



5. Gender Perspectives and Ideologies of the Radical Right.

Giorgia Meloni's 2022 Election Campaign

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Abstract

The growing influence of radical right-wing parties has resulted in the consequent dissemination of their ideologies in the media and institutional circles. The ideologies of these political formations show a close relationship with gender issues and the complex and articulated use of these issues is the subject of this paper. Specifically, we aim to analyse how this relationship is also present in the political proposals of the Italian Radical Right Parties during the Electoral Campaign for the 2022 General Elections, starting from the Electoral manifesto of Fratelli d'Italia and Giorgia Meloni's political communication.

Key words

Gender; Radical Right ideologies; Radical Right parties; 2022 Election Campaign in Italy; Giorgia Meloni.

5.1. Introduction¹

Since 2010, through a series of electoral exploits, the parties of the radical right² have confirmed their growth trend by becoming more and more

¹ The analysis and editing of this paper is the result of shared work. Paragraphs 1, 2 and 5 are attributed to Milena Meo. Antonio Tramontana was involved in the drafting of paragraphs 3 and 4.

² Mudde distinguish the 'far right' from the 'radical right'. The former openly oppose the essential principles of democracy and place popular sovereignty and the majority principle at the centre of their policies. The radical right, on the other hand, recognises the essential values of democracy oppose liberal principles (the rights

influential. As they have become increasingly influential, their rise has led to a gradual process of institutionalisation and, consequently, a transformation of the public sphere³. Indeed, radical right parties have been able to adapt aspects belonging to right ideology (often post-fascist) in a globalised context and their main ideas appear more and more freely in institutional and media debates⁴.

As nationalist forces, they propose more cultural homogeneity through the restoration of traditional hierarchies⁵. Presenting themselves as the solution to widespread social insecurities, through the combination of nationalism and xenophobia they propose nativist ideas⁶. Faced with the fear provoked by demographic changes and the menace of national values from multiculturalism, they propose authoritarian policies⁷. In addition to immigration, national identity and the role played by the defence of tradition, the protection of contemporary democracies also passes through gender policies. The latter take on an increasing centrality in their ideologies. This increasing centrality present in their policy proposals and election campaigns⁸

of minorities, the rule of law, the constitutional separation of powers) and present themselves as the guarantors of true democracy (Mudde, C. 2007, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

³ Mudde C., *Op. cit.*

⁴ Caiani, M. (2018). La destra radicale in movimento fra successi elettorali e nuove strategie online. *il Mulino*, 5, 831-838.

⁵ Laruelle, M. (2022). Illiberalism: A conceptual introduction. *East European Politics*, 38(2), pp. 303- 327.

⁶ De Spiegeleire S., Skinner C., Sweijns T. (2017), "The Rise of Populist Sovereignism: What It Is, Where It Comes from, and What It Means for International Security and Defense", *Hague Centre for Strategic Studies*, pp. 23-41; Rydgren J. (2007), "The Sociology of the Radical Right", *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 33, pp. 241-62; Bar-On T. (2018), "The Radical Right and Nationalism", in Rydgren J., *The Oxford Handbook of the Radical Right*, New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 42-74; Mudde C., *Op. cit.*

⁷ Adorno T. W., Frenkel-Brunswik E., Sanford N., Levinson D. (1982), *La personalità autoritaria* (Vol. 3). Anti-semitismo, etnocentrismo e personalità autoritaria, Milano: Edizioni di Comunità; Norris P., Inglehart R. (2019), *Cultural Backlash. Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism*, Cambridge-New-york: Cambridge University Press; Tillman E. R. (2021), *Authoritarianism and the Evolution of West European Electoral Politics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁸ Spierings N., Zaslove A., Mügge L. M., de Lange S. L. (Eds.) (2015), "Gender and Populist Radical Right Politics", *Patterns of Prejudice*, Vol. 49, n. 1-2; Erzéel S., Rashkova E. R. (Eds.) (2017), "Gender and the radical right in comparative perspective", *West European Politics*, Vol. 40, n. 4; Köttig M., Bitzan R., Petö Á. (Eds.) (2017), *Gender and Far Right Politics in Europe*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan;

is considered by Dietze and Roth as a real 'obsession'⁹. Moreover, the use of gender issues has helped to define alliances between radical right-wing parties and movements¹⁰. The use of gender issues has also taken on a strategic character. Used as a rhetorical way, gender issues have often been employed in public debate, becoming a useful communicative tool.

