "unlikely" coalitions, as illustrated by this tweet from *Fdesouche.com*:

> 'Being a man or a woman is a decision': When sex disappears in favor of gender theory, feminists Dora Moutot and Marguerite Sterne launch the 'Femalist' movement to counter these ideas.

The tweet includes a video clip from *Sud Radio* featuring an interview with Dora Moutot and Marguerite Sterne, demonstrating how these self-described feminist activists have been integrated into the "fachosphere."

In this section, analyzed tweets reveal a shift in the semiotic boundaries of anti-gender discourse specifically in its discursive practices and central themes. Whereas previous

research identified a concentration of discourses against same-sex marriage and adoption (Cervulle and Pailler 2014; Husson 2015; Julliard 2016), these issues are absent from the analyzed corpus. Instead, the tweets focus on two main themes: first, they frame drag queens as a threat through strategies cultivating fear and associating them with "groomers." Second, they emphasize gender detransition, using fear-cultivating strategies, false authority figures, pathologizing language, and victim framing—all of which are strategies previously identified as digital propaganda techniques (Mahood and Rane 2017; Sparkes-Vian 2019).

This evolution from targeting same-sex relationships to questioning "gender differences" represents an expansion of the symbolic boundaries of anti-gender discourse, to use Andreas Wimmer's (2013) notion. This expansion occurs through the fusion of previously excluded categories, particularly anti-trans LGB and feminist groups, which move from "threat" to "threatened," thus becoming part of the semiotic community. However, this inclusion is relative, as it reinforces the symbolic boundary between the "fachosphere" and its perceived opponents, here represented by transgender people and drag queens.

This observation aligns with the findings of House (2023), who shows how the inclusion of "femalist" activists in anti-gender coalitions serves to legitimize, amplify, and give meaning to right-wing populist movements and their exclusionary policies. Though the motivation of "femalist" actors for joining these coalitions needs to be clarified, one can hypothesize they gain visibility and resources. This shift in discourse also aligns with what Corrêa, House, and Paternotte (2023, 487) describe as the fourth wave of anti-gender campaigns, characterized by global reach, diverse actors, and a focus on transgender people.

The analysis also reveals how French discourse adopted two key narratives that originated in the United States. Additionally, discussions about current events in Russia and Eastern Europe were also present in the corpus. Tweets about the banning of "LGBT propaganda" in Hungarian and Lithuanian schools employed populist discourse—which typically portrays a powerless majority opposed to an illegitimately powerful elite that undermines the "legitimate" claims of the majority (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017, 310). In targeting European and French institutions, these tweets merge anti-gender discourses with anti-wokism discourses, forming the second pattern identified in this article.

Blurring the Boundaries between Anti-gender, Anti-wokism, and Anti-Islam Discourses

Existing literature has documented the instrumentalization of anti-gender discourse to condemn French schools and educational institutions, described as propagators of "gender theory" (Harson 2017; Gallot, Khemilat and Pasquier 2018). For instance, using a

corpus of tweets collected between 2014 and 2017, Julliard (2022) exposed the articulation of racist and anti-feminist tweets targeting the former Minister of Education, Najat Vallaud-Belkacem.

In my study, the Twitter account of then-Minister of Education Pap Ndiaye appeared in 6% of tweets. While the tweets analyzed avoided racist rhetoric, they demonstrated the persistence of populist anti-gender discourse against educational institutions. These tweets also articulate different types of discourse to label the Minister. This labeling process is illustrated in the following tweet:

> We learn on CNews that Minister Pap Ndiaye's agenda has been checked. Nothing on education, but lots of meetings on LGBT and anti-racism. In short, leftist and woke propaganda at work. Our children will have a hard time to make progress.

This tweet, from an individual user, makes two arguments. First, the label "woke" encompasses both LGBTQI+ and anti-racist movements, consolidating them under an umbrella term that supposedly represents all progressive struggles (Canet and Dupuis-Déri 2022, 28). Like "gender theory," this integration process allows "wokism" to function as an "empty signifier"—a discursive construct that means so little that it can be used to mean many things (Paternotte and Kuhar 2018, 27). As Laclau (1996, 40) points out, the potential of empty signifiers in political discourse can "bring equivalent homogeneity to a very heterogeneous reality," allowing diverse empirical facts to support a single ideological agenda. This instrumentalization is reinforced by the absence of a consensual definition of "wokism," making it a key notion to establish "chains of equivalence," facilitating coalitions among various actors (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, as cited in Mayer 2018)—as seen in the "fachosphere," which spans far-right political figures to LGB and feminist activists.

The tweet's second argument—"our children will have a hard time to progress"—relies on a fallacious definition: "Minister Pap Ndiaye's agenda has been checked. Nothing on education." This framing suggests that the Minister of Education neglects his main functions, specifically helping "children progress." Similar tweets label Minister Pap Ndiaye as "committed to the ideology of race and gender," "an ambassador of LGBT propaganda," or a collaborator of "wokism," thereby condemning educational institutions and their supposed complicity in spreading "gender theory." These tweets employ populist discourse to pit an elite "collaborating with wokism" against a threatened, powerless people.

This populist discourse not only creates antagonism but also rallies support for the "Reconquête!" political project:

> 🔴 Your children's school is threatened. Act against immigrationist and LGBT propaganda, wokist education and the collapse of school standards. Protect your children: protegeons-nos-enfants.fr/petition #ProtectOurChildren.

This tweet, published by the official twitter account of "Reconquête!", frames the threats to "your children's" school through a strategic list: first several political issues, followed by "the collapse of school standards"—an argument designed to resonate with parents who may not respond to the previous threats. The populist framing of anti-gender discourse around education serves to promote this party, which invites parents to sign the "Protect Our Children" petition. The deliberate grouping of issues is telling, as it links migration with LGBTQI+ issues and "wokism." This association is echoed in this tweet:

> 🟡 At EDHEC Lille, LGBT propaganda is on full display with "pride week". Against the great indoctrination of your children, act: protegeons-nos-enfants.fr #ProtectOurChildren.

Produced by *@ParentsVigil*, this tweet reveals a new discursive formula of "great indoctrination," deliberately echoing the far-right concept of "great replacement." This concept, produced by Renaud Camus, warns of a demographic threat supposedly posed by Islam and Muslim people, who are accused of targeting Caucasians in "their own territories in a context of 'multiculturalist deculturation'" (Camus 2014, as cited in Wakil 2021, 18).

This discursive convergence points to a national-populist discourse, which relies on "the polarized opposition between 'us' and 'them' in vertical and horizontal dimensions" (Brubaker 2017, 1192). The vertical dimension is a characteristic of populism, as previously defined by Benjamin De Cleen and Yannis Stavrakakis (2017, 310-11). In my study, this vertical dimension is illustrated by the condemnation of national institutions and their representatives. The horizontal dimension refers to the boundaries of the "nation," defined in opposition to "Others"—people who, regardless of citizenship, are deemed outside the national community (Brubaker 2017, 1192). This horizontal opposition manifests in associating "wokism" and "Islamism," presented as the ultimate threats to children.

In the analyzed tweets, this association between "wokism" and "Islamism" takes various forms as users highlight perceived threats in schools. For example, one user responds to a video of children singing *as-salamu alaykum* in a public pre-school: "The outrages to the secular republic inflicted on us by woke culture and radical Islam!" Here, the discourse pairs "woke culture" and "radical Islam" as joint opponents of the "secular republic." This discourse also promotes Christianity as a national cultural norm, as illustrated by another tweet about the suicide of a middle-school student who was being harassed because of his homosexuality:

> Before the arrival of Christianophobic populations, the presence of homosexual children at school went unnoticed. Moreover, the #LGBT lobby was not there, to claim their difference. 🙏#Lucas

The tweet presents two arguments about the 13-year-old's suicide. First, it claims that "Christianophobic" populations—implicitly referring to Muslims—were responsible for the teenager's harassment. Furthermore, the "LGBT lobby" encourages children from sexual and gender minorities to assert "their difference," thereby exposing them to harassment. This framing deflects from the central issue: opposition to LGBTQI+ education in schools as part of anti-discrimination measures, which the various political figures represented in the "fachosphere" actively oppose.

Against this backdrop, tweets position Islam and "wokism" as threats to children, while offering a third way:

> It's up to you to choose for your children, Islam based on values of enslavement, wokism based on immoral values and unrestricted freedoms, or Christian values based on love, forgiveness of others... It's up to you to choose for your future and that of your children.

This tweet creates a false dilemma, contrasting Christianity with Islam and "wokism"—discrediting both to promote Christianity. This strategy merges religious and national identities, echoing the rhetoric of American Christian nationalist movements (Whitehead and Perry 2020) and what Marzouki, McDonnell and Roy (2016) theorize as "hijacking" of Christianity to embody national identity. Social media has become crucial for Christian national-populist entrepreneurs to reach their audience (Freire 2014), deploying a culture of fear (Walker 2024), as shown in this tweet:

> Little girl raped and throat slit, French women raped, grandmother assaulted, inclusive writing, vegan, burkini, non-gendered bike lane, meeting forbidden to whites, wokist education minister, war imposed by Macron. Decadent France 2022.

This tweet uses a enumeration strategy, alternating between alleged threats from immigration and Islam, and those from "wokism" and "gender theory," to promote a white nationalist discourse that blurs the symbolic boundaries between ethnic, religious, and cultural factors (Wimmer 2013). Similarly, previous tweets achieved this by framing white populations as victims, universalizing Christian discourse, and reaffirming heterocisgender norms (Wimmer 2013, 62). This strategy positions people of color and people with immigrant background, Muslims, and LGBTQI+ (especially TQI+) as outsiders to the imagined community, thus illustrating the horizontal dimension of nationalism. The tweet's final elements sarcastically blame France's "decadence" on the government, highlighting populism's vertical dimension.

In this section, my analysis shows how associating "wokism" and "Islamism" in anti-education tweets constructs two threats to children. Anti-wokism discourse combines "gender theory" and "LGBT lobby and propaganda" with "race theory" narratives, creating an anti-progressive discourse (Canet and Dupuis-Déri 2022). Meanwhile, discourses on Islam and immigration reinforce Muslim stigmatization and stoke fears of "conquering Islam" that have persisted in French society since the 1980s (Asal 2020), with Muslims remaining the main target of far-right movements for decades (Policar 2022, 118).

This parallel between "wokism" and "Islamism" is built by distorting both concepts with the straw person fallacy, which involves "distorting the opponent's position by attributing to it an implausible, fabricated and easily refutable point of view, and then arguing against this fabricated version as if it were that opponent's" (Blair 1983; Policar 2022, 118). Linking "wokism" with "Islamism" allows the propagators of such discourses to position both as "straw persons" in opposition to their definition of national community—white, Christian, heterosexual, and cisgender. Such opposition is constructed through alarmist discourse and the use of a range of propaganda techniques, including fearmongering, victim framing, sarcasm, and false dilemmas. By presenting these groups as threats, anti-woke and anti-Islam entrepreneurs can stage a fight against these straw persons and reposition themselves as defenders of French identity and the nation's children through a proposed "third way." This strategy serves two purposes: first, it reinforces an imagined national community that excludes those associated with either straw person. Second, it advances a populist discourse by blaming the current government for these supposed threats. This is exemplified in a tweet of a Le Figaro editorialist, Ivan Rioufol:

> No, Mr. President #Macron, you are not a Resistance fighter: with #papndiaye in Education, you collaborate with #Wokism. You do not impede #Islamism in its conquests. You falsify history by saying that 'France has always been a land of immigration'.

