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# Varieties of antigenderism: the politicization of gender issues across three European populist radical right parties

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**ABSTRACT**

This research contributes to the study of populist radical right parties' (PRRPs) role in gendered democratic backsliding by analyzing their articulation and symbolic representation of gender issues. We compare the politicization of gender issues across three European PRRPs, examining how context-specific gendered opportunity structures – the level of contestation of gender issues in their country, the resonance of antigenderism among their electorate, and their issue repertoire and historical trajectory – shape the extent and ways in which the German AfD, the Italian Lega and the Sweden Democrats politicize gender issues. We conduct a quantitative content analysis of PRRPs' framing of gender issues and construct topic networks based on the parties' Facebook and Twitter posts during the European Parliament election campaign 2019. We analyze the *salience of gender issues*, the *broader topical context* in which they are embedded, the *specific gender issues* addressed, and the *parties' positions* on these issues. Our results show how context-specific gendered opportunities shape PRRPs' national gender discourses: A low level of contestation, evidenced by a high public recognition and legal protection of gender and sexual equality, seems to foster a femonationalist framing, while antigenderist discourse is less pronounced in such a context. Instead, a higher level of contestation, expressed in a lower public recognition and legal protection of gender and sexual equality, seems to foster antigenderist discourse. A transnational femonationalist framing, shared by all analyzed parties, relates to a common nativist ideological core.

## 1. Introduction

A recent research strand stresses firmly that feminist and sexual politics have come under threat across Europe (Verloo & Paternotte, 2018). In the context of a general gendered

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democratic backsliding – defined as 'states going back on previous commitments to gender equality norms as defined in their respective political contexts' (Krizsán & Roggeband, 2018b, p. 92) – explorations of national contexts allowed to uncover the common core components of anti-gender politics across contexts: opposition to gay and lesbian rights, reproductive rights, gender deconstructivism, and sex and gender education in schools (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018).

Against this background, increasing attention is paid to Populist Radical-Right Parties (PRRPs), which are transversally identified among the driving forces of anti-gender campaigns and contestations of gender and sexual equality across Europe (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018). Latest accounts on anti-gender politics in the so-called 'populist moment' stress the 'opportunistic synergy' (Graff & Korolczuk, 2021, p. 24) between longer-term opponents of gender and sexual equality, and newer PRRPs which 'embrace anti-gender rhetoric to enhance their popular appeal as defenders of the common people against the depraved elites' (ibid., p.7).

Often starting from the study of party programs and policy provisions (Donà, 2021; Towns et al., 2014), extant research underlines how PRRPs share a 'rejection of post-essentialist/post-naturalist social dynamics and policies' (Villa, 2017, p. 99) while, at the same time, adopting specific positions concerning gender politics that are consistent with the laws and dominant opinions in their countries, and influenced by party genealogy and ideological orientation (Akkerman, 2015; De Lange & Mügge, 2015).

However, less attention has gone towards examining how PRRPs construct and display their antigenderism outside the institutional sphere and in the everyday space – first and foremost in their daily use of social media, which have rapidly become the main tool for populist political actors to reach out to the public, mobilize support and collect consensus (Bracciale & Martella, 2017). As they produce and circulate content on social media, PRRPs contribute to diffuse symbolic representations of gender issues as part of their public discourse – i.e., their 'public communication about topics and actors related to either some particular policy domain or to the broader interests and values that are engaged' (Ferree et al., 2002, p. 9). Thus, a relevant facet of PRRPs' antigenderism can be grasped by looking at their 'discursive construction of women's and gender equality issues' (Krizsán & Roggeband, 2018 p. 91) within online spaces.

This article aims to explore how PRRPs' antigenderism is articulated in their digital political communication activities. More specifically, we adopt a comparative perspective to scrutinize how context-specific factors shape the extent and ways in which PRRPs politicize gender issues and what overarching features unite these parties in their common endeavor to oppose gender and sexual equality. Our claim is twofold: On the one hand, as PRRPs share issue agendas and ideological positions (Poier et al., 2017), they can be expected to overlap at the core of their strategic politicization and framing of gender issues. On the other, we expect that specific articulations of antigenderism emerge within and, at the same time, contribute to shaping specific gendered opportunity structures (GOS) – 'a subset of political opportunity structures that distinctively capture the ways in which states, institutions, and discourses engage with gender equality issues, in either supportive or oppositional ways' (Krizsán & Roggeband, 2018a, p. 72).

To explore the levels, commonalities, and specificities in the politicization of gender issues, we compare three European PRRPs – Germany's Alternative for Germany (AfD), Italy's Lega, and the Sweden Democrats (SD) – and analyze their digital

articulations of antigenderism along what we argue are three key dimensions of GOS: the level of contestation of gender issues in their country, the resonance of antigenderism among their electorate, and their issue repertoire and historical trajectory.

Combining quantitative content analysis and network analysis, we analyze the extent to and the modes in which the three parties crafted their digital political communication on Facebook and Twitter around the 2019 European Parliament (EP) elections to politicize gender issues. We first address the role of gender issues in PRRPs' agendas and discuss the GOS dimensions that are central to their strategic politicization. We next outline the study design, data, and methodology, and present the findings on the salience, topical contexts, and specific framings of gender issues by the selected PRRPs. We conclude by commenting on patterns that emerge from our results and elaborate on their commonalities and specificities.

## 2. PRRPs between consistency with their core ideology and adaptation to GOS

### 2.1. PRRPs' affinity to anti-gender-campaigns

When referring to PRRPs, we refer to 'a populist form of the radical right' whose core ideology is 'a combination of nativism, authoritarianism, and populism' (Mudde, 2007, p. 26). As hybrid political entities, PRRPs are rooted in populism and its vision of society as '*ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite"*' (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). Hence, gender issues are not necessarily at the core of PRRPs' concerns but rather come in when their populist 'thin-centered ideology' (Mudde, 2004, p. 544) interlocks with elements that are typical of the radical right.

The relationship between the populist radical right and anti-gender campaigns has been described as an 'opportunistic synergy' (Graff & Korolczuk, 2021, p. 24): Anti-gender discourses are often presented in the style of populist discourses, relying heavily on common sense arguing as opposed to corrupt and elitist knowledge, drawing on conspiracy theories and victim-perpetrator reversals, and scapegoating elites or racialized others for societal grievances (Graff & Korolczuk, 2021). They bear similar content, displaying Euroscepticism and globalization scepticism, and nurturing national and racial anxieties (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018). Beyond this discursive affinity in content and rhetoric, anti-gender campaigns enable discursive coalition-building across ideological camps (Reinhardt, 2022), and populist rhetoric allows mainstreaming to a wider audience (Graff & Korolczuk, 2021). Moreover, authoritarian principles within the populist radical right are connectible to what is defended as an allegedly natural order in anti-gender campaigns. Binary, patriarchal gender regimes as well as the complementary gender roles of women as caregivers and men as breadwinners in an allegedly natural, patriarchal family are indeed at the core of the populist radical right's defense of the purity of the national community (Donà, 2021).

