Women, Politics, and Communication:
The Discourses of Antifeminism and Misogyny in Europe

Introduction

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Scholarship highlights the attempts to hinder the advances of equality in contemporary discourses via social platforms and political speech. The attempts to undermine feminism appear in speech and attitudes linked to communities where hegemonic masculinity is the norm, such as far-right parties, conservative elites, and others who wish to maintain their privileges. Parallel to antifeminism is the increased online misogyny against women. The articles in this Special Section analyze how antifeminism and misogyny appear in attitudes, are disseminated in political discourses, or function to increase polarization. Salient patterns that emerge in this discourse are 1) the idea that women in democracies have achieved equality, therefore, it is redundant to empower them; 2) the crucial role social platforms play in spreading antifeminism and misogyny to neutralize women; 3) the coincidence of the gender backlash with the political polarization and revival of old debates about the convenience of gender equality; and 4) the gaps in institutional awareness due to a disregard for gender and women's perspectives.

Keywords: gender equality, attitudes, political communication, backlash, far-right

This Special Section offers an interdisciplinary view on antifeminism and misogyny in political discourse and people's attitudes. The articles are located at the intersection of women, politics, and communication, where antifeminist resistances—part of the gender backlash—and misogynistic discourse occur. The first article—"Value Change Regarding Gender Roles and Backlash in Europe: Is Gender a New Polarization Element?"—explores people's values at individual and collective levels, offering a landscape on gender attitudes as a division factor in European society. The second—"Gender in VOX's Ideology: Legitimization Strategy or Central Category?"—and the third—"Gender and Far-Right Women Political Representatives. A Twitter Discourse Network Analysis"—shows that antifeminist resistances are central to

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the current political polarization, not a future threat, and how far-right leaders utilize them. Meanwhile, "Insta-hate and Cybermisogyny Toward Female Political Leaders: Six Profiles as Case Studies on Instagram" deals with antifeminist resistances toward female politicians. The last two articles investigate how antifeminist resistances materialize in different spheres, from the subtle to the extreme. "Resistance to Profem Employer Messages in Talent Attraction: The Case of Employer Femvertising Campaigns on LinkedIn" examines young Spaniards' viewpoints before attempts by companies to attract women. Finally, "Misogynistic Discourse, a Blind Spot in Definitions of Terrorism" highlights the disconnect between the prominence of misogyny and sexism in political manifestos that inspire extreme violence and their absence in operative definitions of terrorism. Fundamentally, antifeminist and misogynistic discourses are rooted in patriarchal beliefs that seek to preserve male privilege and *power*.

Although they are related, antifeminism and misogyny are two distinct concepts. Antifeminism refers to opposition toward feminist ideas, principles, or movements that fight for equality (Beyer, Lach, & Schnabel, 2020; Clatterbaugh, 2003; Sanders & Jenkins, 2022). Antifeminists may disagree with specific aspects of feminism or reject feminism overall; their opposition can stem from concerns about the impact of equality on traditional gender roles, skepticism about specific feminist demands, or disagreement with feminist policy proposals. Concretely, antifeminism emerges from

> the core significance of social hierarchy and biological essentialism to antifeminist conservative thought; the polarizing demonization of feminists by religious conservatives and populist nationalists; the appropriation of rights discourses and advocacy tactics by antifeminist campaigns; and the strategic importance of law and legal language as a terrain of rights contestation. (Sanders & Jenkins, 2022, p. 369)

Leveraging their authority as mothers, wives, and professionals, some female politicians use antifeminism rhetoric to their advantage. Some women oppose feminism as they see it as weakening the traditional roles and protections for women (Zawisza, 2016). Sexism—prejudice, stereotyping, or discrimination based on a person's sex or gender (Bjarnegård, Melander, & True, 2020)—serves to uphold the patriarchal social order. Some antifeminist women may feel that feminism is no longer about equality but rather about empowering women at the expense of men (Brown, 2019).

While antifeminism does not necessarily denote hatred for women, misogyny refers to a deep-rooted hatred, prejudice, or contempt toward women based on their sex or gender (Bosman, Taylor, & Arango, 2019). It entails direct attacks, for instance, resulting in psychological, professional, reputational, or physical harm, or indirect ones, such as making the Internet an unequal, unsafe, or restrictive space (Ging & Siapera, 2018). It can manifest in various ways, including discrimination, sexual objectification, belittlement, and violence. Misogynistic discourse—a variety of hate speech—perpetuates detrimental stereotypes, reinforces inequalities, and undermines women's rights and dignity (Freeman, 2017; Hunter & Jouenne, 2021; Manne, 2017; Mantilla, 2015; Ouyang, Zhu, Luo, & Huang, 2021). While antifeminism can exist without misogyny, some antifeminist arguments foster misogyny. A nuanced approach is essential to examine these concepts.