Conclusion

Based on a qualitative analysis of tweets collected between November 2022 and February 2023, this article revisits existing knowledge on digital anti-gender campaigns in France, ten years after the national debates on marriage and adoption for all. Three main contributions emerge from this analysis.

The analysis of propagation vectors behind these discourses reveals a heterogeneous set of political, media, and activist actors. This set of actors, designated as the "fachosphere" (Albertini and Doucet 2016), functions as a semiotic community sharing discursive practices

and central themes, through which they express a common opposition to liberal modernity. While positions within this community range from the conservative right to the identitarian far right, as outlined in previous research (Julliard 2022), some "unlikely" profiles stand out —notably LGB and feminist activists. To explain their inclusion in the "fachosphere," this article identifies two patterns, based on the rhetoric "protect our children," which help redefine the symbolic boundaries of this semiotic community gravitating around anti-gender discourses.

First, the call to "protect our children" grounds discourses opposing drag queens readings for minors and warning against gender detransition. These discourses operate through several propaganda strategies: stigmatizing association of drag queens with "groomers," fallacious arguments of authority from people in detransition, trans-exclusionary radical feminists positioning themselves as victims, and fear-mongering discourses. The focus within these discourses on drag queens' readings and gender detransition suggests an expansion of the symbolic boundaries of the "fachosphere." Through the fusion of former categories of exclusion, identified anti-trans LGB and femalist groups are integrated into the semiotic community. This inclusion is relative, however, as it reinforces the symbolic boundary between the "fachosphere" and the "Others"—particularly transgender people and drag queens. This first pattern aligns with the coalition-building process described by House (2023) and with what is described in the literature as the "fourth wave of anti-gender campaigns" (Corrêa, House and Paternotte 2023, 48). Nevertheless, the incentive for "femalist" entrepreneurs to associate with such actors remains unclear, though increased visibility and resources may be factors. Future research should examine whether these coalitions are merely strategic and contextual, or if deeper alliances can emerge between actors with seemingly opposing positions.

Second, the call to "protect our children" enables a populist discourse condemning schools, the Minister of Education, and national institutions. While this dimension of anti-gender discourse is well-documented (Harson 2017; Gallot and Pasquier 2018; Julliard 2018), my analysis of anti-school tweets reveals a new pattern. The Minister of Education, Pap Ndiaye, is labeled an "ambassador of LGBT propaganda" and a "collaborator of wokism." This labeling strategy contrasts an elite "complicit" with "wokism" and "gender theory" against a powerless, threatened people who can be saved by the "Reconquête!" party. Additionally, anti-school rhetoric integrates anti-gender discourse within anti-wokism discourse, which connects to discourse against "Islamism".

This pattern results in blurred symbolic boundaries between ethnic, religious, and cultural factors, highlighting the relevance of an intersectional analysis. These boundaries blur through propaganda strategies including false dilemmas, universalized Christian discourse, white victimization and, here again, fear-mongering discourses. The strategy also distorts "wokism" and "Islamism" through the straw person fallacy. This facilitates national-populist discourse that excludes those associated with these straw persons from the imagined national community, while blaming institutions and government for these threats. In this way, the "fachosphere" creates the space and conditions for an alternative political project that appeals to their imagined community, though reactive in its semiotic expression.

For further research, I would like to stress the transnational circulations identified in the corpus. These narratives, imported from the United States, Eastern Europe, and Russia, appear to constitute what Bennett and Livingston (2018, 132) call "alternative information systems"—networks that bypass traditional media and provide audiences with emotionally satisfying beliefs. These systems help radical right-wing movements and parties in the West undermine the legitimacy of democratic institutions and destabilize competing parties and governments (Bennett and Livingston 2018, 134-5). This transnationalization aligns with Paternotte and Kuhar's (2018, 332) vision of anti-gender campaigns as part of a complex constellation of global actors rather than isolated national phenomena. These findings emphasize the need for deeper investigation of the transnational dimension of digital anti-gender campaigns. However, previous research has been limited by difficulties comparing languages used in online discourses (Wallaschek et al 2022), suggesting the value of a transnational approach focused on specific linguistic contexts.

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Appendix: Analysis of Social Media Posts and Their Context

This appendix presents key social media content analyzed in the study, including original French tweets and their English translations. The data is organized into two sections: (1) frequently used hashtags and (2) representative tweets from various actors in the French anti-gender discourse sphere.

All tweets have been preserved in their original form, maintaining the integrity of emojis and hashtags that were present in the source material. The translation process focused on capturing not only the literal meaning but also the underlying tone and intent of each message. This dataset spans a four-month period from November 2022 through February 2023. Each entry includes information about the account type and the actor's role in the broader discourse.

Section 1: Key Hashtags and Their Translations

French Original	English Translation
#PropagandeLGBT	#LGBTpropaganda
#ThéorieDuGenre	#GenderTheory
#Wokisme	#Wokism
#LesGaysDoiventDisparaitreCar	#GaysShouldDisappearBecause
#ProtégeonsNosEnfants	#ProtectOurChildren

Section 2: Representative Tweets by Actor Type

Account	Type of Actor	Content (English)	Content (French)
@ArthurCottrel	Member of far-right political party "Reconquête!"	🔞 Drag-queens and the LGBT lobby are relentless: they want to touch children! They are obsessed with children! We say NO! ❌ NO to @SebVincini's Departmental Council of @HauteGaronne hosting a drag reading on February 4 at MJC Roguet in #Toulouse.	🔞 Les drag-queens et le lobby LGBT sont acharnés : ils veulent toucher les enfants ! Les enfants les obsèdent ! Nous disons NON ! ❌ NON au Conseil Départemental de @HauteGaronne de @SebVincini qui héberge la lecture drag du 4 février à la MJC Roguet à #Toulouse
@F_Desouche	Alternative media	United States: this former soldier had become a trans icon. Now in 'detransition', he wants to protect children. 'I've been propagandized', 'used', 'naive'.	États-Unis : cet ancien soldat était devenu une icône trans. Aujourd'hui en "détransition", il veut protéger les enfants. "J'ai été propagandisé", "utilisé", "naïf".
@Valeurs	Traditional media	🔴Gender detransition: these ex-trans individuals who regret (and let it be known). ➡️ Consequence of the trans phenomenon: many people regret taking the step. These	🔴 Détransition de genre : ces ex-trans qui regrettent (et le font savoir) ➡️ Conséquence du phémonène trans : de nombreuses personnes regrettent d'avoir franchi le pas.

		detransitioners warn about the damages of surgery and treatments.	Ces dé-transitionneurs alertent sur les dommages de la chirurgie et des traitements
@femelliste	A self-described feminist collective	Detransitioner's testimony: 'I just don't want children to be sterilized because they have mental health issues. I receive death threats for expressing this idea'.	🗣Parole de détransitionneuse : « Je ne veux juste pas que des enfants soient stérilisés parce qu'ils ont des problèmes de santé mentale. Je reçois des menaces de mort parce que j'exprime cette idée ».
@Reconquete_off	Political party "Reconquête!"	🔴 Your children's school is threatened. Act against immigrationist and LGBT propaganda, wokist education and the collapse of school standards. Protect your children: protegeons-nos-enfants.fr/petition #ProtectOurChildren	🔴 L'école de vos enfants est menacée. Agissez contre la propagande immigrationniste et LGBT, l'enseignement wokiste et l'effondrement du niveau scolaire. Protégez vos enfants : protegeons-nos-enfants.fr/petition #ProtegeonsNosEnfants
@ParentsVigil	Collective associated with the campaign "Protect Our Children"	🟡 At EDHEC Lille, LGBT propaganda is on full display with "pride week". Against the great indoctrination of your children, act: protegeons-nos-enfants.fr #ProtectOurChildren	🟡 A l'EDHEC Lille, la propagande LGBT bat son plein avec la "pride week". Contre le grand endoctrinement de vos enfants, agissez : protegeons-nos-enfants.fr#ProtegeonsNosEnfants
@MaryC7773	Individual user	We learn on CNews that Minister Pap Ndiaye's agenda has been checked. Nothing on education, but lots of meetings on LGBT and anti-racism. In short, leftist and woke propaganda at work. Our children will have a hard time to make progress.	On apprend sur CNews que l'agenda du ministre PapNdiyaie a été consulté. Rien sur l'enseignement mais bcp de réunions concernant les LGBT et l'anti-racisme. Bref, la propagande gauchiste et woke à la manœuvre. Nos enfants vont avoir du mal à progresser.
@holste_max	Individual user	Before the arrival of Christianophobic populations, the presence of homosexual children at school went unnoticed. Moreover, the #LGBT lobby was not there, to claim their difference. 🙏#Lucas	Avant l'arrivée des populations Christianophobes, la présence des enfants homosexuels, à l'école, passait inaperçue. Par ailleurs, le lobby #LGBT n'était pas là, pour revendiquer leur différence. 🙏#Lucas
@patrioteFr75	Individual user	Little girl raped and throat slit, French women raped, grandmother assaulted, inclusive writing, vegan, burkini, non-gendered bike lane, meeting forbidden to whites, wokist education minister, war imposed by Macron. Decadent France 2022.	Fillette violée et égorgée, femmes françaises violées, grand-mère agressée, écriture inclusive, vegan, burkini, piste cyclable non genrée, réunion interdite aux blancs, wokiste ministre de l'éducation, guerre imposée par macron. France décadente 2022.
@ivanrioufol	Journalist	No, Mr. President #Macron, you are not a Resistance fighter: with #papndiaye in Education, you collaborate with #Wokism. You do not impede #Islamism in its conquests. You falsify history by saying that 'France has always been a land of immigration'.	Non, Mr le Président #Macron, vous n'êtes pas un Résistant : avec #papndiaye à l'Education vous collaborez avec le #Wokisme de salon. Vous n'entravez pas l'#islamisme dans ses conquêtes. Vous falsifiez l'histoire en disant que 'la France a toujours été une terre d'immigration'.

TERF Intimate Publics: Anti-gender Images and Feelings

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Abstract

This article asks: how does trans-exclusionary radical feminism (TERFism) function to create an intimate public that generates a sense of belonging along gendered and racialized lines? Drawing from Judith Butler, I use "fascism" as a conceptual frame while analyzing online images and sentiments of a trans-exclusionary radical feminist (TERF) who belongs to an Australian anti-gender Facebook group. I argue that TERF intimate publics are constituted by feelings of loss and resentment which become alleviated through claiming legitimacy along a "natural" gendered and racialized hierarchy of human worth, through demanding a return of one's "sex-based rights," and through a commitment to victimhood. Generating pride in a perceived endangered identity, this article finds that TERF intimate publics uphold the regulatory norms of cis-heteronormativity and whiteness. This analysis reveals that they offer a space for racist nationalism rooted in cis-hetero-misogyny, a crucial finding as TERFism gains traction in the current political moment.