Nonetheless, European PRRPs are not homogeneous in handling gender issues. Rather, they can be placed on a continuum (Abi-Hassan, 2017, p. 6), as they display a wide variety in framing a commonly shared antigenderism. Above and beyond this variety, Mudde (2007) notices how gender issues typically play a secondary role in PRRPs' nativist struggle, in which they are merely instrumentalized. This is particularly evident

in Femonationalism, which employs ethnicized sexism that depicts 'sexism and patriarchy as the exclusive domains of the (non-western and Muslim) other' (Farris, 2017, p. 74), which must be excluded for the protection of native women. Likewise, a related homonationalist argumentation extends forms of national heteronormativity with national homonormativity, allowing the 'segregation and disqualification of racial and sexual others from the national imaginary' (Puar, 2021, p. 2). A nativist instrumentalization of gender issues is evidenced in recent empirical comparative research, which shows that PRRPs embrace gender equality in the context of immigration but conservative positions in the context of family issues (Akkerman, 2015).

While the specific combination of gender issues and immigration seems to depend on both context-specific events and a party's overall gender position (De Lange & Mügge, 2015), gender is transversally employed in all these cases to reinforce PRRPs' endeavor to present themselves as the defendants of the native people. Previous research has shown that, transnationally, PRRPs instrumentalize gender equality and reposition themselves according to their national context, their shared othering strategy, and their populist 'us-versus-them' narrative (Donà, 2021).

## 2.2. Gendered opportunity structures – Contexts and dimensions

GOS are decisive in politicizing gender issues (Krizsán & Roggeband, 2018a). For example, McCammon et al. (2001) showed that in addition to the classical political opportunity structure – structures of the political environment that benefit or constrain the formation of social movements (Meyer & Minkoff, 2004) – *gendered opportunities* decisively contributed to women's entrance into traditionally male domains such as the electoral arena.

While the concept of GOS is usually employed for assessing specific strategies and outcomes generated by social movements, we think its application can be expanded to study how PRRPs engage with gender issues. The concept of GOS indeed allows adding to existing research on PRRPs 'the specific macro-level intersectional context' (Ferree, 2021, p. 2) in which they are embedded, and which poses both constraints and opportunities to their handling of gender issues. In fact, previous studies show the importance of public opinion and legal standing favorable to gender and sexual equality in the context of women's and LGBTQI movements (Holzhacker, 2012; Soule & Olzak, 2004). Simultaneously, PRRPs are not entirely flexible in adapting to these factors and need to behave consistently with their electorate's expectations and their party agenda.

Consequently, as competitors in the electoral system and, at the same time, as 'innovators' concerning their (elitist) adversaries, PRRPs need to articulate their antigenderism balancing their core tenets with consideration of three main dimensions: the level of contestation of gender issues in their country, the resonance of antigenderism among their electorate, and their specific issue repertoire and trajectory.

First, PRRPs 'do not position themselves as anti-liberal outsiders' but instead frame their conservative views as 'compatible with the prevailing liberal laws and opinions in their countries' and 'avoid negative campaigns against liberal policies' (Akkerman, 2015, p. 57).

The extent to which gender and sexual equality are contested in a country thus provides a first benchmark to orient their strategic politicization of gender issues. In a

progressive context with a low contestation of gender issues, we assume that PRRPs will not openly contest progressive views, but rather propagate traditional views in a way connectible to their liberal contexts. Conversely, where levels of contestation are high, PRRPs can voice their traditional views more openly while strategically adjusting their politicization to existing contestations.

Second, as PRRPs are invested in the idea that politics should express the 'volonté générale' (Mudde, 2007, p. 23) of the people, the politicization of gender issues should be crafted in a way that resonates with a party's electorate and its alleged political agenda. Hence, PRRPs might employ anti-gender rhetoric 'to increase their moral legitimacy in the eyes of traditionalist voters', who might have different preferences than the general electorate and provide distinct incentives to politicize gender issues (Graff & Korolczuk, 2021, p. 24).

Third, and relatedly, a party's genealogy, ideology, and issue agenda affect how gender issues are politicized – as evident in the cleavages that exist between neoliberal and nationalist PRRPs (De Lange & Mügge, 2015). PRRPs differ in either espousing traditional views on gender issues, seeing women as caregivers outside of the labor market, or a modern-traditional position, in which women are primarily caregivers but can also work. Positioning on other issues, such as abortion, feminism, or gender quotas, also varies greatly (Mudde, 2007). Neoliberal PRRPs tend to have modern views on classical gender issues, while nationalist PPRPs have more traditional views (De Lange & Mügge, 2015). Gendered views on immigration and Islam are not shaped by this cleavage but rather by establishing consistency with views held on classical gender issues (ibid.).

Against this background, we assume that PRRPs' politicization of gender issues operates in a tension between the need to adjust their positions to dominant laws and opinions on the one hand while catering to their electorates' stand and being consistent with party issues, agendas and genealogy, on the other.

To analyze how PRRPs strategically politicize gender in this tension, we conceptually distinguish the following interrelated dimensions of politicization: First, we consider (a) the *salience of gender issues*. We are interested in the extent to which PRRPs in different countries address gender issues, and we measure the salience of gender issues relative to total party communication as a basic indicator of politicization. Second, we consider the (b) *broader topical context* in which PRRPs embed gender issues, (c) the *specific gender issues* addressed, and (d) *the parties' positions* on these issues. These specific issues and positions and their embedding into broader topical contexts capture parties' framing of gender issues when understanding frames as the central organizing ideas at the core of broader 'interpretive packages that give meaning to an issue' (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989, p. 3).

## 3. Case selection

This study compares three diverse cases that have been selected as they represent a 'range of variation' among the 'dimension(s) of interest' (Gerring, 2008, p. 9), that is, from contexts that are more open to and supportive of gender and sexual equality to more closed and opposed to gender and sexual equality. This case selection allows analyzing how PRRPs' antigenderism expresses online and in a tension between a common ideological core and GOS-related specificities.

Gender Equality as a fundamental right is well-recognized among the Swedish population (Table 1). The Swedish constitution entails protection from discrimination by sexual orientation or gender identity, and legislation grants marriage equality. However, a third of the predominantly male (70%) and non-religious (63%) SD voters oppose same-sex couples' right to adoption.

The positive stance toward gender and sexual equality in Sweden's general population suggests that the SD can expect little benefit from contesting gender equality. The SD focuses its rhetoric on populist anti-elitism and monocultural nationalism, which emphasizes cohesion among a culturally defined in-group of Swedes against multicultural positions (Hellström & Nilsson, 2010, p. 63; Hellström et al., 2012, p. 190). Consistently, the SD exclusively thematizes sexual violence in cases with immigrant perpetrators (Towns et al., 2014). In the migration context, gender equality is presented by the SD as a Swedish national value but is criticized and rejected in all other policy domains (Towns et al., 2014).

The recognition of gender equality is less pronounced in Germany, with only 77% of the population considering it a fundamental right (Table 1). Marriage equality is granted, but only some federal states provide constitutional protection from discrimination by gender identity and sexual orientation. The AfD's predominantly male (67%) and partially religious (44%) electorate is divided in their stand towards same-sex couples' adoption rights with 45% rejecting this right.