In consonance with the general picture outlined here, the Italian radical right has gradually grown and, as a result, has become institutionalised. The two main parties, the Lega and Fratelli d'Italia, have become the key forces in the formation of the last two national governments. Having grown in electoral and media popularity, they have been able to put forward their ideologies to an ever wider audience, including their ideas on gender issues.

In order to analyse the use of gender issues within the ideologies of the Italian radical right, in the following two paragraphs the theoretical background will be outlined and the literature devoted to the relationship between the radical right and gender issues will be discussed, highlighting the complex relationship and the plurality of areas in which the relationship manifests itself. In order to analyse how this relationship is also present in the political proposals of the Italian radical right, in the fourth section the gender perspective will be used and some results of a research conducted on the electoral campaign for the 2022 general elections will be shown, focusing on the Fratelli d'Italia's electoral manifesto and the political communication of Giorgia Meloni¹¹.

Abou-Chadi T., Breyer M., Gessler T. (2021), "The (Re)Politicisation of Gender in Western Europe", *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, vol. 4, no. 2, pp. 311-314;

⁹ Dietze G., Roth J. (2020), "Right-Wing Populism and Gender: A Preliminary Cartography of an Emergent Field of Research", in Dietze G., Roth J. (Eds.), *Right-Wing Populism and Gender. European Perspectives and Beyond*, Bielefeld: transcript, pp. 7-22.

¹⁰ Kuhar R., Paternotte D. (2018), "'Gender Ideology' in Movement: Introduction", in Kuhar R., Paternotte D. (Eds.), *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against Equality*, London – New York: Rowman & Littlefield, pp. 1-22.

¹¹ The results presented here are part of the research activity that we conducted as members of the local unit of the University of Messina within the context of the PRIN 2020 entitled "Stereotypes and Prejudices: the social representation of gender-based violence and contrast strategies ten years after the Istanbul Convention" coordinated by Prof. Flaminia Saccà.

5.2. Gender perspectives and the radical right

The use of a gender perspective in scholarly studies of radical right¹² have revealed a number of transformations involving these movements. From the point of view of political demand, if until the 1990s empirical research showed that men were more likely than women to vote for radical right-wing parties, the recent literature on electoral behaviour has shown that the difference in voting behaviour between men and women, when it arises, must be related to the domestic political context¹³, confuting the established assumption that such parties tend to be more attractive to the male electorate¹⁴. Some scholars have reviewed the traditional idea that radical right-wing parties are predominantly voted, represented and governed by men (männerparteien)¹⁵.

With regard to the political offer (and thus the internal composition of the parties and their leadership), compared to the consolidated stereotypical image of charismatic male leaders and radical right-wing parties characterised by male-dominated hierarchical structures¹⁶, the presence of militant female activism and the consolidation of women as party leaders has gradually become established¹⁷.

In a context characterised by a masculinity perceived and represented as more suitable for leadership (strong, warriors and vigorous)¹⁸, many women balance traditional gender role images by presenting themselves as strong self-made leaders and, when appropriate, use motherhood as a test of power¹⁹. The female leadership of the radical right, in presenting typically masculine connotations combined with feminine traits, takes on the characteristic of “strongwomen”. As

¹² Spierings et al., (2015), *Op. cit.*; Erzeel S., Rashkova E. R. (Eds.) (2017), *Op. cit.*; Köttig M., Bitzan R., Petö A. (Eds.) (2017), *Op. cit.*

¹³ Donà A. (2020), “What’s gender got to do with populism?”, *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, 27(3), p.3.

¹⁴ Givens T. E. (2004), “The Radical Right Gender Gap”, *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 37 No. 1, p. 30.

¹⁵ Mudde C. (2007), *Op. cit.*

¹⁶ Givens T. E. (2004), *Op. cit.*

¹⁷ Donà A. (2020), *Op. cit.*

¹⁸ Sauer B. (2020), “Authoritarian Right-Wing Populism as Masculinist Identity Politics. The Role of Affects”, in Dietze G., Roth J. (Eds.), *Right-Wing Populism and Gender. European Perspectives and Beyond*, Bielefeld: transcript, pp. 23-40.