Keywords: Trans-exclusionary Radical Feminism; TERF; Intimate Publics; Anti-gender Feelings; Images; Cis-heteronormativity; Whiteness

Introduction

On March 18, 2023, a group of about 30 men belonging to Australia's National Socialist Movement, a neo-Nazi organisation reported to be Australia's largest white supremacist group (Printcev 2024) gathered on the steps of Victoria's Parliament House in Australia to support the "Let Women Speak" event led by British self-described women's rights activist Kellie-Jay Keen-Minshull, also known as Posie Parker (Elkin 2023). Dressed in black and holding the Australian flag and a banner which read "Destroy Paedo Freaks," the men stood on the side of Keen-Minshull while performing the Sieg Heil salute to a large group of counter-protesters (Whelan 2023). Of the 100 or so women attending the "Let Women Speak" event, a significant proportion were trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs). The event attracted significant criticism in Australia and abroad, while Keen-Minshull and her supporters distanced themselves from the men, arguing that they had "gate-crashed" the rally (Deeming cited in Karvelas 2023). An alternative theory was that these men were undercover police or trans-rights activists (Wilson 2023). While some of the

women standing by Keen-Minshull decried the neo-Nazis after the event, the neo-Nazis' attendance—although shocking—was hardly surprising. This is because Nazi ideology has historically excluded and expelled trans people from society.[1]

While the "Let Women Speak" event was not an iteration of neo-Nazi ideology, it did create a space where these men could perform their sexual and racial politics. It was possible because the event was platformed on defending an authentic sense of "true womanhood" defined by one's sex assigned at birth. Such platforming is problematic as it triggers a sense of victimhood which reduces women's oppression to a set of chromosomes and sex organs, invisibilising the social and political hierarchies which produce gender inequality (MacKinnon 2023). This reduction defines women by their biology, upholding notions of biological essentialism whereby women are given an innate and universal "fixed essence" (Grosz 2012, 334). Biological essentialism has been used against feminists to reinforce the system of patriarchy as it validates the idea of women's subordination and secondary relation to men (Grosz 2012, 333). In claiming oppression in one's sex assigned at birth, then, the event offered a space for the neo-Nazis to perform their "essential" maleness alongside these women in a complementary/rescuer relation upholding the myth of patriarchy which is glorified in neo-Nazi ideology. This reflects a form of cis-hetero-misogyny whereby the ideologies of cisgenderism, heterosexism, and misogyny are upheld. Cisgenderism is an ideology which denigrates and rejects gender identities which do not align to those assigned at birth (Lennon and Mistler 2014, 63), while heterosexism is a belief system which assumes all individuals to be innately heterosexual (Richardson-Self 2019, 574). Following Richardson-Self (2019, 574), who draws on Manne (2018, 13), misogyny can be described as a "system that polices, punishes, dominates, and condemns those women who are perceived as an enemy or threat to the patriarchy" (Manne 2018, 34). Cis-hetero-misogyny then, as Richardson-Self (2019, 574- 575) defines it, is:

> a property of social systems or environments as a whole, in which sex-, gender-, and orientation-diverse persons, as well as some cis-het women, will tend to face hostility of various kinds because they are sex-, gender-, and orientation-diverse persons in an androcentric, sexually dimorphic, cisgenderist, heterosexist world (i.e. a cis-hetero-patriarchy), who are held to be failing to live up to cis-hetero-patriarchal standards, or

[1] In Nazi Germany, trans people were regularly conflated with homosexuality and were considered demographic threats to the nation. Like homosexuals, many were deported to concentration camps where they were murdered (Giles 2011, 389).

because they actively challenge these standards in some way, including by being visually Other.

While the "Let Women Speak" event created an environment where the neo-Nazis could enact cis-hetero-misogyny through a defence of "true womanhood," in doing so, it inescapably also offered a space for the articulation of racist nationalism. For example, in reducing women to their physical anatomy, the notion of sexual dimorphism is reinforced, which has been saddled with whiteness throughout history to elucidate racial differences and hierarchies (Markowitz 2024, 47). While this reduction renders unintelligible diverse sexed and gendered identities, it leaves the structure of whiteness relatively stable, upholding and reproducing its social and political privilege. Furthermore, in rendering women's anatomy as an asset to be defended, women's reproductive organs become consequentially prized, reducing women to vessels of biological reproduction. This reduction subsequentially creates a space for the neo-Nazis to defend the women at the "Let Women Speak" event on the grounds of them being racially valuable to the development of a pure Australian race, an articulation of racist nationalism through a defence of "true womanhood."

The attendance of the neo-Nazis at Victoria's Parliament House in 2023 highlights how anti-trans sentiment creates a shared ground where fringe and extreme actors can unite across Australia's political spectrum. Anti-trans sentiment has been escalating in Australia in recent years (Kelly 2023). For example, a report published in 2023 by the Trans Justice Project and The Victorian Pride Lobby revealed that one in two trans and gender diverse people had experienced hate or violence in some form in the last twelve months (Kelly 2023). The report also noted an escalation of such incidents on online platforms in the lead-up to the "Let Women Speak" event. In recent years, Australia's online anti-gender movement has been a hotbed for anti-trans sentiment. Re-energising itself after a failed attempt to prevent the legislation of same-sex marriage in 2017, this movement has been successful in mobilisng individuals against the threat of "gender," which captures a range of concerns that counter cis-heteronormativity. In this context, cis-heteronormativity can be defined as "the systemic normalization and material privileging of bodies, identities, and subjectivities that most closely align with white cisgender and heterosexual cultural expectancies" (LeMaster et al. 2019, 367). Cis-heteronormativity is racialized as white, inasmuch as both whiteness and cis-heteronormativity function as default, invisible, and regulatory norms, working to Other those bodies who are non-white, queer, or sexually and gender diverse thus rendering them inauthentic to the dominant white, cis-heteronormative social order. As Susan Stryker (2014, 41) reminds us:

> The caesura, or break, that race introduces into the body politic allows the population to be segmented and selected, enhanced or eliminated, according to biological notions of heritability, degeneracy, foreignness, differentness, or unassimilability—all in the name of "defending" society and making it "pure".

Drawing from Judith Butler (2024), this article uses "fascism" as a conceptual frame to explore the emotions and rhetorical registers of TERF intimate publics. In doing so, it reveals how these intimate publics generate a sense of belonging along gendered and racialized lines and thus create a space for racist nationalism rooted in cis-hetero-misogyny, a crucial finding as TERFism gains traction in the current political moment. Lauren Berlant (2008, 8) describes an "intimate public" as "a porous, affective sense of identification among strangers that promises a certain experience of belonging" through networks of disappointment, sympathy and recognition. By meeting the mediated desires and expectations of the intimate public, they offer a sense of shared belonging through an "attachment to what disappoints" (Berlant 2008, 22). As such, there is a certain homogeneity to an intimate public: they generate "a subjective likeness" (Berlant 2008, 5) and are based on shared norms and values which "engender kinds of insider recognition and cultural self-development" (Berlant 2008, 11).

Fascism is a difficult concept to define due to its contours changing and shifting depending on time and context (Paxton 1998, 1). However, a common theme found across various mobilisations of fascism is the creation of a deviant sexual Other used to strip people of their rights and freedoms (Butler 2024, 8). The goal of othering here is to protect the nation's "pure" citizens and return the nation to its glorified and mythical past (Butler 2024, 8). This past is invariably glorified through the enactment and sustainment of patriarchal gender roles, which place the traditional patriarchal family at its centre while arousing fears towards deviations from it (Stanley 2018, 16). To return the nation to its mythical and glorified past, natural hierarches of human worth are represented as "immutable facts" in the fascist imagination (Stanley 2018, 80). These hierarchies solidify divisions between social groups by stoking fear between them (Stanley 2019, 8). Fear, therefore, is a core emotion of fascism which borders alongside a deep-seated feeling of loss. This loss is mobilised and manipulated into "aggrieved victimhood and exploited to justify past, continuing, or new forms of oppression" (Stanley 2018, 99).

As this article argues, TERF intimate publics are constituted by feelings of loss. This loss is accompanied by a feeling of resentment which is directed towards trans subjects, who are framed as deviant sexual Others and are held responsible for this loss. Displaced onto an

object of blame (the trans subject), these feelings, I argue, become alleviated by claiming legitimacy along a "natural" cisgender hierarchy of human worth which is sexualised as straight and racialized as white, by demanding a return of one's "sex-based rights," and through a commitment to victimhood. TERF intimate publics operate on two parallel tracks. First, they rely upon emotions central to the mobilization of fascism—specifically loss and resentment leading to aggrieved victimhood. Second, they deploy similar rhetorical registers found in fascist politics: they create a deviant sexual Other to protect the nation's "pure" citizens and advocate for a return to a glorified, mythical past. In practical terms, this means reducing the category of "woman" to chromosomes and sex organs—a move that reinforces racial differences and hierarchies while obscuring the social and political realities of female oppression. This is not to argue that TERFs are fascists, but that TERF intimate publics offer a space for racist nationalism rooted in cis-hetero-misogyny, a crucial finding as TERFism gains traction in the current political moment.

The data used and analyzed for this article were gathered from an Australian anti-gender Facebook group, Binary Australia. Binary Australia is arguably Australia's largest anti-gender organisation. Binary Australia emerged in 2017 as a rebranding of Marriage Alliance, a leading lobbying group that had campaigned against same-sex marriage. The organization now focuses on opposing what it calls the threat of "gender" and actively campaigns against the advancement of trans and gender diverse rights (Duffy 2018). It is most active on Facebook, where it communicates to its approximately 90,000 followers daily through the posting of various images.

I use two images posted by Binary Australia to argue that these images create TERF intimate publics where personal feelings of loss and resentment can be mobilised and displaced onto a public criticism of "gender," represented through the figure of the trans subject framed as a deviant sexual Other. To analyze these images, I use the sentiments of Emily, a self-identified TERF who is a member of Binary Australia. Although this article focuses on the sentiments of one participant interviewed for a broader PhD project on anti-gender politics in Australia, Emily's sentiments mirror those of many other participants. As such, of the twenty participants interviewed for this project, five identified themselves as TERFs. These TERFs consistently expressed a sense of victimhood due to the purported loss of their "sex-based rights." Additionally, all argued that trans women were not really women but were either mentally ill, deceived, or deliberately appropriating gender for deceptive or nefarious purposes. All participants therefore defended a "natural" cisgender hierarchy of human worth, which, as will be argued, is sexualised as straight and racialized as

white; thus, their sentiments uphold the regulatory norms of cis-heteronormativity and whiteness. Emily's sentiments therefore not only connect to a larger pattern of how TERFs feel about "gender," but they also point to the emotions and rhetorical registers which are required to belong and identify as a TERF in Australia today.

Emily's interview was conducted through the video communication platform Zoom in May, 2023. I had prepared broad topics to discuss with Emily before the interview, and questions were semi-structured, participant-led, and open-ended, encouraging Emily to share her thoughts, feelings, and understandings of "gender" and the trans community with me. I adopted a phenomenological approach to interviewing, which focused on the participant's description of events and their experiences with the phenomenon under investigation. This approach takes an impartial and non-directive stance and is focused on studying "what it is like as we find-ourselves-being-in-relation-with others… and other things" (Vagle 2018, 20). It therefore allows for an investigation of how participants understand their lived experiences and the meanings they make from those experiences (Seidman 2019, 16).