Meanwhile, a *backlash* is understood as a strong adverse reaction to progressive social, cultural, economic, or political changes. It typically occurs when communities perceive a threat to their traditional beliefs or ways of life due to these changes (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). A backlash often emerges in response to shifts in societal norms, attitudes, and policies regarding issues like gender equality, lesbian, gay, trans, bisexual, and intersexual (LGTBI+) rights, immigration, multiculturalism, or changes in religion. Connected to antifeminism, this concept highlights the reactive response against the gains made by women and marginalized genders in their pursuit of equality (Faludi, 2006; Moore, 2013; Otterbacher, Bates, & Clough, 2017). The gender backlash has been theorized as an antifeminist resistance (Flood, Dragiewicz, & Pease, 2020).

Several studies emphasize the attempts to hinder the progress of equality in current discourses through news media, social platforms, publicity, and political campaigns (Álvarez, González, & Ubani, 2020; Clatterbaugh, 2003; Ging & Siapera, 2019; Gutiérrez, Pando, & Congosto, 2020; Lewis, 2019; Rodríguez & Pérez Tirado, 2020; Schutzbach, 2019). The efforts to gag feminism transpire in discourses from communities where hegemonic masculinity is the norm, such as far-right parties, conservative elites, and others who wish to preserve their advantages. The study of these obstacles has generated a growing interest in the academic literature (Asimov, 2018; Faludi, 2006; Flood et al., 2020; Moore, 2013; Otterbacher et al., 2017). Antifeminist resistances exist in a latent state and reappear when there are signs of advancement toward equality (Faludi, 2006). Parallel to these antifeminist resistances, the increase of hate speech and misogyny in online content has been identified in other studies (e.g., Demirhana & Cakır-Demirhan, 2015; Mantilla, 2015). Several special issues, articles, and monographs explore the complex relationships between online culture, technology, and misogyny (Ging & Siapera, 2018, 2019; Siapera, 2019)**,** the intersection between misogyny, technology, and harassment online (Vickery & Everbach, 2018)**,** or how individuals comply with antifeminist communication norms (Beyer, Lach, & Schnabel, 2020)**.**

This Special Section of the *International Journal of Communication* is not the first to investigate these connections. Nevertheless, it offers novel insights into relationships between women, politics, and communication. It connects cultural backlash, antifeminism, and misogyny with values, attitudes, political discourse, and polarization. Rather than examine what the far-right stands against, this Special Section also explores its proposals, with its complexities and contradictions. Thus, the articles in this Special Section are situated in the broader research on antifeminist values, discourse, and hate speech by looking at emerging phenomena in international communication.

Concretely, in "Value Change Regarding Gender Roles and Backlash in Europe: Is Gender a New Polarization Element?" Edurne Bartolomé Peral, María Silvestre, Ayauzhan Kamatayeva, and Bogdan Voicu investigate gender beliefs in the European Value Study and the World Value Survey datasets in 48 European countries from 1990 to 2022. Right-wing populist parties have gained significant electoral success in some European countries; their rhetoric emphasizes traditional gender roles, nationalism, and opposition to progressive values. This populist backlash is a reaction to changes such as secularization, gender equality, and diversity. The former cultural majority now feels threatened and blames elites and minority groups for these changes. Right-wing populist parties leverage this sentiment by promoting an "us versus them" narrative, portraying immigrants, feminists, LGTBI+ people, and other minorities as threats to the traditional nation. This has led to the proliferation of misogynistic and antifeminist ideologies. The study asks to what extent attitudes toward gender equality are likelier to be related to ideology now than in the past and

whether these attitudes are still understood to be changing because of societal changes. The authors use a longitudinal comparative analysis of attitudes toward gender roles in European societies to evaluate classic modernization theories and the cognitive mobilization affecting attitudes toward gender. The article argues that attitudes toward gender roles are shifting from being primarily explained by modernization to being increasingly shaped by ideological polarization along the left-right political spectrum. It confirms that the mediating effect of ideology on attitudes toward gender roles has strengthened in recent years.