Although the AfD has focused its issue agenda on immigration since 2015 (Backes, 2018, p. 457), family and gender policies have also been described as top issues on the party's agenda (Decker, 2016, p. 6). AfD's positions on gender issues are informed by Volkish nationalism, viewing family policy primarily as demographic policy (Havertz, 2021). The AfD strongly opposes affirmative action for women, which is seen as undermining the natural social order (Havertz, 2021). Sexual violence is conflated with migration and Islam in the AfD's discourses but is not thematized in that way within the German majority population (Lang, 2017).

The Italian context stands out for a significant gap in men's and women's perceptions of gender equality, which is recognized by only 57% of men but 71% of women as a fundamental right (Table 1). Italy does not provide constitutional protection from discrimination by sexual orientation or gender identity. Same-sex couples have the option for a registered partnership, but there is no marriage equality. Lega voters are highly religious (83%) and consist equally of men (52%) and women. Two-thirds of Lega voters reject same-sex couples' adoption rights.

**Table 1.** Case-specific gendered opportunity structures.

|  | Sweden | Germany | Italy |
|---|---|---|---|
| Gender equality index* | 83.8 | 67.5 | 63.5 |
| Recognition gender equality, %** | 95 | 77 | men: 57, women: 71 |
| Constitutional protection discrimination by gender identity*** | yes | partially | none |
| Same-sex marriage*** | yes | yes | registered partnership |
|  | SD | AfD | Lega |
| % of electorate rejecting same-sex couples' adoption rights **** | 30 | 45 | 66 |
| % of male electorate**** | 70 | 67 | 52 |
| % of electorate belonging to religious denomination**** | 37 | 44 | 83 |

*(EIGE, 2021), **(EIGE, 2014), ***(ILGA Europe, 2020) data for 2020 refers to data from January to December 2019), ****('ESS Round 9', 2018), filtered by the country and party voted for in last election, design weights).

Dominated by migration, identity, nationalism, and law-and-order issues, the Lega's political agenda casts a xenophobic lens on gender issues (Donà, 2021). Such instrumentalization of gender issues by the Lega is sustained by an essentialist vision of gender and a strong defense of traditional family models, which, in turn, trigger fierce opposition to feminist politics and LGBTQI rights. As a clear example, the Lega took the initiative in convening the hyper-conservative World Congress of Families in Verona in 2019, which served as a shield for strengthening the anti-gender movement (Pavan, 2020).

## 4. Data and methods

We used the three PRRPs' communication on Facebook and Twitter as an entry point into their political communication during the EP election 2019. This context has been chosen as it was a period of heightened outward-oriented political communication, during which parties communicate their agenda with particular care. Particularly, anti-gender campaigns are closely intertwined with Euroscepticism, as gender egalitarianism is frequently equated with ideological colonization forced upon local populations by European elites (Graff & Korolczuk, 2021; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018).

Facebook is the top social media platform in all three countries, used by at least 50% of the total population in Germany, 77% in Italy, and 71% in Sweden (Newman et al., 2019). Twitter is another relevant social media platform that is especially useful for parties to directly reach their electorate and media actors (Jungherr, 2016).

We included posts from the parties' official Facebook and Twitter accounts and the accounts of the parties' top candidates (frontrunners) in the EP elections. If one of these accounts was not available to the public, we used the account of another leading politician in the party (Table S1, Supplement). We analyzed the account holders' posts and, in the case of Twitter, their retweets of others' posts. By including two highly relevant social media platforms, we provide an encompassing view of parties' digital communication in the election context beyond potential platform-specific particularities.

Our analysis covered the period from the beginning of January to the end of July 2019. We used Netvizz to collect Facebook posts (Rieder, 2013) and manually verified the completeness of our data. For Twitter, we relied on Crimson Hexagon[1] and its author specifier to collect all the posts of the specified accounts during our study period (Table S1, Supplement).[2]

Our study relied on two corpora: the sample of parties' overall digital communication as the baseline and a gender-specific corpus as the main corpus of the analysis. The gender-specific corpus was constructed through a dictionary-based selection of posts, based on a list of language-specific keywords derived from relevant studies in the field (Akkerman, 2015; De Lange & Mügge, 2015; Reinhardt, 2022). For the dictionary construction, we followed the steps of keyword preselection, keyword translation, and keyword evaluation (Lind et al., 2019, for the construction process and keyword list, see Supplement II).

### 4.1. Quantitative content analysis

We conducted a manual quantitative content analysis of both corpora based on a standardized codebook. An entire tweet or Facebook post constituted the analysis unit, including all the visual (photo and video) material. In the general corpus, to measure

the topical focus of the parties' communication and the relative frequency of gender-related issues within this communication, we classified up to three *general topics* discussed in a text (variable TOPGen). The classification scheme distinguished a detailed set of political and societal topics (see Supplement). For each topic, we coded the *sentiment* (variable TOPSent) or how the topic was evaluated.

In the gender corpus, coders checked whether posts selected through the dictionary contained gender issues and then classified the *relative importance of gender issues* within the text. The parties' framings of and stances on *specific gender-related topics* in the text were captured through two variables. First, our classification of gender-related topics (variable GenTop) differentiated among gender and sexual equality in general and more specific gender issues in politics, in the labor market, or related to care, family, and immigration (Akkerman, 2015; De Lange & Mügge, 2015). Furthermore, we captured the *evaluation of gender-related topics* (variable GenTopEval) with regard to how the parties positioned themselves toward gender issues.

Six trained coders performed the coding, and the intercoder reliability tests resulted in Krippendorff's Alpha reliability coefficients between 0.81 and 0.97 for the coding of the general topic and 0.65[3] and 0.95 for the general topic sentiment. The gender topic variable reached values between 0.8 and 0.92, and the gender topic evaluation between 0.86 and 0.95. For the coding whether a gender topic was present at all or not, we reached a Holsti reliability coefficient between 0.96 and 0.99 (Table S2, Supplement).

## 4.2. Topic network analysis and community detection

For each party's gender discourse, we built a topic network based on the co-occurrence of gender topics and general topics representing the framing of gender topics in each party's broader political discourse. We calculate edge weights by the raw counts of co-occurrences between the different general topics and general topics and gender topics. Furthermore, the topic networks included the closeness of gender topics to each other based on the similarity of their connections to general topics. Here, we calculate the edge weights between gender topics based on how many identical general topics each pair of gender topics connects to (for more details, see Supplement II, *Topic Network Construction*). To identify the most salient frames in the parties' gender discourses, we reduced the topic networks by cutting the edges weaker than the average tie strength (Pavan & Rapini, 2022). We next detected communities of densely interconnected topics by applying the Louvain method to the subgraph (Blondel et al., 2008; see Supplement II, *Community Detection*).

Using this network approach allowed representing the multiplex inter- and intra-connections between general topics and gender topics and adding information such as the positioning and sentiment toward a topic in the network graphs, which further informed the data interpretation.