¹⁹ Spierings N. (2020), “Why Gender and Sexuality are both Trivial and Pivotal in Populist Radical Right Politics”, in Dietze G., Roth J. (Eds.), *Right-Wing Populism and Gender. European Perspectives and Beyond*, Bielefeld: transcript, p. 47.

Griffini and Montecchio argue, it is not only a hegemonic femininity whose aim is to defend male hegemony – and which asserts itself in parallel to a hegemonic masculinity focused on the protection of weak and vulnerable women who are fundamental to the reproduction of heterosexual families and the Nation²⁰. It is a leadership style based on the fusion of assertive character traits typical of strong men with stereotypical feminine attitudes. It is on the basis of such characteristics that, instead of destroying the hegemonic masculinity that has often defined governance, this style of female leadership tends to reaffirm those power structures that are strongly linked to gender – sometimes inadvertently and implicitly, sometimes strategically and explicitly²¹.

The gender perspective with which to observe the transformations of radical right-wing parties highlights an ongoing process of modernisation and the ability of these formations to compete with other political formations, showing themselves capable of reaching out to a broad electorate and proposing policies that are also oriented towards the needs of a female electorate.

5.3. Gender and ideologies of the radical right

Among the aspects that have led to internal transformations among the political formations of the radical right are also their ideologies, where unprecedented combinations are recorded. Indeed, leaders can often be observed appealing to feminist principles. When use is made of key elements of feminism, such as women's empowerment, according to Dzodan we are in front of forms of 'Alt-Feminism'²². Farris and Rottenberg, for their part, speak of 'righting feminism' to point not only to the presence of a right turn in feminism but also to the way in which the language of women's rights is used to promote policies in opposition to women's empowerment²³.

²⁰ Griffini M., Montecchio L. (2023), "Strongwomen? A Comparative Analysis of Gender Discourse in the Electoral Campaigns of Marine Le Pen and Giorgia Meloni", p. 5.

²¹ Almon L. (2022), "Hegemonic Masculinity and the Contemporary Rise of Female Right-Wing Populist Leaders: The Case of Giorgia Meloni", *Journal of Political Inquiry*, Fall 2022, p. 34.

²² Dzodan F. (2017), "The new Alt-Feminism, when White Supremacy Met Women's Empowerment", <https://medium.com/this-political-woman/the-new-alt-feminism-when-white-supremacy-met-womens-empowerment-b978b088db33>.

²³ Farris S. R., Rottenberg C. (2017), "Introduction: Righting Feminism", *New Formations: A Journal of Culture, Theory, Politics*, 91(3), pp. 5-15.

In this framework, rather than the femininization of their ideologies, it would be a process of reinforcement and radicalisation of the tendency to differentiate and catalogue gender differences hierarchically²⁴. Indeed, gender is often used to make binary divisions within the social body²⁵. By splitting society into two distinct groups, a legitimisation of binary and hierarchical gender distinctions is made. Gender relations are thus reduced to a relation between two sexes (male and female) and on this simplification operates a binary distinction based on biological differences. In addition, gender becomes the element on which the ethnopluralist instance based on which the opposition to different ethnicities is founded. Traditional gender relations constitute a value to be protected against the menace from other cultures. Finally, gender also works as a useful demarcation line to define conflict and to identify the source of moral corruption regarding sexual practices and gender identity. In this sense, feminist activists and LGBTQI+ movements are often included in the enemy side of the spectrum.

The binary and hierarchical divisions of the social body are also powered by nativist impulses and manifested through an instrumental use of feminist themes in the context of Islamophobic campaigns and, more generally, as an argument against the phenomenon of immigration²⁶. By pointing to Islam as a tangible expression of the repression of women, cultural otherness is associated with the idea of an endemic 'backwardness' present in non-Western cultural practices. Islamic 'values' are set against liberal democratic values such as autonomy of the individual, democracy, emancipation of homosexuals and women, equality between men and women, freedom of expression. In this sense, the radical right presents itself as the last stand in the defence of gender equality, women's rights and freedom of choice, even posing as champions of women's rights, accusing feminists and the left parties of neglecting the discrimination of immigrant (and Muslim) women²⁷.