The second article examines antifeminist discourse in the Spanish far-right party VOX. According to Mudde's (2007) classic definition, gender does not belong to the characteristic ideological core of far-right parties; it responds to a strategy of legitimizing their nativistic anti-immigration agenda. More recently, however, some studies indicate that gender is becoming increasingly central in far-right ideology (Anduiza & Rico, 2022; Blum & Köttig, 2017; Cabezas, 2022; Christley, 2022; Grzebalska & Petö, 2018; Spierings, 2020). In "Gender in VOX's Ideology: Legitimization Strategy or Central Category?," Carmen Innerarity, Jose María Pérez-Agote, and María Lasanta analyze the keys to VOX's discourse to see to what extent it fits Mudde's definition or whether, on the contrary, gender is a central ideological category. For this purpose, VOX's interventions in parliament during 2020 and 2021 are studied. The analysis reveals a strategic use of gender to legitimize its restrictive proposals concerning immigration, but, above all, it shows gender as a pivotal cross-cutting issue in the three ideological characteristics of the far-right identified by Mudde (2007)—that is, nativism, authoritarianism, and populism. Perhaps the marginal place Mudde grants to gender explains the scarcity of empirical studies on the role of gender values in the radical right. Paying more attention to this aspect could expand the understanding of the factors that have driven the growth of the far-right, particularly in Europe. Ultimately, it would contribute to explaining the relationship between populism and gender in European far-right parties.

"Gender and Far-Right Women Political Representatives. A Twitter Discourse Network Analysis" analyzes discourses published on Twitter accounts by far-right politicians Rocío Monasterio (Spain), Giorgia Meloni (Italy), and Marjorie Taylor Greene (United States) from 2022 and 2023. Its authors, Miren Berasategi, María J. Pando-Canteli, and Pilar Rodríguez, use discourse network analysis and six key gender-related concepts (i.e., criticism of so-called gender ideology, attacks on feminism, traditional masculinities and femininities, defense of the patriarchal family, denial of gender-based violence, and rejection of LGTBI+ and trans people) to find the main concepts, recurrence level, and agreement among the comments. They learn, first, that there is a trend whereby far-right female leaders use gender-related issues to advance their political agenda; second, Twitter interactions reflect differences in the levels of engagement among these politicians, explained partly by the fact that one is a premier, and the others have less prominent roles; third, there is a convergence in topics between Monasterio and Taylor Greene, who display an aggressive antifeminist rhetoric, while Meloni has a more constrained communication profile. Ultimately, the article shows that the antifeminist discourse of female far-right leaders is not based on overt misogyny but rather on the rejection of feminism. These leaders appropriate a *liberal feminism* that claims that women are free to adopt the role they wish (e.g., mothers, professionals, and wives) to the point that they see themselves as the authentic defenders of women's rights against enemies such as the LGTBI+ and Muslim religious communities. The findings suggest the need for further research on the centrality of gender in far-right discourse.

Instead of looking at political speeches, the following article examines the reactions they trigger. Female politicians of all creeds—rightish or leftish—are exposed to online hatred; in "Insta-hate and Cyber-misogyny Toward Female Political Leaders: Six Profiles as Case Studies on Instagram," misogyny directed at prominent women in politics plays a fundamental role. Its authors—Irene Pérez-Tirado, Adriana Carmen Calvo Viota, and Belén Igarzábal—focus on detecting and analyzing hate speech and misogyny expressed by users on the Instagram profiles of six prominent female politicians with international exposure (i.e., Irene Montero [Spain], Alexia Ocasio-Cortez [United States], Giorgia Meloni [Italy], Marine Le Pen [France], Ofelia Fernandez [Argentina], and Jacinda Ardern [New Zealand]). Based on content analysis, the study investigates the differences or similarities in the hate speech and expressions of misogyny directed at these politicians. Here, six classificatory parameters on hate speech and misogyny are applied. Each profile and the commentaries they elicit are analyzed and then compared. The results indicate that although hate speech and misogyny represent a small percentage of the comments (12% of the sample), these messages attack women similarly based on their ages, appearance, or abilities. This is relevant because online attacks result in the silencing or self-censorship of women politicians and deter other women from entering politics (Ging & Siapera, 2018).