## 5. Results

### 5.1. Salience of gender issues

Among all the issues discussed by the three parties during the EP electoral campaign, gender remains peripheral in all cases. The AfD pays the most explicit attention to gender

issues, coded as a main topic in 6% of its posts, followed by the SD (3%) and the Lega (1%; Table S3, Supplement). The salience of gender issues increases when considering any mention of gender issues in a post, even when they are not a main topic. Nevertheless, the pattern across countries remains constant: 13% of all posts by the AfD touch upon gender issues, followed by 7% of the SD's posts and 3.25% of the Lega's posts (Table S4, Supplement).

## 5.2. Focus of gender issue agendas

The parties show commonalities and country-specific differences in what gender issues they politicize during the EP election campaign. To illustrate our examples further, we present some typical posts for the most frequent gender topics in Supplement II.

The AfD primarily addresses gender issues in politics and politicizes *Female & LGBTQI Leadership* (41%, gender topics in the gender corpus, Table 2). The second most frequently raised issue is the presentation of *Immigrants/Islam as a Threat to Domestic Women* (26%). *Gender-Based Violence* is a third focus of the AfD's politicization of gender issues. Positioning itself primarily against feminist positions in these issue areas (82% dismissive, Table S5, Supplement), the AfD criticizes female leadership, uses gendered framing to reject immigration and Islam, and takes a more neutral position on more general questions of gender equality.

In stark contrast, the Lega primarily addresses questions related to the family (Table 2). Overall, 45% of the gender issues fall in this area, most prominently *Adoption Rights* (27%) and (*Non-)Traditional Family Models* (7%). *Gender-Based Violence* is also an important topic in Lega's gender-related communication (23%), along with the portrayal of *Immigrants/Islam as Threats to Domestic Women* (14%). The Lega positions itself as a defender of women's rights in some issue areas (35% supportive; Supplement, Table S5) while capitalizing on antigenderist positions in others (41% dismissive). While it frames gender issues related to family relationships, such as adoption rights, more neutrally, the party uses gender-based violence to showcase its support for women.

The SD focuses its gender-related communication on gender and immigration (42%) and general questions of feminism and gender equality (36%). *Gender-Based Violence* (33%), along with a strong focus on *Immigrants/Islam as Threats to Domestic Women* (24%) and a discussion of *Female Immigrants' Rights* (13%) are important issues addressed in the SD's communication (Table 2). The SD also politicizes *Female & LGBTQI Leadership in Politics* (11%). Regarding gender equality, the party's communication often adopts a neutral tone (Supplement, Table S5) or supports feminist positions. Regarding female leadership in politics, the SD takes an unequivocally anti-feminist position.

Our results show that the three parties have a common tendency to present themselves as protectors of women against gender-based violence during the EP election campaign, which serves as a vehicle to oppose Islam and immigration. Simultaneously, they take anti-feminist positions on other issues, such as family policies and female participation in politics.

**Table 2.** Frequency table: main categories and subcategories of gender topics across parties (in %).

| | AfD (n = 342) | | Lega (n = 338) | | SD (n = 159) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Gender issues in politics** | **47.95** | | **12.43** | | **20.13** |
| Civic participation by women | | 4.97 | | 5.03 | 0.63 |
| Female & LGBTQI leadership | | 41.52 | | 4.44 | 11.32 |
| Gender quotas | | 0.88 | | 0.30 | |
| Women's & LGBTQI issues & rights | | 0.58 | | 2.07 | 5.03 |
| Women's & LGBTQI representation in politics | | | | 0.30 | 1.26 |
| Gender equality legislation, general | | | | | |
| Politics, other | | | | 0.30 | 1.89 |
| **Gender issues in the labor market** | **0.29** | | **0.30** | | |
| Labor market opportunities for women & LGBTQI persons | | | | 0.30 | |
| Equal rights for women & LGBTQI persons | | | | | |
| Education for girls | | | | | |
| Labor, other | | 0.29 | | | |
| **Care** | **1.17** | | **0.59** | | **1.26** |
| Childcare & parental leave | | | | | 1.26 |
| Public/Private care for family members | | | | 0.59 | |
| Equal share of caregiving roles | | 0.58 | | | |
| Care, other | | 0.58 | | | |
| **Family** | **5.85** | | **45.27** | | |
| (Non-)Traditional family models | | 0.88 | | 7.40 | |
| Same-sex/Inter-ethnic marriage | | | | | |
| Family planning, abortion, & contraception | | 2.63 | | 1.48 | |
| Pro-natalist positions | | 1.75 | | 3.55 | |
| Divorce rights | | | | | |
| Adoption | | | | 27.51 | |
| Family, other | | 0.58 | | 5.33 | |
| **Feminism and gender equality** | **10.53** | | **24.85** | | **36.48** |
| Feminism as a movement | | 0.58 | | 1.18 | 1.26 |
| Gender equality, general | | 2.34 | | 0.30 | |
| Gender-based violence | | 7.31 | | 23.37 | 33.33 |
| Gender equality, other | | 0.29 | | | 1.89 |
| **Gender and immigration** | **33.33** | | **15.98** | | **41.51** |
| Female immigrants' rights | | 4.97 | | 2.07 | 12.58 |
| Immigrants & Islam as threats to domestic women | | 25.73 | | 13.91 | 23.90 |
| Immigrants' LGBTQI rights | | | | | |
| Multiculturalism, general | | 1.46 | | | |
| Immigration, other | | 1.17 | | | 5.03 |
| **Other** | **0.88** | | **0.59** | | **0.63** |
| **Total** | **100** | | **100** | | **100** |

## 5.3. Framing of gender issues

### 5.3.1. Alternative für Deutschland

Figure 1 shows that the AfD holds a negative sentiment (general topic, circle) or position (gender topic, rectangle) toward most of the gender issues (81.9%) addressed during the EP election campaign. In the graph, negatively evaluated topics are located more centrally than positive or neutral topics (for Node Centrality, see Table S6, Supplement). In the center of the graph, the discourse revolves around *Female & LGBTQI Leadership* in politics and *Civic Participation by Women* in the context of *Domestic Politics & Polity*.