This approach was suited to the research objective as it allowed for an investigation of the participants' perceived relationship between themselves and trans individuals and the anti-gender image, as well as how the participants generated meaning from both of those relationships and experiences. As lived experiences have a transitory nature and are often disregarded (van Manen 2016, 42), a phenomenological approach was also appropriate as it encouraged Emily to reconstruct her lived experiences in order to make sense of them in the present moment. This approach allowed me to explore why Emily had been attracted to the Facebook page initially and why she had reacted to their images online. This approach justifies studying images and interviews together, as it allows for an examination of how Emily's past experiences shaped and affected her support for anti-gender criticism at the time of the interview.

Images were analysed using a critical discourse analysis, which treats discourse as a "social practice" which shapes both the individual and is shaped by them (Wodak 2024, 32). As the analysis explored how anti-gender images helped to forge a sense of identity and belonging, and how the participant's past experiences contributed to these feelings, this approach was well suited.

The two images selected for this article's analysis most accurately captured Emily's sentiments and those of the five self-identified TERFs or trans-exclusionary feminists I interviewed for my research. It is important to note here that I asked all of my participants

which images they had reacted to on Binary Australia's Facebook page.[2] However, none of the participants remembered specific images that had stuck with them. Instead, when asked why they had reacted to the images in the past, all indicated that the images had accurately represented their feelings surrounding a particular issue at a particular point in time. This indicates that the images reflected a shared sense of reality generated from a shared sense of what disappoints, thus indicating their ability to function as an intimate public.

The findings also reveal the extent to which the images captured an individual's personal and private feelings, albeit in a fleeting way. Not remembering what images one had reacted to indicates that the anti-gender image operates, to some extent, on a level of cultural and emotional amnesia. What I mean by this is that the image successfully captures suffering or disappointment despite the source of this suffering or disappointment being forgotten. This suggests a displacement of emotion is occurring here. This is a worrying finding: if what pulls one towards the anti-gender image is forgotten, the feelings which drove one to react to the image in the first place can be diverted to suit other political ends—political ends which accrue efficacy by presenting themselves as a way out of suffering or disappointment. This indicates that anti-gender images may be operating as a gateway to other exclusionary ideologies. The next two sections present my analysis of Emily's feelings of loss and resentment, which I argue become displaced onto the anti-gender image and alleviated by claiming legitimacy along a "natural" cisgender hierarchy—which is sexualised as straight and racialized as white—by demanding a return of one's "sex-based rights" and through a commitment to victimhood.

"They're Erasing Females and Motherhood!"

Sitting on a dusty orange leather couch, Emily fidgets towards her laptop screen as she greets me. Behind her are large bay windows framing the outside front garden, which lay a lemon tree and a selection of flowers and herbs planted in terracotta pots. There is a Led Zeppelin poster hanging on the wall in the left-hand corner, and to the right I can see one speaker, presumably part of a pair, decorating the room. Emily is a white Australian and appears to be in her mid-to-late forties. Greeting me cheerfully in a thick Australian accent, I tell Emily that her name will be changed for this research. "Good!", she responds. "I'm already threatened as being a TERF!" She laughs as I ask her why she joined the Facebook group Binary Australia and began to react to their images online. "I've had issues with them

[2] Binary Australia almost exclusively communicates to its members through the posting of images. Images therefore act as a key mode of recruitment for this group.

[trans women] throughout my life and within the workplace," she tells me. She goes on to say that she is a second-wave feminist who has two daughters and "like most women," she says, "I've been groped, threatened, and have had predators after me… so, male violence and sexual predatory behaviour is also a big issue…" Her voice rises as she concludes: "They're erasing females and motherhood!"

Months later, when I'm writing up my notes of Emily's interview, I send her a Facebook message to clarify whether or not she identifies as a TERF. "Do you think this acronym is useful in describing how you feel about these issues and also in connecting you with other second-wave or radical feminists who share your thoughts on transgender people?", I ask. "I wear it like a badge of honour", she responds. "I am a feminist who excludes males from being identified as female and gaining female sex-based rights (which are now all gone) as any sane, careful, matriarch, intelligent female should".

Emily articulates a deep sense of victimhood in her opening remarks to me. Although she occupies a dominant position within Australian society as a white, cisgender, and heterosexual woman, her remarks indicate that these identities are felt as fragile and at risk of being erased. These sentiments are articulated when she argues that trans women are erasing females and motherhood. In placing these categories as under threat, Emily triggers a sense of nostalgia for these identities—a longing for a time when they were felt as stable. The effort to restore the category of "woman" to a set of chromosomes and reproductive imperatives works to spark a discourse of "vulnerable, maternal femininity" (Blee 2020, 419) which upholds cis-heteronormativity by relegating women's sexuality as in service to her "complementary" cis-male counterpart. However, it also has an imperial effect in that it keeps racialized histories alive by rendering Eurocentric understandings of binary sex as immutable facts (Patil 2018). This privileges the social structure of whiteness, as these understandings have had whiteness pressed upon them since the eighteenth century when modern discourses of race emerged (Markowitz 2024, 47).

For example, as Schuller (2023, 151) points out, white women's bodies were rendered by race scientists as fleshy bodies "capable of progress but also likely to get lead astray," while white male bodies "possessed just the right amount of sensibility, enabling them to maintain altruism, abstraction, and justice" (Schuller 2023, 151). Thus, "the sex binary was deployed to stabilise the precarity of impressible whiteness" (Schuller 2023, 151), impressibility meaning the capacity for the body to be affected and progress over time (Schuller and Gill-Peterson 2020, 6). This system had two major effects. First, it relegated women to the position of the inferior sex in the sex binary. Second, through modern discourses of race, it

rendered non-white bodies and bodies outside binary definitions of sex as unimpressionable, thereby justifying scientific racism and establishing sexual and racial hierarchies.

The deployment of nostalgia by Emily, then, not only works to stabilise whiteness through a longing for binary sex to be returned to its "innate" and "fixed" essence, but through such longings it also affords her body the potential to progress forward through time while trans women are denied this affordability and indeed liveability. This reveals the practice of feeling in the exercise of solidifying group differences, and how these feelings work to stabilise and naturalise sexual and racial differences and hierarchies (Schuller 2018, 37). In a commitment to victimhood, stemming from an anxiety that females and mothers are being erased by trans women, Emily generates pride in her cisgender identity, which is sexualised as straight and racialized as white, thus upholding cis-heteronormativity and the social structure of whiteness.

Emily's opening remarks also evoke a high level of sexual anxiety towards trans women. For example, comparing trans women to violent men, Emily frames these women as deviant sexual Others and simultaneously constructs herself as a vulnerable victim. Through her reliance on essentialist tropes that frame the category of "woman" as vulnerable and in need of protection, Emily perpetuates cis-heteronormativity by positioning femaleness in relation to its presumed male protector. Emily's sentiments also build on a framework of "war and struggle," dependent upon a rhetoric of "us and them" which functions as a silencing technique aimed at distraction and blame evasion what Wodak (2021, 177) refers to as "victim-perpetrator-reversal." For example, by casting blame onto trans women—whom she labels as "violent men"—Emily positions herself as the victim, thereby obscuring her own acts of violence in denying trans women's existence. We can see here how Emily's feelings of resentment are displaced onto trans women and alleviated by a commitment to victimhood. Lastly, Emily's remarks indicate a deep sense of pride for and a commitment to her TERF identity. "I wear it like a badge of honour," Emily says. Emily's sentiments here suggest that identifying as a TERF functions as something that is pleasurable for Emily. The "badge" she claims indicates how a commitment to victimhood confirms a TERF identity, enabling Emily to feel a sense of belonging with others who identify this way. A commitment to victimhood then not only offers Emily a means to displace her feelings of loss and resentment onto the trans subject—who is constructed as a deviant sexual Other—, but also it gives her a sense of belonging to a TERF intimate public by performing the requirements of suffering that constitute this identity.

Furthermore, Emily's feelings of loss, resentment, and pride are similarly represented in Figure 1, one of Binary Australia's most engaged-with images in 2022, gathering nearly three thousand Facebook reactions. The image depicts a young person in school uniform standing against a white wall, their legs bare, with the words "me trying to live my life" imprinted in white across their torso. Opposite them, another young person in school uniform wearing black tights holds a tuba over the first person's face, with the progress pride flag emblazoned across their back alongside the words "LGBTIQAA+++ propaganda." The progress pride flag was created in 2018 to include trans and gender diverse people and to represent rainbow people of colour within the rainbow community (Cathey 2021).

The image's portrayal of loss operates through both a sexual and racialized logic. Specifically, in depicting a young person who is white and, presumably, cisgender and heterosexual as being silenced by a tuba bearing the progress pride flag, these identities are framed —both symbolically and literally—as requiring protection, thereby fuelling pride in their recovery and demarcating sexual and racial difference. The caption "me trying to live my life" further positions white, cisgender, and heterosexual identities as normative within the Australian imagination, placing them on the side of desirability.

Protecting these identities from the perceived threat of sexual and racialized Others demands an investment in the future, primarily through the figure of "the child," which is framed as universal and necessary for "political futurity" (Edelman 1998, 19). Consequently, "the child" represents an investment in the future of Australia, one imagined along a "race/reproductive bind" (Weinbaum 2004, 5). Following this logic, these correctly raced and gendered children represent the reproductive future of Australia, while non-white, queer, and same-sex young people are discursively positioned as preventing life thus generating national death. This framework justifies exclusionary sentiment through a language of eradication, purportedly to protect the nation's "real" citizens, constructed as white, cisgender, and heterosexual.

Figure 1. "Just let kids be kids," Binary Australia Facebook post, September 5, 2022.

Source: Binary Australia

"This Whole Movement is Misogyny in a Dress!"

Returning now to my conversation with Emily. After introductions, Emily spends the next several minutes telling me about her time working on cruise ships. She then asserts that after same-sex marriage became legal, "transsexuals" were hired and began to take over jobs like hers. "They just want to take over! They want supreme rights! This whole movement is misogyny in a dress!", she shouts. She further argues that same-sex marriage is at fault

because it gave trans people a platform to push their agenda, stating, "I knew it would all get worse when that was legalised, not that I have a problem with gay people getting married." When asked about her specific concerns with same-sex marriage, she claims that trans women "want sexual partners… want to groom for more sexual partners… and normalise what's not normal." "When prompted about the motivation, Emily interjects: "To get children! To be able to foster them, adopt them or have sex with them." In response to my question about whether she believes identifying as a trans woman is a motivator to prey on children, she confirms that, in her opinion, "they are all sexual predators, or mentally ill," and "trans women are not genuine women."

Emily then describes her experience as an advocate in the family courts, claiming she has witnessed children being taken off their mothers and handed to "predatory men." According to her, the justice system "tricks you." As she explains, "unless you have a lawyer, you're screwed" and "if you're not a minority group who is on the top of the list to get these things either, you're screwed!" I ask Emily whether she believes the justice system in Australia is a corrupt institution. She responds affirmatively, explaining, "It's called an interconnected system and who's part of that? The education system, Centrelink [an Australian government department which delivers social and income support], the custody and foster care systems, the police, the courts, the media, they're all interconnected and they're all playing the same game." Before I can pose my next question, Emily adds: "Women already had so much trouble getting justice, and now we're just screwed!" I nod, and she continues:

> And I've heard the trans are sitting in Parliament. They've got a special spot in Parliament. And they're sitting there with fishnets and stilettos and lipstick and they're very abusive in there, but they are allowed to have that spot. No one else is. And so they make sure everything the government does suits them. Because they have the voice, the platform, the ear of the government… the voice. Once they've got more rights than you, you're gone!