²⁴ Meo M., Tramontana A. (2024), "Gender issues e ideologia della destra radicale italiana. La difesa della tradizione tra femminilismo e nativismo", *Sociologia. Rivista quadrimestrale di Scienze Storiche e Sociali*, LVIII, n.2, pp. 54-63.

²⁵ Sauer B. (2020), "Authoritarian Right-Wing Populism as Masculinist Identity Politics. The Role of Affects", in Dietze G., Roth J. (Eds.), *Right-Wing Populism and Gender. European Perspectives and Beyond*, Bielefeld: transcript, pp. 23-40.

²⁶ Farris S. R. (2019), *Femnazionalismo. Il razzismo nel nome delle donne*, Roma: Alegre.

²⁷ Akkerman T. (2015), "Gender and the Radical Right in Western Europe: a Comparative Analysis of Policy Agendas", *Patterns of Prejudice*, Vol. 49, No. 1-2, p. 40.

By emphasising the social group's demand for conformity, the valorisation and defence of traditional values and consolidated lifestyles constitute a vehicle with which to activate processes of exclusion of otherness. In this sense, the traditional family plays a central role. Indeed, the latter is presented as the foundation of society and the core from which biological, social and cultural reproduction can be guaranteed²⁸. Faced with the social threat posed by (ethnic, sexual and cultural) pluralism, the heteronormative family is the framework on which to build the struggle for the defence and reproduction of national identity, imposing a homogeneous vision and, with it, a specific image of the family, gender and sexual roles. On the basis of such sexual complementarity, while on the one hand heteronormative relations are reified, on the other hand, as Arfini et al. argue, an organicist, hierarchical and functionalist view of society is imposed²⁹. Thus, as Dietze and Roth argue, hierarchical gender binarism is based on the essential category of societal order, and the gender perspective is a tool to fight against the dissolution of 'natural' orders³⁰.

Exploiting the anxieties experienced in a climate of uncertainty, an invocation is made for the defence of cultural homogeneity and the protection of traditional hierarchies³¹. Pointing to the origin of these anxieties and fears in the 'excesses' of liberalism – and thus to the emphasis on individualism, multiculturalism, pluralism and globalism – they contrast with claims based on the politics of differences. In this sense, 'gender ideology' represents on the one hand a kind of generic term with which to cluster multiple attacks (e.g. on gender studies, abortion rights, LGBTQI+ rights, etc.)³² and on the other hand the articulated formation of social groups and movements whose aim is to discredit the political opponent and influence public debate³³. In addition to the

²⁸ Hall J. E. (2023) "The Family and the Nation: The Centrality of Gender Politics in the Rise of European Illiberalism", *Claremont-UC Undergraduate Research Conference on the European Union*, Vol. 2023, Article 10, p. 90.

²⁹ Arfini E., Ghigi R., Magaraggia S. (2019), "Can Feminism Be Right? A Content Analysis of Discourses about Women by Female Italian Right-Wing Politicians", *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia*, a. LX, n. 4, p. 711.

³⁰ Dietze G., Roth J. (2020), *Op. cit.*, p. 15.

³¹ Laruelle, M. (2022), *Op. cit.*, p. 304.

³² Schmincke I. (2020), "Sexual Politics from the Right. Attacks on Gender, Sexual Diversity, and Sex Education", in Dietze G., Roth J. (Eds.), *Right-Wing Populism and Gender. European Perspectives and Beyond*, Bielefeld: transcript, p. 61.

³³ Wielowiejski P. (2020), "Identitarian Gays and Threatening Queers, Or: How the

establishment of a bloc to oppose progressive ideas that are the product of a corrupt and dangerous liberal elite³⁴, the opposition to gender ideology allows for the focus on proposals for social reforms such as: sexual and reproductive rights, the right to marriage and adoption for people of the same sex, sex education, and the use of reproductive technologies³⁵. On the other, this opposition becomes an integral part of the anti-pluralist and illiberal project inextricably linked to the struggle for the recovery of national identity through the defence and promotion of the traditional family (Hall, 2023, p. 88)³⁶.