In the upper half of the graph, it becomes clear that the AfD takes an anti-feminist position toward *Family Planning, Abortion, Contraception,* and *Pro-natalist Positions,* which are connected to *Social Policy.* These posts refer to the AfD's Volkish family and demographic policies, which aim to increase birth rates among white German women and, therefore, oppose reproductive rights.
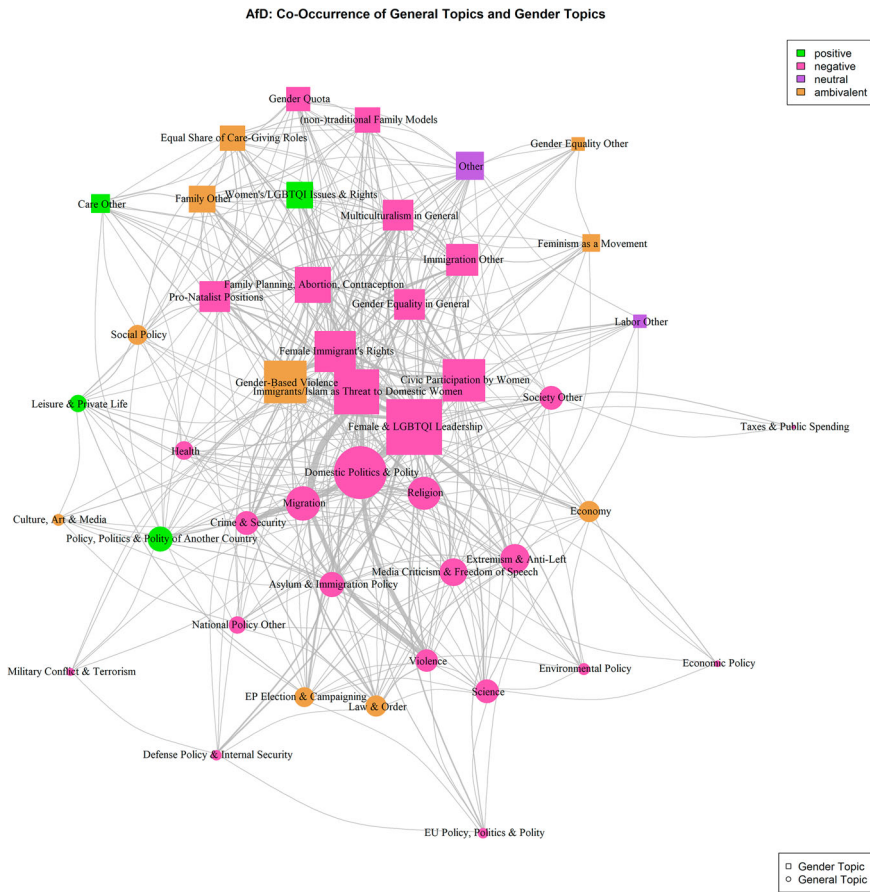
**Figure 1.** Topic network of gender topics and general topics based on the gender corpus from Germany (45 nodes, 424 edges). Node size = degree, edge width = edge weight, layout: Fruchterman-Reingold. Created with igraph.

The community detection algorithm detects three main frames in the AfD's gender discourse (Figure 2). At the center of the graph, the femonationalist frame in the pink community connects immigration to (gender-based) violence and marks immigrants as a danger to native women. The AfD presents itself as a protector of women against immigrant and Muslim men but holds an ambivalent position toward gender-based violence.

In the top right corner (Figure 2), the second frame (blue community) connects *Female Immigrants' Rights* to *Religion*. The posts creating this association often address demands to ban veils and headscarves – i.e., the AfD retweets:

> RT @Whmuhsal #austria decides to ban headscarves for elementary school girls - right. Far too often pressure is put on girls to hide under a #headscarf as early as possible, far too often they are considered fair game otherwise. Germany should follow suit! (own translation, AfD. [@afd]. (2019, 16.05.). Twitter.)

These demands are coded as anti-feminist when they specifically target Islamic practices rather than prohibiting all public displays of religious beliefs (Akkerman, 2015, p.
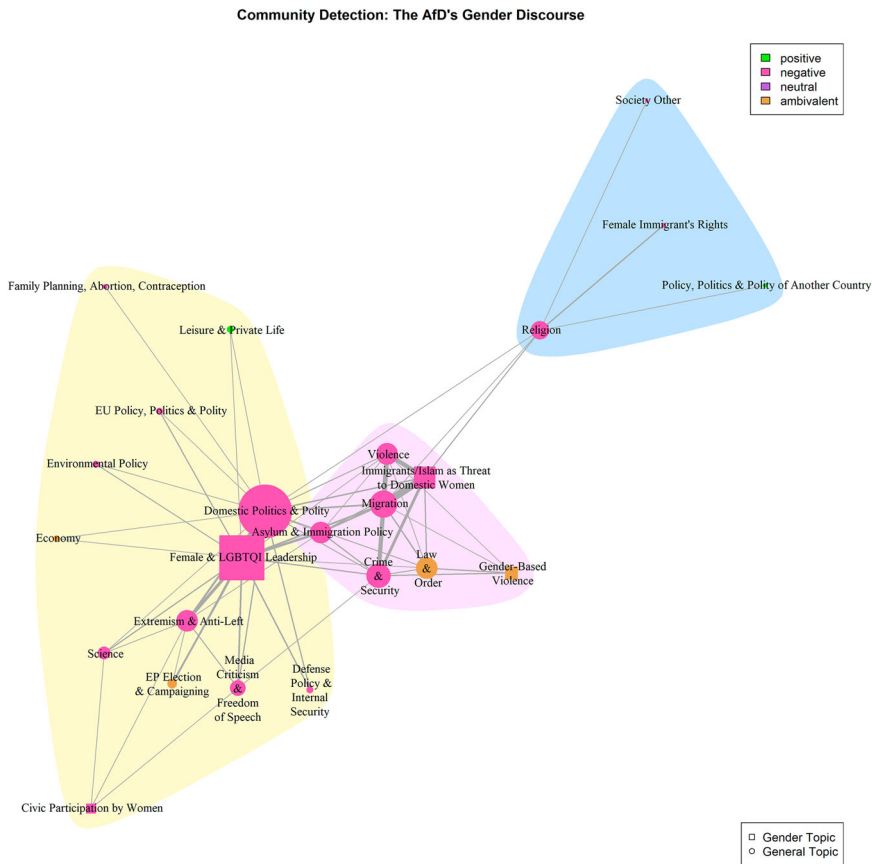
**Figure 2.** Community detection in the reduced network, Germany (24 nodes, 62 edges). Node size = total degree, edge width = edge weight, layout = Fruchterman-Reingold. Created with igraph.

43). The negative sentiment toward *Religion* suggests that it adversely affects female immigrants' rights. This frame represents a variation of the previous frame and adds another nuance to the instrumentalization of women's rights against a religious other.

Finally, on the left side of the graph (Figure 2), the frame in the yellow community can be interpreted as criticizing and politically attacking female politicians. *Female & LGBTQI Leadership* was coded as anti-feminist when female politicians were criticized in a gendered way. The connection to *Domestic Politics & Polity* indicates that these statements do not criticize specific policies; instead, they represent political conflict and debate explicitly targeting women. *Civic Participation by Women* and *Environmental Policy* is part of this frame and refer to the Fridays for Future protests and female climate activists, whom AfD negatively mentions. These topics are linked to *Science* because these posts often question the scientific character of climate change research. In addition, media reporting on climate change and climate activism are criticized.