Emily's remarks reveal deeply embedded feelings of resentment and loss. By constructing trans women as deviant sexual Others who prey on vulnerable and innocent children, she deploys the figure of "the child" as a symbol of Australia's futurity, which she portrays as under threat by trans women. This framing fuels and justifies exclusionary sentiment against trans women for "political futurity" (Edelman 1998, 19). However, Emily's sentiments also articulate a perceived loss of cultural status within the dominant social order of Australia. This perception manifests when she claims that trans women are taking her job, removing children off "good mothers," and occupying a "special spot in Parliament." Her statements thus articulate a desire to return to a dominant status which she believes has been taken by trans women. As she tells me, "once they've got more rights than you, you're gone!"

To alleviate feelings of loss, Emily asserts legitimacy along a "natural" cisgender hierarchy of human worth. She does this by claiming that trans women are "not genuine women," which constructs her own identity as authentic—or, read another way, natural. This "natural" hierarchy of human worth is further defended when Emily declares that "this whole movement is misogyny in a dress!" This comment suggests that trans women are deceptively appropriating femininity and femaleness to inflict misogyny onto cisgender women. Her argument frames masculinity and maleness as unstable or in decline in ways that "cast a shadow of doubt over the supposed supremacy of males and masculinity" (Serano 2017, 15). Though rejecting trans women, then, Emily's comments work to stabilise the privileging of masculinity under patriarchy. Alternatively, her remarks—intentionally or not—work to defend a male-centred gendered order. This upholds cis-heteronormativity as her "authentic" femininity and femaleness is placed alongside its masculine "ideal."

Emily's feelings of loss are further alleviated by claiming legitimacy along a "natural" racialized hierarchy of human worth. I conducted Emily's interview in May 2023, five months before Australia's Indigenous Voice referendum. The Voice referendum was "held on whether to change the Constitution to recognise the First Peoples of Australia by establishing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice" (The National Indigenous Australians Agency 2024). The Voice would have established a permanent advisory body to advise the government about the issues affecting First Nations peoples (Uluru Statement from the Heart 2024). On October 14, 2023, 60.8% Australians rejected the referendum, with all states opposing the reform (The Guardian 2024). While the referendum presented a chance for Australia to recognise its colonial past and to take measures to ensure that Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community gained a voice on issues concerning them, the "Vote No" supporters led a "simple, repetitive, and targeted campaign" featuring messaging like "the voice will divide us" and "if you don't know, vote no" (Carson et al. 2024).

In this context, Emily's remarks about trans women having "the voice" of Parliament can be read as a sideways movement of loss, wherein the anticipated loss of one's dominant status in Australia through the inclusion of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice in Parliament slides and is displaced onto the trans body. This feeling of loss is closely tied to the fear of being erased from the Australian imagination evoked, as by Emily in her statement: "once they've got more rights than you, you're gone!" Emily's comments also reveal a connection between transphobia and racism, and how transphobia serves the regulatory norm of whiteness. Not only does a metonymic slide occur in Emily's comments,

where a fear of losing one's dominant white status shifts onto a fear of trans bodies, but through this metonym, "trans bodies" and the "non-white body" stick to one another and become read as analogous. Rejecting one, therefore, becomes a rejection of both.

Emily's feelings of loss, resentment, and pride are further depicted in Figure 2. The image features Angie Jones, who has been described by Binary Australia as a mother and left-wing feminist (Smith 2023). Characterized by her opponents as "an anti-trans campaigner," Jones hosts TERF Talk Down Under, an Australian podcast and YouTube show (Wilson 2023). The image shows Jones standing on a podium at the event "Why Can't Women Talk About Sex?," held at Australia's Parliament House Lecture Hall on September 11, 2023, approximately one month before Australia's Voice referendum. The event, which aimed to address "the war on women" (Smith 2023), was attended by Binary Australia's director, Kirralie Smith, along with other prominent trans-exclusionary women and TERFs.

The image features a quote: "If everyday Australians understood what 'trans rights' really meant for women they would stand beside us." This quote encapsulates many of Emily's sentiments regarding the perceived loss of her status within Australian society. It also functions to solidify group differences through the mobilisation of fear. By stoking fear between social groups (trans people and those who support their rights versus everyone else), it creates an "us and them" mentality, thereby justifying exclusionary rhetoric on the basis of protecting Australia's "real" women. Trans people and those who support their rights are, consequently, constructed as outsiders to the Australian imagination, as foreigners who threaten to take away the rights of "we" the deserving.

While this dynamic evokes a politics of "us and them," it also reinforces a "natural" gendered and racialized hierarchy of human worth. Specifically, as Angie Jones is depicted as standing up for Australia's "real" women, her identity represents the desired identity of Australia's women: one which is cisgender, heterosexual, and white. This identity aligns with Emily's identity, thereby offering her a place of alignment where she can find consolation and belonging among fellow TERFs. Just as Emily's sentiments of loss reflect a betrayal of the social and political order of Australia, Figure 2 offers a solution to this loss: a future where Australia's "real" women are treated justly and fairly. As this future relies upon a return of "natural" gendered and racialized hierarchies of human worth, it unavoidable evokes a language of eradication. As Judith Butler reminds us (2024, 262), "the language of eradication belongs to fascism, and today it is directed not only against trans people but against all those who have been clustered under the signs of 'gender'".

Figure 2. 100% emoji. Binary Australia, 3 July 2023.

Source: Binary Australia

Conclusion

This article has examined how TERFism functions to create an intimate public that generates a sense of belonging along gendered and racialized lines. Through an analysis of two images from the Australian anti-gender Facebook group Binary Australia and the sentiments of Emily, a self-identified TERF who belongs to this group, this research reveals patterns of belonging and exclusion. The images analyzed best captured Emily's feelings and those of five other self-identified TERFs I interviewed for my PhD project on anti-gender politics in Australia, indicating a broader pattern of feelings across this demographic.

The research shows that individuals like Emily, drawn to Binary Australia and its images, join an intimate public, finding a sense of identification amongst strangers, and confirmation and consolation in living as a TERF in Australia today. This alignment

manifests through feelings of loss and resentment. These feelings are alleviated in three ways: by asserting legitimacy through a "natural" gendered and racialized hierarchy, by demanding the restoration of "sex-based rights," and by maintaining a position of victimhood. By generating pride for a perceived endangered cisgender identity—sexualised as straight and racialized as white—TERF intimate publics uphold the regulatory norms of cis-heteronormativity and whiteness.

As TERFism gains traction in the current political moment, both offline and online, it becomes important to bring to light the gendered and racialized maneuverers discussed in this article. Although TERFs comprise a network of disparate actors, many of whom would distance themselves from and oppose a form of racist nationalism rooted in cis-hetero-misogyny (or indeed fascism), this article finds that these intimate publics provide a space for this ideology through their sexual and racialized formations. This finding should concern all Australians —TERFs included—who oppose fringe and extreme movements in Australia and globally.

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The Neverending 90s in Serbia: What Came before the Phantasm of Gender

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Abstract

Right-wing actors—conservative politicians, public intellectuals, and the Serbian Orthodox Church—have been influential in contemporary Serbia since the early 1990s, playing a formative role in its anti-gender movement. This study advances our understanding of how anti-gender mobilization draws from its local context. Drawing on Judith Butler's concept of gender phantasm and Andrea Pető's concept of gender as symbolic glue, this analysis examines two documents: the 1992 "Warning" resolution and Patriarch Pavle's 1995 Christmas message. These texts enable mapping of actors and succinctly encapsulate the ideological imaginaries of the conservative elite who remain active. The ideological imaginary uniquely draws from rhetoric used to justify regional wars, serving as the phantasmic foundation of contemporary anti-gender mobilizations. Since right-wing actors operated within a contested space, the study acknowledges the unwavering feminist and pacifist left-wing opposition.

Keywords: Anti-gender Mobilizations; Abortion; "White Plague"; Phantasm of Gender; Sticky Phantasm; Serbia

Introduction

Anti-gender mobilization has intensified across the post-Yugoslav region in recent years, as documented in a growing body of academic literature (Kuhar 2017; Zaharijević 2019; Škokić 2019; Zaharijević and Lončarević 2020; Veljan and Ćehajić Čampara 2021; Cvetkovic and Velichkovska 2022; Bobičić and Stojčić 2023). Building on this research, our text aims to go further back into the past, focusing on the 1990s, a decade that was pivotal for our region. The 1990s brought the violent destruction of Yugoslavia's self-management socialism and initiated a neoliberal transformation that continues to this day. This transformation involves several consistent actors—representatives of the right-wing political establishment, the

clergy, conservative media, public intellectuals, and the capitalist elite. We aim to sketch a mental map of conservative actors in Serbia, who were the backbone of retraditionalization during the 1990s and that have now joined European right-wing movements in attacking gender and achievements in gender equality.

Through mapping, we systematically present the actors who were pioneers of the right-wing approach to gender and sexual (in)equality, and who have subsequently transformed into anti-gender actors. We use mapping as a method because it effectively demonstrates direct connections between present trends and those from three decades ago. Given the analysis's complexity, we conducted the mapping at two levels: the individual level and the organizational level. This approach allows us to document not only specific individuals who have been active for thirty years but also the generational shifts within key organizations/institutions that that have taken place in the meantime.

We identify public figures and organizations/institutions that remain active in our public sphere, whose involvement in the 1990s is either forgotten (particularly among younger generations, including ourselves as Millennials) or has been historically "whitewashed." Besides figures and organizations, we map themes such as right-wing fantasies about increasing "ethnically pure" birth rates, which right-wing actors continue to present as a novel problem in public discourse, despite their formulation being inseparable from the nationalist and criminal ideas and practices of the war period.

Furthermore, as a counterpoint to right-wing mobilization against gender, we find it essential to include progressive actors from the 1990s in our mapping. We particularly emphasize feminist organizing, which maintains a three-decade continuity of preserving gender equality and defending gender (while noting some exceptions). Thus, our work serves to recover from erasure both the actors who retain positions of power and to commemorate those who are committed to preserving and expanding gender and other forms of equality.

We complement the mapping of names and organizations/institutions with an analysis of key themes and buzzwords prevalent the 1990s because, in this archival material, we recognized the methods used by today's anti-gender movements. We therefore use contemporary theories that critique anti-gender movements—primarily the concepts of "symbolic glue" (Pető 2015) and "gender phantasm" (Butler 2024)—to analyze key right-wing messages and attacks on gender equality from the 1990s, which we identify as precursors to contemporary anti-gender movements in this region.

Although we explore continuities, which manifest not only through conservative themes and methods but also directly through the actions of the same public figures, we

recognize that contemporary anti-gender movements are a more recent phenomenon with different local and global populist forms of functioning compared to the right-wing movements of the 20th century (to which Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk dedicated a study in 2022). Hence, strictly speaking, we cannot categorize the 1990s discourse as an anti-gender discourse *per se*, but whithin it, we can find elements for comparison and the roots of what has only more explicitly emerged as an anti-gender movement in the last decade.

Furthermore, we believe that mapping actors from the 1990s can help us understand the local context more deeply and situate anti-gender movements within our experience, which is inseparable from the transformation of Yugoslav socialism into the neoliberal "Western Balkans"—a consequence of the war. Thus, we ask what came before the gender phantasm and link it to the "neverending 90s."