5.4. Gender and the radical right in Italy in the 2022 Election campaign

With respect to the general framework traced so far, even the Italian radical right, through the process of institutionalisation and, after experiencing a gradual rise, having enjoyed a growing electoral and media popularity, have been able to put forward their ideologies to an ever wider audience. In presenting their ideologies, it was not uncommon for them to show how gender issues became progressively more central in defining their ideologies and positioning these formations in the political arena. Focusing on Fratelli d'Italia and its leader, some results of an research still in progress will be presented below, the aim of which is to analyse how the relationship between gender and the radical right is also present in Italian political proposals. For this purpose, we defined the time frame of the analysis to the period of the election campaign for the General elections in 2022. In order to get a grasp of the complexity of areas in which gender issues have been shown to influence the Italian radical right field, we analysed the official party discourse and Meloni's discourse and chose to use three different sources of data: the Election manifesto of Fratelli d'Italia's 2022 General election campaign, Meloni's Twitter profile and her autobiographical

Far Right Constructs New Chains of Equivalence", in in Dietze G., Roth J. (Eds.), *Right-Wing Populism and Gender. European Perspectives and Beyond*, Bielefeld: transcript, p. 136.

³⁴ Graff, A. (2021), "Anti-gender mobilization and right-wing populism", in Fabian K., Johnson J. E., Lazda M., (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of gender in Central Eastern Europe and Eurasia*, New York: Routledge, pp. 266.

³⁵ Kuhar R., Paternotte D. (2018), *Op. cit.*, p. 5.

³⁶ Hall J. E. (2023), *Op. cit.*, p. 88.

book entitled *Io sono Giorgia. Le mie radici, le mie idee* (= I'm Giorgia. My roots, my ideas)³⁷. The various set of these sources, we believe, can make it possible to report some of the complexity of areas in which gender issues have been shown to have influenced the field of the Italian radical right.

In order to bring out thematic areas common to the three different data sources, Qualitative Content Analysis techniques were used³⁸. At least three recurring themes thus emerged. The first concerns the way in which equality issues are treated and specifically the selective use of feminist themes. At the basis of what can be defined as the naturalisation of gender distinctions are the aspects that concern the second issue: the valorisation of the traditional family and the set of values from which derives a heteronormative definition of the role of women as motherhood, as well as the establishment of a series of limits placed on reproductive rights. Finally, the third theme concerns the use of gender issues to legitimise a sovereignist vision and establish a series of ethnic, cultural and identity exclusions.

5.4.1. Save the women

Women's rights is an area where there is a selective appropriation of feminist issues whose aim is to make right parties less radical. In her book Meloni writes: 'I sincerely hope that these arguments of mine do not come across as what they are not, namely linked to a passatist view of the role of women, but that they can instead be considered common ground for reflection on what is needed to modernise Italy'³⁹.

The propensity to modernise their ideologies is realised through a combinatorial operation that brings together liberal and often feminist claims in a neo-conservative perspective. This combination emerges in the chapter of Meloni's book entitled 'The Strong Sex'. Here, more than elsewhere, the profile of strongwomen emerges⁴⁰, through which connotations of typically male leadership (being strong, warriors, vigorous

³⁷ The following translations of the empirical material are ours.

³⁸ Kracauer S. (1952), "The Challenge of Qualitative Content Analysis", *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 16(4), pp. 631-642; Krippendorff K. (2004), *Content Analysis. An Introduction to Its Methodology*, London: Sage; Schreier M. (2012), *Qualitative Content Analysis in Practice*, London: Sage.

³⁹ Meloni G. (2021), *Io sono Giorgia. Le mie radici, le mie idee*, Milano: Rizzoli, p. 145.

⁴⁰ Griffini M., Montecchio L. (2023), Op. cit.

and assertive) combined with feminine traits are presented⁴¹. The assertive traits typical of strong men merge with stereotypical female attitudes when Meloni writes that

I always knew that a leader must be a leader, must prove that he is the strongest, the bravest, that he is the one capable of leading the community beyond difficulties. I was always clear that my being a tiny blonde girl could be an obstacle, an element of weakness. However, this did not stop me: I simply had to show more courage and, sometimes, I realised that it would even be useful to resort to a certain amount of madness⁴².