### 5.3.2. The Lega
The Lega's gender discourses during the EP election campaign present more diverse sentiments and positionings: while the left side of the graph in Figure 3 displays negative
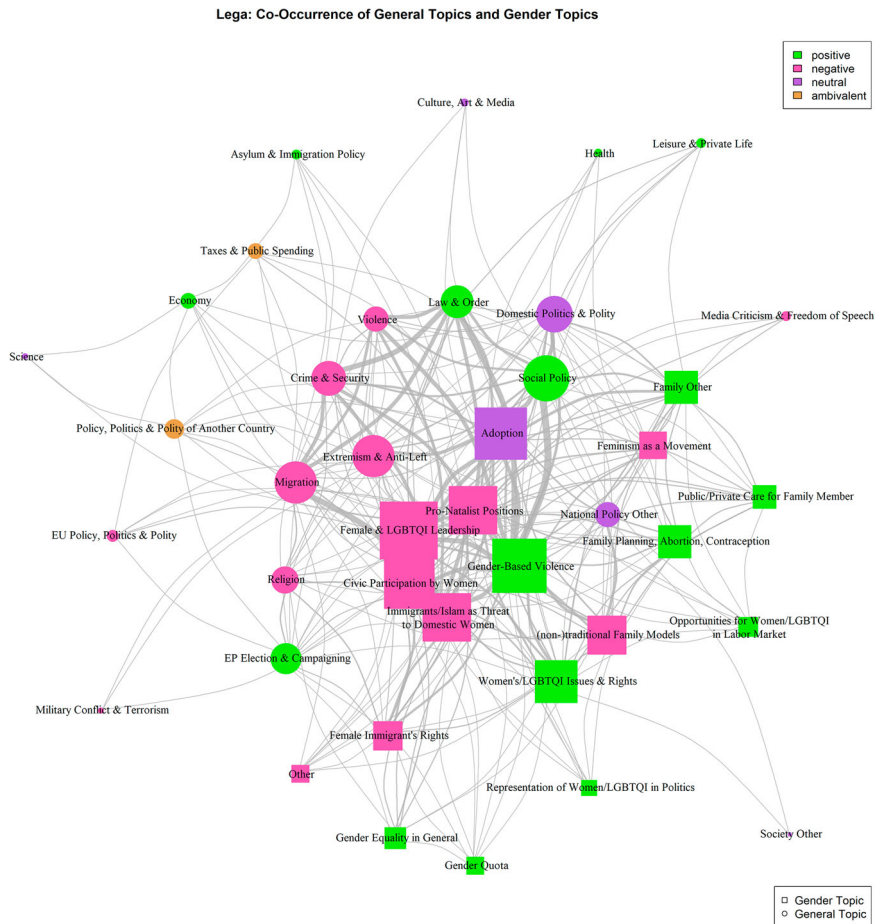
**Figure 3.** Topic network of gender topics and general topics based on the gender corpus from Italy (40 nodes, 283 edges). Node size = degree. Edge width = edge weight. Layout: Fruchterman-Reingold. Created with igraph.

sentiments and positions (41.1%), the other side includes positive (34.9%) and neutral (24%) ones. Gender topics at the center of the graph in Figure 3 include *Female & LGBTQI Leadership* in politics, *Civic Participation by Women*, and *Pro-natalist Positions*. Nearby, *Gender-Based Violence* and *Adoption* are central topics (Table S6, Supplement) in Lega's gender discourse.

This network displays three salient frames (Figure 4). The yellow community represents a frame connecting *Immigrants/Islam as a Threat to Domestic Women* to *Violence* and *Crime & Security*. This femonationalist frame shows how the Lega focuses on incidents of (sexual) violence by migrant and Muslim men. It connects *Female Immigrants' Rights* to *Religion*, suggesting that religion affects their rights negatively.

This anti-immigration stance is connected to a frame focused on gender-based violence and family issues (pink community). In this frame, *Adoption* is important in relation to *Social Policy* and *Extremism & Anti-Left*, due to the highly debated,
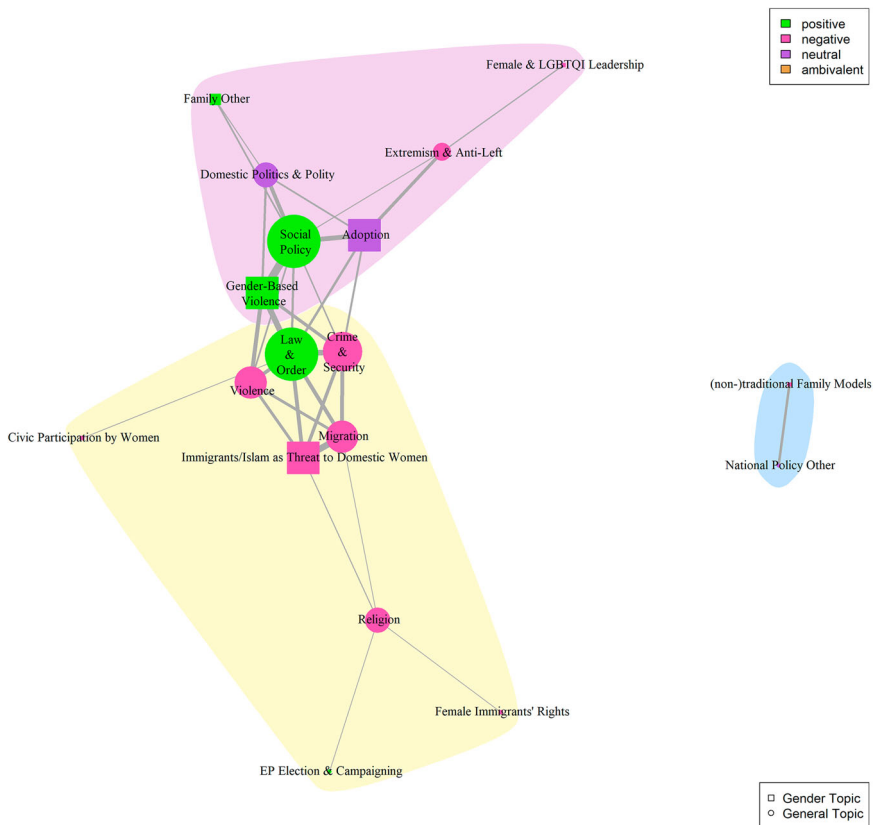
**Figure 4.** Community detection in the reduced network, Italy (18 nodes, 33 edges). Node size = total degree, edge width = edge weight. Layout: Fruchterman-Reingold. Created with igraph.

headline-raising Bibbiano Case of a group of children assigned to foster care. The Lega leveraged the case to point attention to its strenuous defense of the traditional family and its commitment to defend parents' rights – displayed by Lega as relevantly threatened by alleged leftist extremists often associated with female and LGBTQI political leaders. While maintaining neutrality toward adoption, the Lega translates its allegiance to the traditional family into positive views of the role of law and enforcement authorities and the social policies proposed by the party.

The focal points of Lega's gender discourse are its anti-immigration stance and the defense of the family, displaying an instrumentalization of women's rights and presenting the party as a family protector. This protection extends only to heterosexual families, as indicated by the marginal frame on non-traditional family models (blue community), which recalls the party's harsh opposition to the extension of parental rights to same-sex couples – a possibility withdrawn from the so-called *Legge Cirinnà*, which legalized same-sex partnerships in the country.