Antifeminism is not only a trend in far-right parties' speech, but it can also operate more subtly in other spaces where social communication has a relevant role, such as recruiting platforms. The following article reveals how empowering recruitment messages can generate antifeminist resistances. One strategy for attracting and empowering female personnel is *employer femvertising*; however suitable, these strategies are sometimes met with diffidence, scorn, or disbelief. In "Resistance to Profem Employer Messages in Talent Attraction: The Case of Employer Femvertising Campaigns on LinkedIn," Garazi Azanza, Lorena Ronda, and Begoña Sanz examine resistances among Spanish young people to empowering discourses by different companies on LinkedIn. Based on focus groups, this article examines whether university graduates value these so-called *profem* messages or, on the contrary, show resistances, understood here as conflicting feelings toward job ads promoting gender equality on LinkedIn. The primary resistance found was the mistrust toward the companies behind the ads and the doubts about the genuineness of their intentions, as some participants perceived the messages as insincere attempts to improve the company's image. Other forms of resistance included minimizing the scope of gender inequality, questioning the positive visibility of women's achievements, and opposing initiatives exclusively targeting women. However, participants also recognized positive aspects of employer *femvertising*, such as their contribution to equality and promotion of female employment in male-dominated industries and more attractive workplaces. Interestingly, some of the resistance came from the female participants, who perceived that portraying female achievements as exceptional is counterproductive for the cause of equality. This connects with the idea that women should have the right to be average and still achieve equality rather than having to outperform men (Hassanloo, 2023; Yellen, 2020). The study provides recommendations for implementing effective employer *femvertising* strategies.

Taken to the extreme, misogynistic speech can unite and mobilize troubled men who entertain thoughts of bitterness against women, such as Incels, or involuntary celibates (Mantilla, 2015). In the following entry, "Misogynistic Discourse, a Blind Spot in Definitions of Terrorism," using text analysis, Miren Gutierrez, María Lozano, and Antonia Moreno Cano conduct a two-tier analysis. First, they locate and examine misogyny in six political manifestos that have inspired different violent groups. The study indicates

that, to various degrees, misogyny and sexism are critical components in these narratives, which include Jihadist, far-right, and leftish/separatist credos. Second, these authors conduct a similar analysis of functioning definitions of terrorism coined by international organizations, countries, and agencies with the responsibility to fight against terrorism. The results indicate that neither misogyny nor women appear in any of the most established characterizations of terrorism from 1996 to 2022, based on the idea that violence against women is not political. That is, misogyny is missing in most working definitions of terrorism, while it is a prominent element of the manifestos, offering justification to those wishing to act violently. They group the conclusions around four ideas, that among other objectives, terrorism: 1) seeks the subservience of women and 2) the control of women's bodies; 3) is based on the idea that men are innately entitled to privilege and that 4) women should go back to their primordial roots and *natural* functions as mothers and caretakers. Besides arguing that misogyny and sexism play a vital role in the political underpinnings of diverse terrorist organizations, these authors further contend that violence against women is, indeed, political and, therefore, should be included as a determining factor in the fight against terrorism.

These articles reveal several shared ideas. First, in line with what Flood and colleagues (2020) call *denial of the problem*, there is a growing perception in democracies that *women have achieved equality; therefore, empowering or supporting them is unnecessary*. This notion emerges in the young people's commentaries in the focus groups and the Twitter discourse of far-right female leaders. However, the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap report confirms that, even where they are equal before the law, women and men have not reached gender equality, especially regarding access to economic and political power (World Economic Forum, 2022). Refuting that discrimination exists in today's democracies or denying the legitimacy of feminism's case for change is a form of antifeminist resistance (Flood et al., 2020).

Second, *the role of the platforms in disseminating both antifeminism and misogyny is critical.* This idea emerges in the articles investigating Twitter, Instagram, and other networking and sharing platforms. It corroborates previous studies, such as those by Krasodomski-Jones, Atay, Judson, Smith, & Lasko-Skinner (2020), who call this phenomenon *gender disinformation*:

> Online spaces are being systematically weaponized to exclude women leaders and to undermine the role of women in public life. Attacks on women which use hateful language, rumor and gendered stereotypes combine personal attacks with political motivations, making online spaces dangerous places for women to speak out. And left unchecked, this phenomenon of gendered disinformation, spread by state and non-state actors, poses a serious threat to women's equal political participation. (p. 5)