Strategic progressivism, made up of calculated ambivalence, entails not a promotion of feminism but of women. By emphasising the figure of femininity, it is the image of women as such that is exalted. On this point Meloni writes

I am convinced that a greater qualified female presence in decision-making places would help to raise the moral level and productive efficiency of our ruling class, which is at times weak, indolent, and prone to trampling all forms of work ethics⁴³.

The exaltation of women entails the neutralisation of any claim to emancipation, but at the same time it makes it possible to politicise femininity and make it a political resource.

The strategic artifice concerning the appeal to liberal values is also used to address the issue of abortion. Fratelli d'Italia proposes to fully implement the law protecting the voluntary interruption of pregnancy⁴⁴, while Meloni repeats the same principle with a victimising intent. In two tweets his position is better articulated. On 16 September 2022 he writes: "We clarify (once again) our position on the abortion law. No more lies!"⁴⁵. 11 September reaffirms the same principle by writing: 'Our position on the abortion law. Enough falsehoods from the left against @FratellidItalia'⁴⁶. The two tweets are supported by respective videos taken from television speeches in which Giorgia Meloni herself

⁴¹ Sauer B. (2020), Op. cit.

⁴² Meloni G. (2021), Op. cit., p. 70.

⁴³ Meloni G. (2021), Op. cit., p. 64.

⁴⁴ Fratelli d'Italia (2022), *Pronti a risollevare l'Italia*, p. 5.

⁴⁵ <https://twitter.com/GiorgiaMeloni/status/1570825078421573632>.

⁴⁶ <https://twitter.com/GiorgiaMeloni/status/1568874880468140032>.

advances a series of reassurances with respect to the accusation of wanting to change or abolish Law No. 194. Instead, it claims to want to apply it in its integrity, referring to the part hidden by an 'ideological approach' and concerning prevention. She opposes the 'supposed feminists' and claims that women's self-determination is not at question. On the contrary, in granting an alternative to abortion, she says she wants to protect women and their freedom of choice.

5.4.2. Defending tradition

The traditional family plays a prominent role. The Fratelli d'Italia programme includes a quote from John Paul II in which he states that "the family is the founding element of society and what makes "a nation truly sovereign and spiritually strong" (John Paul II)"⁴⁷. The quotation placed in the introduction to the themes devoted to the family is a vivid example of Hall's argument and thus represents a possible way of presenting the family as the foundation of society and the core from which biological, social and cultural reproduction can be guaranteed⁴⁸. The appeal to one of the highest Catholic authorities, in making sacred the type of family they refer to, at the same time naturalises heteronormative roles, imposing a homogenous vision and, with it, a specific image of the family, gender and sex roles. In this regard, small claims of women's care work are embedded subtly in the description of everyday family intimacy that Meloni gives in her book

when I'm at home I don't mind taking care of household things. In fact, some tasks, especially tidying up, relax me. I also like to cook, but I cannot say that others always like to eat what I prepare. In any case, if I cook, I don't necessarily expect Andrea to wash the dishes. I wash them just as happily, provided that there is good music to listen to while I do it. (...) When I am at home I walk behind him and Geneva, and every time they move something, I put it back. I must be a disturbing figure in their eyes. And perhaps also to yours, if you came to my door unannounced. Because you would risk finding me like this: teddy bear sweatshirt, hair held in a mess with a clip and hoover in hand. Other than Dr Jekyll and

⁴⁷ Fratelli d'Italia (2022), *Op. cit.*, p. 5.

⁴⁸ Hall J. E. (2023), *Op. cit.*, p. 90.

Mr Hyde, we are quicker to transform ourselves from career women walking briskly in high heels to fierce labourers in fleece pyjamas⁴⁹.

Based on this sexual complementarity, while on the one hand it naturalizes heteronormative roles and reified the related hierarchy between men and women, on the other hand, as Arfini et al. state, an organicist, hierarchical, and functionalist vision of society is imposed⁵⁰. For Meloni

Our founding fathers, not narrow-minded bigots, chose to include the so-called favor familiae in the Constitution—a dedicated legislation designed to encourage a stable union between a man and a woman through a series of benefits. For a simple reason that has nothing to do with individual emotional spheres: because the state needs a family formed by a man and a woman who marry⁵¹.