### 5.3.3. Sweden democrats
In the SD's gender discourse, negative positions and sentiments (42.8%) dominate. The SD takes a supportive position or holds positive sentiments toward 24.5% of the topics

discussed and neutrally addresses 30.8% of them. Negatively evaluated topics are displayed at the center of the graph (Figure 5).

*Gender-Based Violence* is at the center of SD's gender discourse during the EP election campaign and is closely connected to diverse other topics in the network graph. *Immigrants/Islam as a Threat to Domestic Women* and *Female Immigrants' Rights* are discussed in the context of *Crime & Security* and *Violence*. Another major topic is *Female & LGBTQI Leadership* in politics.

The community detection algorithm identifies six frames in this structure (Figure 6). In the center of the graph, a frame (red community) connects *Immigrants/Islam as a Threat to Domestic Women* with *Migration*, *Violence*, and *Law & Order* topics. These connections indicate that a femonationalist argumentation against immigration is central to the SD's gender discourse. Like the Lega and AfD, the SD strongly connects Female Immigrants' Rights and Religion (green community), representing another variation of femonationalist framing. As shown by a distinct but closely interrelated frame (pink community), *Gender-Based Violence* is discussed in the context of *Crime & Security*. The SD adopts no clear-cut positions on *Gender-Based Violence* and remains rather
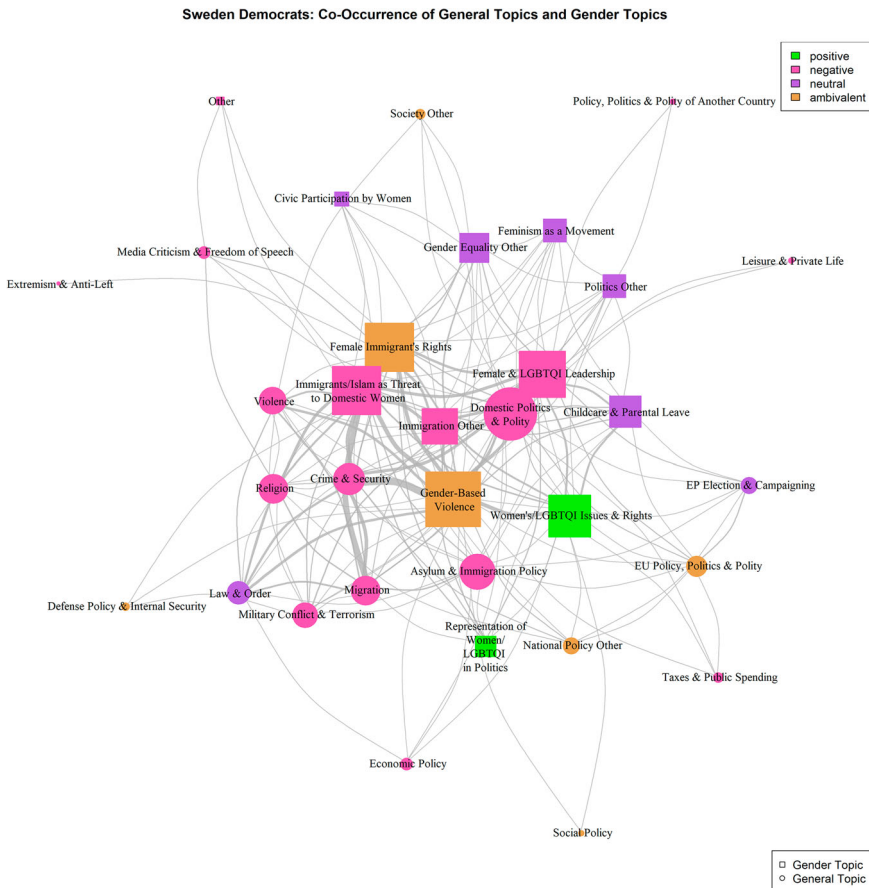


**Figure 5.** Topic network of gender topics and general topics based on the gender corpus from Sweden (33 nodes, 177 edges). Node size = degree, edge width = edge weight. Layout: Fruchterman-Reingold. Created with igraph.
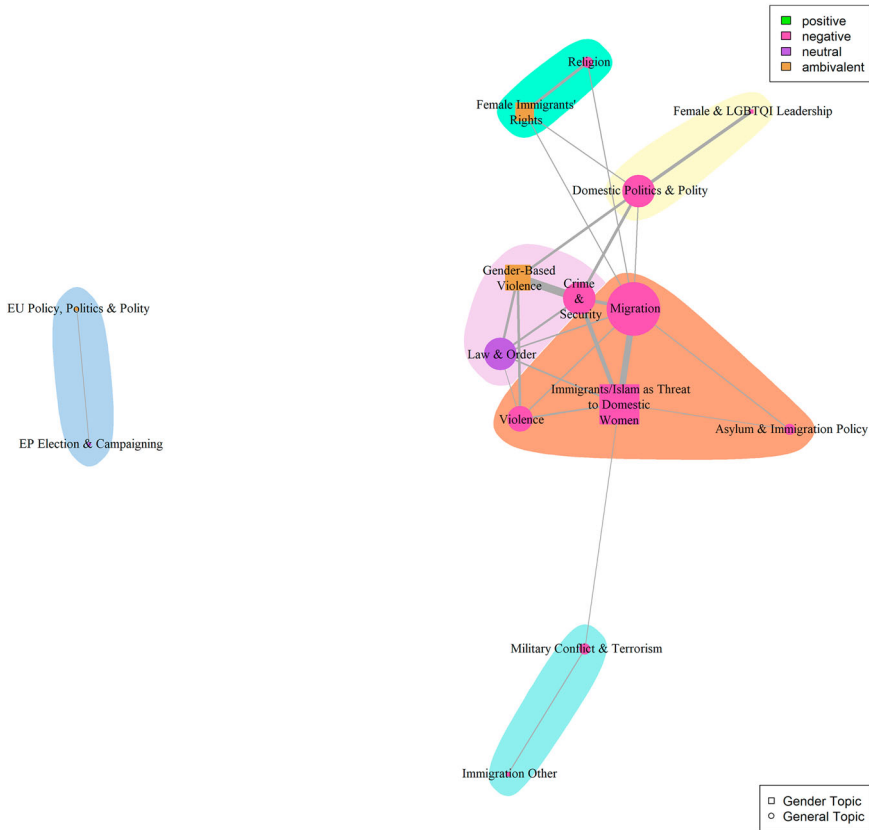
**Figure 6.** Community detection in the reduced network, Sweden (15 nodes, 25 edges). Node size = total degree, edge width = edge weight. Layout: Fruchterman-Reingold. Created with igraph.

ambivalent: it sometimes denounces cases of gender-based violence and sometimes states that more should be done to protect women. *Female & LGBTQI leadership* is connected to *Domestic Politics & Polity* in the frame represented by the yellow community. Both topics are evaluated negatively, indicating criticism toward Swedish female and LGBTQI politicians. The frame in the turquoise community connects the gendered topic of *Immigration Other* to *Military Conflict & Terrorism*. These posts discuss ISIS as a threat to either women abroad or Swedish women and focus on incidents of gender-based violence against women by ISIS. The references to Islamist terrorism are peculiar to the SD's gender discourse and serve to underpin the alleged danger of a perceived cultural and religious other. The blue community on the left of the graph does not address a gender topic and is about the EP election campaign.