Platform algorithms play a significant role in prioritizing and shaping the content users see, and they can contribute to the increase of misogyny and antifeminism online in three main ways. First, recommendation algorithms personalize users' feeds by suggesting relevant content based on browsing history, interactions, and preferences; that is, these algorithms can reinforce existing biases and generate ideological bubbles (Pariser, 2011). This can lead to users' polarization, making it challenging to hear alternative viewpoints. Second, algorithms prioritize content that generates high engagement as it indicates user interest and the possibility of monetizing their data. Misogynistic or antifeminist content can be provocative and elicit strong emotional responses, leading to increased engagement. As a result, algorithms amplify such content to broader

audiences, giving more visibility and reach to discriminatory or harmful narratives (Andreeva & Matuszyk, 2018; Williams, Brooks, & Shmargad, 2018; World Economic Forum, 2018). And third, platform algorithms allow for microtargeting, enabling advertisers to tailor their messages to specific people; in some cases, this capability can be misused to disseminate discriminatory or antifeminist messages.

Third, *the antifeminist backlash has pervaded political debate and led to an intense partisan division in political communication, reviving old debates on gender equality that seemed to bring antifeminism to the fore*. The pervasiveness of gender backlash and its impact on political debates, as well as the revival of old debates on the convenience of gender equality, highlight the critical nature of this issue in today's societies. The gender backlash and the rise of antifeminism threaten the progress toward achieving equality, perpetuating stereotypes, reinforcing gender roles, and challenging the legitimacy of feminist movements and their cause. Gender identity, reproductive rights, and sexual harassment have become deeply politicized along left and right lines. This polarization hinders constructive dialogue, impedes the formulation of evidence-based policies, and fosters an us-versus-them mentality. Finally, this has broader societal consequences beyond political debates, as it contributes to a culture that marginalizes and disempowers women, negatively affecting social cohesion, economic development, and overall well-being.

Fourth, *there are some similarities in the messages of the manifestos inspiring terrorism and the far-right leaders' comments*. This is not to say that the extreme right is to be associated automatically with violence; it means that antifeminist thinking is prevalent and can lead to violence. For example, some discourses connected to gender and sexuality in, on the one side, far-right political speech and, on the other, Jihadist manifestos, are intertwined with a nativist conception of the nation, even though the emphasis is different. The papers on VOX, Twitter, and the political manifestos confirm, too, that antifeminism and misogyny are not secondary to reactionary and antidemocratic political discourse but a fundamental element in a diverse range of ideologies that seek to normalize inequality and legally impose ultraconservative orthodoxy, as, for instance, Sanders and Jenkins (2022) argue. Concurring with Innerarity, Pérez-Agote, and Lasanta, Berasategi, Pando-Canteli, and Rodríguez conclude that gender is becoming a central ideological category for far-right parties beyond just being a strategic tool to legitimize their nativist agendas. Namely, antifeminism and gender emerge as critical (but neglected) elements in captivating and mobilizing both the far-right electorate and extremist thought of different ideologies.

Fifth, *a lack of institutional awareness, regulation, and tools hinders the fight against inequality and misogyny*. The article on the attitudes toward *profem* initiatives indicates that contrary to overt misogyny, subtle antifeminism is not always easy to discern. Besides, the studies highlight the scarcity of gender perspectives in policies to address inequalities. This can be attributed to a lack of awareness, limited capacity, and resistances within the very same institutes that should fight against discrimination (Mergaert & Lombardo, 2014). A systematic approach to consider gender implications in all aspects of institutional functioning and the specific challenges women face should receive adequate attention (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2016). Throughout history, gender inequalities have been ingrained in societal structures, perpetuating traditional gender roles sustained by the notion that women were inferior to men. These longstanding norms and beliefs have shaped institutions and policies, leading to a lack of recognition of gender as a critical discriminatory element. Also, institutions involved in policy-making and governance have traditionally been dominated by men. When decision-making processes are not inclusive, the

perspectives and experiences of women may be overlooked, leading to a lack of emphasis on addressing gender inequality. Besides, gender discrimination intersects with other forms of unfairness, such as discrimination based on race, class, sexuality, and disability. Institutions struggle to recognize and address the complex ways gender interacts with other forms of discrimination.

Antifeminist and misogynistic content promoted online can harm women offline. Overcoming this requires a concerted effort to challenge and dismantle entrenched gender stereotypes and biases that seemed bygone but are being reinvigorated and used by political polarization. Addressing the lack of institutional awareness about gender involves investigating and raising awareness about the importance of gender equality, providing training and education, fostering gender diversity and inclusion, promoting intersectional perspectives, and engaging with feminist movements, civil society organizations, and experts in gender studies.

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