5.4.3. Exclude otherness

Presenting itself as a force opposed to the excesses of liberalism—thus to the emphasis on individualism, multiculturalism, and pluralism—the party and its leader act in opposition to all those claims that base their politics on the value of difference and position themselves as profoundly illiberal political formations⁵². The anti-pluralist and illiberal project, inextricably linked to the struggle to reclaim national identity through the defense and promotion of the traditional family, is also carried out by establishing a demarcation line useful for defining the source of moral corruption. In this sense, both LGBTQI+ movements and feminist activists constitute a single front united by the goal of spreading the dictates of single-minded thinking: “According to the priests of single-minded thinking, you must be free to do anything. (...) You must be free to define yourself as a woman even if you are not, as a man even if you are not⁵³ (Meloni, 2016, p. 135).

⁴⁹ Meloni G. (2021), *Op. cit.*, pp. 152-3.

⁵⁰ Arfini E., et al. (2019), *Op. cit.*, p. 711.

⁵¹ Meloni G. (2021), *Op. cit.*, p. 136.

⁵² Hall J. E. (2023), *Op. cit.*

⁵³ Meloni G. (2021), *Op. cit.*, p. 135.

The illiberal approach, which aims to counter pluralistic claims, also operates through the strategic and selective use of liberal and feminist demands to assert conservative principles and values:

Once again, everyone is free to feel however they wish, to adopt the label they identify with the most. But when individual behaviors give way to the norms that regulate collective life, to the principles applied to all, the attempt to 'protect' someone risks creating new injustices. When taken to the extreme, gender theory could have enormous consequences and would end up discriminating primarily against women. And it is strange that, at times, some feminists themselves are the main sponsors of these bizarre theories⁵⁴.

The same use of (selectively employed) liberal claims takes on a xenophobic connotation when certain feminist themes are used in Islamophobic campaigns. Femonationalism⁵⁵, largely built on the portrayal of Islam as an expression of repression of individual freedoms, is used as a tool to oppose the pluralist demands present within society and as a threat to Western freedoms that affects both Italians and migrant women alike.

5.5 Conclusions

Overall, gender issues serve as a battleground for further defining the ideologies of radical right-wing parties and, at the same time, for asserting the hegemony of their ideas

By appealing to gender equality to appear more modern, and by shaping radical right-wing ideologies into a blend of conservatism and liberal claims, the issue of equality becomes a domain where ideology operates along an axis that rigidly separates gender identities, ultimately establishing a hierarchy of gender roles. The selective use of feminist themes focuses on the activation of stereotypes aimed not only at restoring traditional gender roles. At the same time, this selective use allows for the employment of stereotypical femininity traits to legitimize Meloni's leadership. Her leadership, in fact, combines her maternal experience with the assertive traits typical of strongmen

⁵⁴ Meloni G. (2021), *Op. cit.*, p. 150.

⁵⁵ Farris S. R. (2019), *Op. cit.*

The strategic use of feminist claims does not change the ideological framework of the radical right to the extent that it is limited to promoting the role of women. The appeal to women's free determination by the parties and leaders of the Italian radical right, as well as the exaltation of the intrinsic qualities of women, can not only be understood as a process of neutralizing any claim for emancipation. The very exaltation of women becomes a political resource to initiate a process of politicizing femininity. In this context, motherhood and reproductive rights represent thematic areas through which mechanisms for defending the traditional family are activated, presenting themselves as a force guaranteeing cultural homogeneity and the protection of traditional hierarchies.

The illiberal approach, which aims to counter pluralistic claims, can also be found in the use of liberal demands (used selectively) with xenophobic connotations. When certain feminist themes are employed in Islamophobic campaigns, the image of Islam is constructed as an expression of the repression of individual freedoms. Presenting itself as the last bastion defending gender equality, women's rights, and freedom of choice, even posing as champions of women's rights, a demarcation line is drawn in which Islam is opposed to liberal democratic values.

Fratelli d'Italia and Meloni demonstrate how the inclusion of gender issues does not necessarily lead to transformations within a political organization. In some cases, it even leads to a strengthening and radicalization of the tendency to differentiate and hierarchically categorize these differences, allowing them to use such issues in rhetorical and strategic terms, expanding the field on which they can create alliances and hegemony. It can be said that we are witnessing a process of politicization both of femininities and of sexual and gender differences, thereby acting in a field where new conflicts are emerging and where they seem to focus their efforts to gain support

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