Methodology

While drawing on broader post-Yugoslav scholarship, our research examines primary sources from 1990s Serbia to uncover the ideological foundations of conservative opposition to reproductive rights. Rather than analyzing legal documents, as most previous studies have done, we focus on two key texts that capture the core arguments of conservative actors. This approach allows us to trace the early development of right-wing rhetoric and strategies, revealing how gender-based fears first took root in political discourse.

We began our archival research by looking at collections of press releases, messages, demands, and other materials created by women's groups in the 1990s. These texts helped us both understand the issues women's groups considered important and map out key actors. Based on this information, we collected archival documents produced by the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC), the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS)—the leading political party at that time—and other conservative actors, including academics, public intellectuals, and influential individuals such as opinion leaders. From these sources, we developed two distinct collections: one drawn from feminist organization archives, and another from conservative sources including right-wing newspapers, state media, church publications, and party documents.

This approach is important for two primary reasons. First, we wanted to take a more holistic look at the 1990s, recognizing that right-wing actors did not act in a vacuum and thus focusing only on their actions would be insufficient. Feminist and pacifist movements have continuously opposed right-wing actors, as noted by Adriana Zaharijević and Zorana

Antonijević (2023). Secondly, while there has been a continuity in the conservative attack on gender equality, there has also been steady left-wing opposition. This methodology inherently reflects activist perspectives while revealing an important historical shift: though feminist movements of the 1990s firmly opposed conservative ideology, some contemporary feminist actors have aligned with "gender-critical" positions that challenge trans rights and gender identity theory under the banner of protecting sex-based rights.

The two collections differ fundamentally in their preservation. The first corpus is housed in state libraries, ensuring official preservation. The second exists more precariously, split between formal institutions and informal archives maintained by civil society organizations. This divide creates two distinct vulnerabilities: feminist historical materials face potential loss through resource limitations and neglect, while conservative historical records, though well-resourced, often remain hidden as contemporary capitalist elites attempt to obscure their connections to the violence of the 1990s.

Our mapping reveals individual actors who have undergone various political "reincarnations" over the past three decades, yet remain steadfast enemies of gender equality and freedom. We also mapped key feminist and right-wing organizations and institutions, aiming to connect different actors and highlight the right-wing's three-decade development of networks of influence. Additionally, we examine the actions of individuals and organizations currently in power, while documenting positive examples of important feminist work by individuals and organizations.

To define the corpus, we center our analysis on two seminal documents that sparked widespread debate and continue to resonate: the 1992 "Warning" resolution from the Second Congress of the Socialist Party of Serbia and Patriarch Pavle's 1995 Christmas epistle. These texts were chosen for their ability to both map key actors and crystallize the conservative elite's ideological worldview—one that many still advance today. We argue that this ideological imaginary serves as the phantasmic foundation of contemporary anti-gender mobilizations.

Sticky Phantasm

While we were still thinking about how to explain the process that started three decades ago and continue today, Judith Butler published *Who's Afraid of Gender* (2024). This book provided us with a framework for understanding the roots of tendencies that have since evolved into anti-gender politics. While the past decade has seen a broad body of research on anti-gender movements develop (for example, Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Graff

and Korolczuk 2022), even such vast academic production cannot keep pace with the speed and strength with which anti-gender movements have reached seemingly every corner of the globe. Just when we think we have uncovered their methods or financial flows, they proliferate like the heads of the Lernaean Hydra.

Andrea Pető was one of the first authors to describe and foresee the danger of these movements. She identified the very essence of their adaptability, arguing that gender serves as a "symbolic glue" (Pető 2015, 127). As Pető explains, anti-gender movements are only seemingly focused on gender. In reality, gender is merely a "glue" making the conservative actors' attack on progressive policies and the broader framework of human rights. Consequently, in different regional or national contexts, anti-gender movements can easily adapt to the needs of conservative elites. In some countries, criticism of gender rests on "preserving tradition," while in others, gender appears as an "imported" Western means of colonization.

Butler uses psychoanalytic terminology to explain what Pető calls "glue," writing that gender "has become a phantasm with destructive powers, one way of collecting and escalating multitudes of modern panics" (Butler 2024). Although climate catastrophe, forced migration, war, poverty, racism, and anti-trans/queer discrimination pose legitimate threats, right-wing moral panic obscures these concrete dangers by collapsing them under the single, unrelated label of "gender." Butler writes: "Gender' both collects and incites those fears, keeping us from thinking more clearly about what there is to fear, and how the currently imperiled sense of the world came about in the first place" (Butler 2024). They argue that existing structures subjugate people by scaring them with the phantasm of "gender" while simultaneously externalizing their fears at the expense of vulnerable communities. Butler cites Pope Francis's 2015 speech comparing gender theory to nuclear weapons' destructiveness.

Beyond the phantasms of "gender", we derive another important idea from Butler. They propose that advocating for a return to an imagined patriarchal order necessarily entails the targeting of minorities and abolishing their basic rights, protections, and freedoms. This is why anti-gender ideology is inherently fascistic: "As panic builds, full license is given to the state to negate the lives of those who have come to represent, through the syntax of the phantasm, a threat to the nation" (Butler 2024).

The origins of the gender phantasm in the post-Yugoslav region emerged during the 1990s amid Yugoslavia's violent dissolution, a period in which feminists like Žarana Papić identified fascist elements (1999). During this period, the symbolic "glue" operated through

two distinct concepts: "white plague" (Serbian: *bela kuga*) and abortion. "White plague" is a vivid local term for depopulation. Its racist implications were twofold: "white" referred to the ethnic Serbian population, while "plague" framed demographic decline as a disease threatening national survival. Abortion was often referred to as "infanticide" (Serbian: *čedomorstvo*) rather than by its proper medical term for terminating pregnancy.

While these earlier concepts were narrower in scope than the concept of gender, examining primary texts from the 1990s reveals clear parallels with contemporary uses of gender as a phantasm. The following sections will demonstrate how these historical phantasms laid the groundwork for gender to become what we see today: a "sticky" concept that crystallizes right-wing fears and mobilizes political influence.

The Ghosts of the 1990s Still Among Us

Recent scholarship from the post-Yugoslav region has documented the emergence and consolidation of local anti-gender movements, with researchers increasingly tracing their roots to events of the 1990s. In particular, recent studies examine how wartime conservatism of the 1990s evolved through the establishment of neoliberal nation-states in the early 21st century, leading to contemporary anti-gender movements in Croatia and Serbia.

Firstly, Jelena Ćeriman and Tanja Vučković Juroš (2024) show how heteronormative family models and right-wing "protection of the family and children" have been imposed since the 1990s. They further connect these ideas to gender re-traditionalization and militant nationalism during the collapse of socialist Yugoslavia, which was built around the themes of "declining birth rates and dying out of the nation" (Ćeriman and Vučković Juroš 2024, 663). These discourses later evolved into discourse about the "protection" of future generations from "same-sex parents, sexualization in education, or unwilling mothers-to-be" (Ćeriman and Vučković Juroš 2024, 662). In a related study, Tanja Vučković Juroš and Maja Gergorić (2024) further analyze the evolution of "traditional family" ideology by examining how attitudes towards abortion changed in Croatia. They find that despite the conducive environment of retraditionalization and war violence, the Catholic Church's attempts to abolish abortion rights in the 1990s failed (Vučković Juroš and Gergorić 2024). Zaharijević and Antonijević (2023) make a similar conclusion in the Serbian context with regards to the Serbian Orthodox Church during that time period.

Our research extends these studies by focusing specifically on 1990s materials to map both right-wing and progressive actors (individuals and organizations) and their key themes. First, we trace which of these actors remain active and have now become part of the anti-

gender movement. Second, we show that while the central themes from the 1990s persist, they have been reframed to align with contemporary European and global anti-gender discourse.

The concept of "sticky phantasm" helps explain the thematic and dialogical continuity from the region's formative period, when power shifted to nationalist, neoliberal elites who have consistently opposed gender equality. Right-wing actors have weaponized feminism and gender equality as threats to distract from institutional destruction, wartime and post-war structural violence, and resource depletion. These actors have maintained their influence for three decades, adapting their forms while preserving their essential character.

Anti-Gender Actors: Then and Now

When mapping right-wing/conservative actors from 1990s Serbia, we draw on typologies established in previous literature. While there are several ways to categorize these actors, we focus on the division proposed by Damjan Denkovski, Nina Bernarding, and Kristina Lunz, who categorize actors chronologically into three groups: old (for example, the Catholic Church), new (for example, parental associations), and allies (for example, public intellectuals and politicians). This typology is not rigid, as boundaries between different actors overlap, particularly with political parties. Moreover, allies can emerge from both older and newer groups. Nevertheless, this framework effectively traces the historical development of anti-gender movements over the previous three decades. While certain actors pioneered these ideas and remain central figures, others—including citizens, parents, and the general public—were gradually drawn into this circle of influence. Meanwhile, the original actors have not remained static, instead adapting their tactics throughout three decades of activity.

Conservative forces in anti-gender movements can be conceptualized through a chess metaphor (Edström et al. 2023), with distinct roles represented by different pieces: populist authoritarian leaders as kings and queens; religious fundamentalists as bishops; ethno-nationalists, neo-fascists, and racists as knights; aristocratic and economic elites as rooks; and men's rights groups and illiberal civil society organizations as pawns. In opposition, progressive actors occupy parallel positions: political champions of socio-economic and democratic values serve as kings and queens; feminist educators, researchers, and journalists as bishops; anti-fascist, humanitarian, and minority rights movements as knights; feminist funders and progressive philanthropists as rooks; and feminist and progressive organizations as pawns.

A comprehensive analysis of gender relations requires examining both conservative and progressive actors, as both have achieved significant victories and suffered losses over three decades, adapting their approaches to regional and global contexts. This chess metaphor not only provides effective symbolism but also emphasizes different social structures, particularly the connections between state power and capitalist, religious, and nationalist forces in anti-gender movements. We demonstrate this convergence of "axis forces" in Serbia during the collapse of Yugoslav self-management.

In sum, drawing on feminist archives and conservative publications, we employ dual analytical frameworks: a chronological typology of actors (old, new, and allies) and a chess metaphor that maps the power dynamics between conservative and progressive forces. Furthermore, like the interdependencies of chess pieces, we expose the complex network of influence and collaboration among mutually supporting conservative actors.

The "Warning": Resolution on Population Renewal

The Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), then led by Slobodan Milošević, passed a resolution focusing on "population renewal" titled "Warning" (Serbian: *Upozorenje*) at its second congress, which took place on October 23rd and 24th of 1992. The SPS maintained its political influence in Serbia even after Milošević's fall and extradition to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, and continues to hold power today, with its current president Ivica Dačić serving as deputy prime minister and minister of internal affairs.

The resolution addresses what it terms "uneven and unbalanced" demographic development across regional, ethnic, and social lines. It notes that among the country's 19 ethnic communities, 16 had experienced population decline since before the industrial revolution. In contrast, the document claims that three ethnic minorities—Albanians, Muslims, and Roma—show high birth rates and "explosive" population growth. However, it characterizes this growth as "irrational and inhumane," citing these communities' "poor material and cultural foundations" and their residence in areas with inadequate natural and "work-produced" resources (Socialist Party of Serbia 1992, 4-6). The document expresses alarm that these three ethnic minorities accounted for 40 per cent of overall "population renewal" at the time, projecting an increase to 50 per cent within a decade. Additionally, it notes that women "bear the greatest burden" of population renewal (Socialist Party of Serbia 1992, 5).