## 6. Discussion

Our results suggest that GOS do indeed play a role in PRRPs' national discourses about gender during the EP election campaign. Lega's posts exhibit a politicization of family issues, including adoption rights and non-traditional family models, while operating in

a country context characterized by low legal protection and public recognition of LGBTQI rights. In this context, its strategy is to present the party as a protector of heterosexual families and children by politicizing a law – the extension of parental rights to same-sex couples in *Legge Cirinnà* – and context-specific events such as the Bibbiano case. The case of Lega contributes to a line of research showing that the legal status of and public opinion toward LGBTQI persons are crucial to politicizing LGBTQI rights (Holzhacker, 2012). The party indeed takes advantage of the shortcomings in protecting LGBTQI persons and contributes to further contesting their rights.

The AfD expresses derogatory positions toward the political and civic participation of women and LGBTQI persons. This is just apparently in contrast with the high visibility of women in the German political context as great attention to this aspect triggers its politicization. In 2019, Germany had a female chancellor and a nearly equal ratio of female ministers in the fourth Merkel cabinet, while young women spearheaded the Fridays for Future movement. AfD thus was able to connect its anti-elitism and climate change denialism to its misogynist criticism of women in politics, intertwining its anti-feminist attitudes with core topics in the party's issue repertoire. While the AfD partially positions female or homosexual politicians in central party positions, women are underrepresented in national and federal party factions (Gutsche, 2018), indicating the party's low regard for equal representation in politics. Operating in the context of a GOS with relatively high respect for gender equality but sexist gender stereotypes, the AfD relies on the resonance of these stereotypes in its strong criticism of women and LGBTQI leadership in politics and applies ethnicized sexism in the context of its femonationalist agenda. With this strategy, the party can cater to its predominantly male electorate.

The SD takes a derogatory position toward female and LGBTQI leadership in politics in more than 11% of their posts. As in Germany, we interpret the equal representation of women in government as an opportunity for this (negative) politicization intertwined with anti-elitism, which is salient to the SD's issue repertoire. The SD's focus is gender-based violence and immigration and women's rights; more than 69% of the party's posts are preoccupied with these issues. The politicization is less focused on opposing women's rights than on externalizing antifeminism and misogyny. A context that considers gender equality as a national value (Towns et al., 2014) offers little opportunity to adopt openly anti-feminist positions. Hence, the absence of an endorsement of gender and sexual equality can signal silent opposition in such a context. Instead, the SD strategically externalizes existing grievances against immigrants and Muslims, exploiting women's rights to advance its monocultural nationalist agenda.

While such externalization is most pronounced in the Swedish context, we find that this femonationalist frame weaponizing women's and LGBTQI rights against immigration and Islam is a transnationally shared commonality among the three parties analyzed during the EP election campaign. The intensity of this instrumentalization varies across national contexts. The more gender and sexual equality are established in a context, the more salient the frames that externalize existing inequalities. This pattern, along with the low salience of gender issues in all country contexts, seems to confirm gender issues as secondary to PRRPs' nativist struggle (Mudde, 2007): In a GOS with little incentives to politicize gender issues, their politicization revolves around the SD's nativist core. The same amalgamation of nativism and gender issues is observable for AfD and Lega. However, in the rare cases in which PRRPs do mention gender issues, they exploit

them within a common strategy of othering that portrays migrant men as dangerous sexual threats and migrant women as victimized by their allegedly patriarchal cultures.

These frames not only externalize and ethnicize misogyny and queerphobia but perform two more comprehensive functions for these PRRPs. First, they reproduce traditional gender roles by defending women's rights only in domains where women can be portrayed as powerless. Women's inferiority is never openly stated: instead, a paternalist framing suggests female inferiority and cloaks it in the mantle of a protective endeavor. Compared to openly hostile sexism, such a strategy of benevolent sexism can be more socially accepted in contexts with high regard for gender equality.

Second, consistent with what Siri (2015) has observed, these discriminatory attitudes serve a paradoxical aim: in the absence of a real threat to conservative lifestyles, conservative protest in the context of equality policies requires the fabrication of threat scenarios to maintain its political potential. Both progressive policies on gender and sexual equality and (Muslim) immigrants' allegedly patriarchal cultures are imagined as threat scenarios to women, revealing how PRRPs exploit gender issues for their nativist agendas. This femonationalist framing is used transnationally to create a sensation of threat, but the motif is adapted to national contexts and context-specific gendered opportunities.

## 7. Conclusion

In light of strengthening opposition to feminist and sexual politics across Europe, this study has investigated the politicization of gender issues by PRRPs in relation to the context-specific GOS in which they operate during the EP election campaign 2019. The analysis shows that GOS are both encapsulated in and transformed by PRRPs' discourses on gender and sexual equality. Taking a comparative perspective and considering context factors allowed us to gain insights on PRRPs' strategic articulation of antigenderism: GOS disadvantageous to gender and sexual equality seem to allow the politicization of context-specific gender issues. In a contested context, also a GOS favorable to gender and sexual equality can elicit oppositional politicization by PRRPs, as seen in the politicization of female leadership in politics and civic participation in Germany. In a context of low contestation, such as Sweden, GOS more favorable to gender and sexual equality instead seem to foster the ethnicization of sexism by PRRPs. This pattern is observable across contexts, where PRRPs' gender discourses are closely linked to a common ideological nativist core. The salience of this femonationalist frame seems to be higher in less contested contexts.

Taking a more sociological approach toward GOS, our case study shows how context-specific factors contribute to shaping PRRPs' politicization of gender issues. Turning toward a more institutionalist approach, the analyzed PRRPs can themselves be considered as part of the GOS. Their strategic articulation of antigenderism constitutes an essential part of the symbolic representation of gender and sexual equality in public discourses, in which PRRPs question the legitimacy of gender and sexual equality as an objective and the policies connected to it.

While studying a limited number of cases, our work shows how a conceptual framework highlighting the context-specific gendered opportunities and constraints for the politicization of gender issues allows a more nuanced understanding of PRRP's strategic

articulation of antigenderism. Applying the concept of GOS to PRRPs adds an explicitly gendered dimension to existing research on PRRPs, which highlights more often common traits in their anti-gender positions rather than their specificities. Future research may apply our conceptual framework to other national and party contexts. A cross-platform perspective is also desirable to gain nuance on how platform affordances and context-specific GOS jointly shape gender discourses on digital platforms.

## Notes

1. Crimson Hexagon, now Brandwatch, is a commercial data reseller providing full access to current and historical Twitter data.
2. We acknowledge the different media logics of Facebook and Twitter. While our study is not a cross-platform study, we made sure that our analysis is not skewed by noise from platform differences and that variables of interest are similar across platforms.
3. Despite lengthy coder training, the general topic sentiment variable did not exceed 0.65 (Krippendorffs Alpha) in the case of the Sweden Democrats. We treat this part of the results with the necessary care.

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