The resolution uses accessible language intended for wide circulation, featuring slogans like "without birth, there is no kin; without kin, there is no nation!" (Socialist Party

of Serbia 1992, 5). It explicitly frames the "explosive" birth rates of Albanian, Muslim, and Roma populations as a threat to other ethnic groups' rights.

This document can be understood through Butler's concept of phantasmic clustering. The resolution's racist problematization of minority birth rates emerged alongside ongoing war crimes in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina—a rhetorical strategy that preceded and helped justify ethnic cleansing and genocide.

The resolution was signed by leaders from the SPS party, but also representatives of academic institutions, medical bodies, government agencies, and research institutes. The signatories included Miloš Macura, Chairman of the Population Analysis Committee of the Serbian Academy of Science and Arts; Bogoljub Stojanović, President of the SPS Family Council; Miroljub Rančić, Head of the Center for Demographic Research; Miloš Baničević, Director of the Institute for Mother and Child Health Care; Milovan Živković, Director of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia; Milomir Bešević, President of the Serbian Medical Society; Dragomir Mladenović, President of the Yugoslav Family Planning Association; and Luka Todorović, Director of the Institute for Social Policy.

This resolution was one of many spanning several decades that addressed decreasing birth rates and depopulation. In 2002, Luka Todorović published a comprehensive book on family planning that compiled these resolutions. The book, which was reviewed by fellow Warning signatory Miloš Baničević, argued that while civil societies recognize families as central to prosperity, some scientists blame modern industrial society's features—particularly women's emancipation and workplace participation—for "creating the rising economic crisis, characterized, among other things, by pathological phenomena in the family" (Todorović 2002, 5).

As Wendy Bracewell (1996) writes, right-wing actors placed the blame for the "white plague" on both women and "emasculated" men. Among them Maja Gojković, then vice-president of the Serbian Radical Party and current president of the Vojvodina government. Gojković said that Serbian men had "allowed themselves to be neutered", stating:

> Women in general succeeded in preserving their femininity [under communism], but a significant part of the male population suffered serious injuries in the region of the backbone and the heart. This is one of the causes of the "white plague." In order to decide to create a new life, a woman needs inspiration. You can't ask a woman to bear children to men who have capitulated in advance to every threat. In order to raise natality we must awaken and develop the spirit of masculine honor and heroism. We must help men to be that which nature and tradition intend them to be. (Duga, 16 August 1992, p. 52 as cited in Bracewell 1996, 27)

Other high-ranking Serbian politicians expressed similar views in the early 1990s. At a 1990 party meeting in Novi Pazar, Kosta Bulatović, founder of the right-wing Kosovo Serb political organization Srpski pokret otpora, called on Serbian women to "propagate and renew the Serbian nation" (as cited in Ćetković, Jarić and Stojanović 1993, 21). Bulatović remained politically active until his death in 2023.

Using Denkovski, Bernarding and Lunz's chronological framework reveals how different allies collaborated. Traditional actors—SPS politicians like Gojković and Bulatović—found support from conservative intellectuals (academics and institute researchers) and establishment professionals (doctors and bureaucrats). This interweaving of actors exemplifies what Jerker Edström and colleagues (2023) term "axis-forces," demonstrating how they collectively advanced the resolution's fascist agenda.

Feminist organizations actively opposed conservative family planning policies in Serbia that preceded and later culminated in the 1992 Warning resolution. In June 1990, prominent groups, including the Belgrade Women's Lobby (Serbian: *Beogradski ženski lobi*) and the Association for the Yugoslav Democratic Initiative (UJDI) issued a formal statement condemning the discriminatory nature of proposed conservative family planning policies under consideration at that time. These policies, like the Warning resolution, were described by these groups as racist in nature. They also sought to curtail abortion rights and discriminated against parents who do not have multiple children. The UJDI, founded by left-leaning intellectuals Predrag Matvejević, Bogdan Bogdanović, Vesna Pešić, and Koča Popović, played a key role in organizing this resistance (Ćetković et al.1995, 27). In 1990, the Belgrade Women's Lobby and youth activists gathered 2,000 signatures petitioning against these conservative measures.

In November 1992, shortly after the adoption of the Warning resolution, a panel was organized at the Belgrade Youth Center to discuss discriminatory population policies and critique it. The panel featured prominent feminists Anđelka Milić, Žarana Papić, and Nedeljka (Neda) Božinović. In the 1990s, Božinović was a key member of Women in Black (Serbian: *Žene u crnom*, ŽUC), a feminist anti-militarist group that has consistently fought against restrictions on women's reproductive rights and opposed right-wing attacks on gender equality. Over three decades, ŽUC has led opposition to SPC conservatism and ethno-nationalistic war crime legacies, as evidence in Ildiko Erdei and Lidija Radulović's 2020 study on reproductive and worker's rights of women in Serbia.

However, ŽUC's progressive stance has become complicated by some members' self-identification as gender-critical feminists. In 2024, a ŽUC member published *Liberation*

from Gender (Serbian: *Oslobođenje od roda*), an anthology of translated texts. Among its editors is Nina Radulović, who belongs to Women's Solidarity (Serbian: *Ženska solidarnost*), an openly trans-exclusionary internet collective.

Patriarch Pavle's 1995 Christmas Message

In his 1995 Christmas message, Serbian Orthodox Church Patriarch Pavle focused heavily on the "white plague," warning that Serbs would become a minority in their own country within two decades—a claim he asserted was "mathematically calculated" (Pavle, srpski patrijarh 1995). According to Pavle, such minority status would strip Serbs of their ability to determine their future. Though he acknowledged mothers grieving sons lost to wars, Pavle identified abortion—which he exclusively termed "infanticide"—as the sole cause of Serbian depopulation. Addressing the mothers' grief, he stated:

> Many mothers, who did not want to have more than one child, today tear out their hair and weep bitterly over the onlyborns they have lost in these war conflicts, often cursing God and people, but at the same time forgetting to blame themselves for not giving birth to more children that could bring solace to them now. (Pavle, srpski patrijarh 1995)

He accused mothers of pursuing pleasure while neglecting childrearing, lamenting that schools "once filled with children's joyful voices" were closing. As he put it, "mothers conceive, because such is done with enjoyment and satisfaction, but they do not want to give birth and raise children, because that is tiring and supposedly endangers their comfort" (Pavle, srpski patrijarh 1995).

Pavle describes abortion as a "howling sin before God" and makes surprising and seemingly out of place claims about science: "At conception, in the embryo, invisible to the human eye, there is a complete future personality: hair and eye color, figure, stature, character, and all other features" (Pavle, srpski patrijarh 1995). Science has proven that life begins at conception, not birth, Pavle says. He concludes by saying that it is a sin to deny "your child to see the light of day" and "to be at least kissed by the sun." He goes on to claim:

> When they appear before the all-fair judge, those mothers who did not allow their children to be born, will meet those children up there and they will ask them sadly: why did you kill us, why didn't you give birth to us?" (Pavle, srpski patrijarh 1995)

The Belgrade Women's Lobby, in a statement signed by feminist activists Nadežda Ćetković, Jelka Imširović, and Zorica Mršević, staunchly opposed Pavle's message. They argued that it advocated denying women's fundamental rights: the ability to make their own childbirth decisions and "to be masters of their bodies" (Ćetković et al., 1995, 27). The group

rejected Pavle's equation of abortion with infanticide. They contended that the so-called "white plague" stemmed not from abortions but from a society failing to provide humane living conditions for its citizens. Furthermore, they dismissed Pavle's "math" as merely a facade for "feeding nationalist intolerance and hate." They further elaborate:

> The message is that there will be more Albanians than Serbs. It does not matter who there will be more of. What is important is that we all live amicably and in harmony. Trust and friendship cannot be built on these types of jabs. (Ćetković, Imsirović and Mršević 1995, 45-46).

The Belgrade Women's Lobby criticized Pavle's use of "reproof and reprimand" toward women they characterized as "responsible" (Ćetković, Imširović and Mršević, 1995, 45)—women who wished to have only the children they could provide with a safe and well-rounded future. They challenged the assumption that women seek abortions because they reject motherhood or childbirth. Instead, they identified several root causes: inadequate sexual education, limited access to contraception, poverty, political instability, and unemployment. The group emphasized that women cannot be reduced solely to their reproductive capacities (Ćetković, Imširović and Mršević, 1995, 45). Notable feminist activists who joined in opposing abortion restrictions included Nadežda Ćetković, Lepa Mlađenović, Ljiljana Vuletić, and Svenka Savić.

The Serbian Orthodox Church fired back against the Belgrade Women's Lobby in the January/February issue of its Herald (Serbian: *Glasnik*). An unsigned editorial in the Herald states that Pavle and the Serbian Orthodox Church consider the freedom to choose what to do with one's own body an "inalienable feature" of "man" (Serbian: *čoveka*) while arguing that freedom without spiritual responsibility constitutes a misuse of divine intention and is thus "unworthy of God" (Srpska pravoslavna crkva 1995a, 19). The piece characterizes abortion as a moral transgression, portraying women who terminate pregnancies as misusing their divinely granted freedom to the detriment of both themselves and society. The piece addresses those "who believe man is just flesh, and not an immortal soul," suggesting that they pursue pleasure while neglecting duty and "the greatness of serving one's neighbors and the sacrifice that springs from the feeling of love for God and one's neighbor" (Srpska pravoslavna crkva 1995a, 19). The text frames abortion, which it explicitly equates with infanticide, as stemming from irresponsibility, adding that:

> The Belgrade Women's Lobby may not care that the Serbs are disappearing, but Serbs cannot be indifferent. The Serbian Orthodox Church cannot be indifferent either and warns them of the danger in a motherly way. (Srpska pravoslavna crkva 1995a, 20).

In Serbian society, the patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church has almost a mythical status, granting him extraordinary influence in shaping phantasms. Pavle's statement demonstrates how he conflated distinct societal concerns, transmuting fears about war into anxieties about the "white plague" and equating wartime loss of children with voluntary termination of pregnancy. It is precisely this mechanism that is deployed in anti-gender mobilizations today.

Examining Patriarch Pavle's activities surrounding the 1995 Christmas message reveals the process of phantasmic clustering—how the "white plague" narrative was constructed and disseminated through specific networks of religious and political power. Three months after publishing his message, Pavle and the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church convened a special session in Bjeljina with Milan Martić, then-president of the Republic of Serbian Krajina, and Radovan Karadžić, then-president of Republika Srpska (both later convicted of war crimes by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia). The session's focus was the "spiritual and biological survival" of the Serbian people (Srpska pravoslavna crkva 1995b, 42).

The campaign against abortion extended beyond Pavle within church leadership. In 1993, Vasilije Kačavenda, head of the Eparchy of Zvornik and Tuzla, characterized abortion as a "prenatal war more brutal than real war" and urged the Republika Srpska government to implement an abortion ban (Ćetković, Jarić and Stojanović 1993, 137). Though Kačavenda later resigned amid a pedophilia scandal, he retains a degree of public legitimacy. Bishop Jovan of Šumadija recently awarded him the Order of the New Martyrs of Kragujevac following their joint memorial service for students killed by Nazis in Kragujevac in 1941 (Miljković 2024). Importantly, his influence persists through a network of supporters in positions of power.

This historical thread connects to contemporary politics through figures like Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski, the current Minister of Family Welfare and Demography and co-founder of the far-right Oathkeepers party. She maintains ties with Dejan Nestorović, a public defender and self-proclaimed relative of Kačavenda (M.Ž. 2024). While Đurđević Stamenkovski has only recently adopted explicit "white plague" terminology, she promotes similar ideological frameworks. As a case in point, she dismissed in a 2024 television interview reports of gynecological violence and poor maternity ward conditions as "part of the global agenda against childbirth in Serbia." She claimed that "for twenty years there has been a campaign against the birth of children in Serbia, and it is part of the global agenda," adding that "that is why obstetric violence, bad conditions in maternity wards, and bad food

are emphasized, and that is why they are persistently insisted on" (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2024).

Pavle's focus on abortion in his 1995 Christmas message coincided with broader political developments. Although abortion had been legalized in 1952 and enshrined in the 1974 Constitution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, it became a contentious public issue in the mid-1990s when legislation was proposed to restrict access. The Serbian Radical Party (*Srpska radikalna stranka*, SRS)—led then and now by convicted war criminal Vojislav Šešelj—championed these restrictions. Among the law's prominent supporters was SRS parliamentarian Jorgovanka Tabaković (Ćetković, Mršević, Stojanović and Vuletić 1995, 40). Tabaković later became governor of the National Bank of Serbia when her current party, the Serbian Progressive Party (*Srpska napredna stranka*, SNS), assumed power in 2012. She has served as SNS deputy president since then.

An analysis of Pavle's Christmas message through the chronological framework reveals complex actor networks. The "old actors" encompass both religious authorities (Pavle and the Holy Synod) and nationalist political-military leaders who were actively committing war crimes in the 1990s. Šešelj, Tabaković, and Košela represent a hybrid category—while fitting the "old actors" classification, their continued influence and activity positions them simultaneously as "old-new actors." This overlap illustrates how artificial the boundaries between actor categories can be, particularly in the political sphere. Applying the chess analogy provides additional analytical clarity. Politicians function as kings and queens on this ideological chessboard, while Pavle and the synod operate as bishops, leveraging their diagonal movements across institutional boundaries to influence both religious and political spheres.

As we mentioned above, right-wing actors did not act in a vacuum and feminist activists spoke out against the Christmas message and efforts to restrict abortion access. It is important to note that their response found theoretical reinforcement in academic circles, most notably through Žarana Papić's influential analysis. Writing in 1998, Žarana Papić identified the message as the "most obvious example" of both "silent patriarchy" and what she characterized as the "Serb national program" (Papić 2006, 129). Addressing Pavle's characterization of abortion as an epidemic, Papić argued:

> This 'disease', as the patriarch chose to see it, can only be cured in one way, which is by making Serbian women want to bear children, the patriarch advised. And this, he advised, could be achieved if they were told that not doing so constituted a threefold sin: toward themselves, toward the Serbian nation, and, of course, toward God himself. (Papić 2006, 129-130).

In another work, Papić (1999) writes about the church's role in what she called the "fascisation of social life" through fictionalization and displacement of trauma (Papić 1999). This analysis parallels Butler's work and reveals the mechanism deployed in Pavle's ruthless treatment of mothers who had lost children in the wars and the equation of abortion to murder. Fears are appropriated and weaponized for the purpose of strengthening the church's and government's grip on power.

This theoretical work forms an important part of Papić's broader scholarly legacy, which ended with her untimely death in 2002. Her intellectual contributions are preserved at the Center for Women's Studies in Belgrade, where an archive houses her extensive collection of 2,000 books along with other scholarly materials.

Discussion

The global anti-gender movement today centers primarily on opposition to reproductive rights and resistance to women's and LGBTIQ+ rights. In Serbia, these opposing forces converge around the mythologized concept of the "traditional family" (Bobičić and Stojčić 2023). This contemporary narrative has deep roots in the rhetoric of the 1990s war and post-war period, where the supposed defense of "traditional family values" manifested through anti-abortion campaigns and moral panic about demographic decline, termed the "white plague."

Our analysis reveals the underlying mechanics of today's "traditional family" mythology. Right-wing actors exploit legitimate societal concerns about war, violence, poverty, and corruption by redirecting blame toward reproductive rights. They cast women as failing their maternal duty to produce new Serbs, holding them responsible for the nation's supposed demographic crisis—a narrative particularly evident in Pavle's epistle. The right deploys creates such phantasms as "infanticide" to describe abortion and "white plague" to frame depopulation concerns.

Drawing on Butler's analysis of fascistic tendencies that advocate returning to an idealized patriarchal past by targeting minorities, we see similar patterns in the Warning. It portrays ethnic minorities as culturally inferior while simultaneously burdening women with the role of national preservation through reproduction. This reveals how nationalist and war ideologies in Serbia became inextricably linked with attacks on women's autonomy.

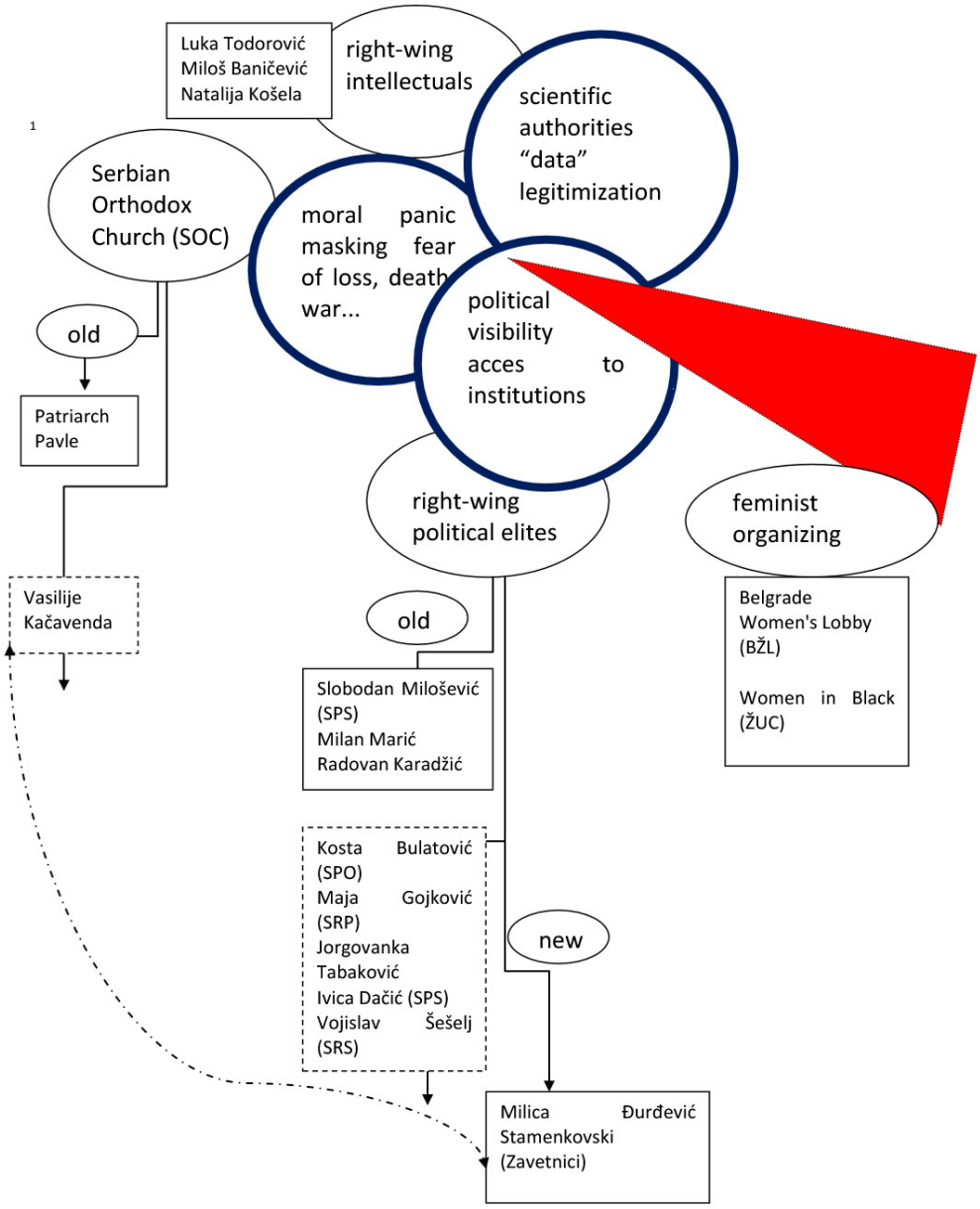
Examining the 1990s serves two crucial purposes: it illuminates the origins of current ideological frameworks and exposes how capitalist elites networked while attempting to

evade responsibility for both wartime violence and the subsequent deterioration of social institutions.

Figure 1 maps key actors identified in our analysis of the Warning resolution and Patriarch Pavle's 1995 Christmas Message, organizing them into three distinct groups. The visualization also illustrates the strategies these groups employed to construct and sustain an enduring ideological phantasm over three decades. This "stickiness" demonstrates how right-wing ideas cohere and reinforce each other, creating an ideological specter that persists in contemporary discourse. While our analysis discusses diverse individual feminist activists, the map highlights feminist resistance through a red triangle piercing the right-wing phantasm, specifically featuring two key feminist organizations as representative examples.

The network analysis illustrated in Figure 1 reveals that despite the right's rhetorical shift from war-centric to neoliberal discourse, key continuities persist through the sustained activity of central organizations and specific individuals. The Serbian Orthodox Church and several political figures maintain their influential positions across this transition. Moreover, the fundamental mechanisms of ideological production remain consistent, enabling the repackaging of historical narratives under contemporary frameworks—particularly evident in how "traditional family" values are conceptualized and deployed. The same strategic approaches used in the 1990s to generate moral panic and legitimize political positions through pseudo-scientific authority continue to shape current anti-gender and nationalist discourse.

Figure 1: Serbian Right-Wing Networks and Feminist Resistance (1995-Present)



[1] This arrow "open" indicates that the actor is still active and influential.

Source: Authors

Conclusion

In regions characterized by perpetual "transition"—a euphemism for war-torn and plundered societies still ruled by irreplaceable elites—the global anti-gender movement has found a suitable new home and fertile ground. In this text, we contribute to the growing body of work on anti-gender policies in Serbia. We show how the conservative turn of the 1990s, coinciding with the militarized collapse of socialist Yugoslavia, laid the groundwork for contemporary anti-gender mobilization in the region. We supplement existing

scholarship by analyzing key texts that function as manifests to capture the core conservative arguments against reproductive rights and freedoms. We also examine feminist counter-arguments drawn from both institutional and activist archives.

To that end, we mapped right-wing actors: individuals, organizations, and institutions on the one side, and the progressive actors who opposed them on the other. We connected the mapping to previous research through categorization. Our analysis revealed a network of right-wing actors who have maintained presence across in various institutions of the system for three decades.

Meanwhile, feminist and LGBTIQ+ movements have grown stronger over these three decades, mounting resistance to right-wing policy implementation while holding these actors accountable for their past actions and defending hard-won rights. This text thus contributes to feminist resistance against historical erasure, contextualizing contemporary anti-gender mobilization within its historical lineage while deconstructing conservative phantasms of fear.

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