Anti-gender Backlash in Europe: First Findings and Recommendations

Key findings:

1) EU citizens' attitudes towards women in positions of power and responsibility have improved since 2009. However, about 1/3 of EU citizens would not feel comfortable with an LGBTQI+ person in the highest position of power.
2) Gender norms remain a factor behind the gender gap in political involvement in EU-27 Member States and the UK.
3) An in-depth analysis of Austrian longitudinal survey data revealed a re-traditionalization of women's gender role attitudes due to Covid-19 pandemic policies in Austria.
4) An in-depth analysis of Italian longitudinal survey data revealed that Covid-19 policies moderated changes in trust in political institutions and risk preferences of employed mothers in Italy.
5) An in-depth analysis of family policies in Hungary revealed their discriminatory character.
6) Preliminary results from the analysis of X (formerly Twitter) data show variation in anti-gender equality actors' positions on gender issues, the topics they engage with, and the strategies they use. These preliminary findings suggest that it appears that there is no "monolithic" anti-gender equality movement on social media platform X.
7) Multiple context-specific strategies to counteract anti-gender discourses have emerged in EU-27 Member States and the UK, illustrating the need to tailor approaches to the unique challenges and opportunities in each country, with the EU serving as a model and a champion of change in the field of gender equality.

Anti-Gender Backlash: Background

Democracies in Europe and beyond have been experiencing deterioration in their quality, and the number of democracies in the world has been decreasing. Worldwide, only 38% of people live in a democratic country, while 5.7 billion people, or 72% (up from 46% in 2012) live in autocracies today (Papada et al. 2023). Russia has championed the legitimation of these autocratization efforts by offering an ideological alternative to the Western liberal values that includes an emphasis on traditional heteronormative family values that reduce women to their biological reproductive function, and strong opposition to the protection of rights and freedoms of the LGBTQI+ persons. These ideas have echoed across EU democracies.

In recent years, Europe has made significant progress in advancing women's rights and achieving gender equality. However, there has been certain pushback that indicates opposition to these progressive politics and policies. As feminism grows, so too do anti-feminisms, a multifaceted and complex set of phenomena characterized by individual, collective, and institutional opposition

to gender equality. These counter-movements contest the ideas, policies, and people that make up the feminist movement (Lamoureux & Dupuis-Déri, 2015).

Anti-feminism is an organized counter-movement in and across diverse cultural and historical contexts that seeks to undermine and counteract the accomplishments of the feminist movement in economic, social, and political arenas (Zald & Useem, 1987; Bonet-Martí, 2021). The anti-feminist backlash is part of a broad network of (neo)conservative discourses and practices fed by misogyny, sexism, and chauvinism. However, it cannot be reduced to any of these. Anti-feminism is a set of beliefs, practices, discourses, actions, and subjectivities that promote mobilizations and attacks against feminist agendas to the detriment of women's and LGBTQI+ people's rights.

Another widespread form of anti-feminism is the anti-gender movement, which questions the concept of gender, discrediting its notions as an ideology. "Gender ideology" is a discursive strategy devised by the Vatican and adopted by various actors to challenge feminist ideas and agendas for equal rights for women and LGBTQI+ people (Faur & Viveros, 2020). Christian-based religious anti-feminism is pursued by both Catholics and evangelicals. These forms of anti-feminism decry the social and moral instability allegedly triggered by contemporary feminism (Gago, 2020). Two key factors contributed to the emergence of this type of antifeminism: the Vatican's opposition to both the agenda of the Cairo Conference of 1994 and the Beijing Conference of 1995 as well as the Catholic Church's growing support for mobilizations against the decriminalization of abortion and equal marriage, especially in European countries (Bonet-Martí, 2021).

Anti-feminist backlash can occur on both an individual and an institutional level. On a micro level, people may resist feminist ideas and actions because they perceive them as threatening to their status, identity, or beliefs. On a macro level, backlash can occur through policy changes or social practices that seek to roll back feminist gains or undermine their legitimacy. This backlash is not a universal or inevitable response to feminism but rather a social and cultural phenomenon that varies in manifestation across different contexts and historical periods.

It is notable that the attitudes to gender equality often serve as a metaphorical seismograph that foretells the deteriorating situation of fundamental rights and values (including democracy and the rule

of law) in a given society. Efforts to restrict or undermine women's rights frequently signify broader societal conflict. Scholars suggest that such tendencies to erode progress in women's rights represent "the tip of the iceberg" of a vaster phenomenon, which is accurately captured by the notion of the rule of law backsliding (Bárd et al. 2021) and slow and incremental deterioration in the quality of democratic norms and institutions (Waldner and Lust 2018).

To learn more, please see: Integrated report on the contributions of feminist theory.

EU Citizens' Attitudes Towards Women and LGBTQI+ People in Leadership Positions: A Slow Progress

Women continue to be under-represented in the positions of power in the EU. The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) reports that in 2023 women hold 33% of seats in the EU parliament, and only 34% of ministers are women.

At the same time, attitudes towards women in positions of responsibility have become more supportive over time. While in 2009, still 31.6% of men and 22.8% of women agreed that 'women do not have the necessary qualities and skills to fill positions of responsibility', this decreased about 10% for men and 5% for women in 2017.

The 2019 Eurobarometer data also show that 93% of EU citizens say that they would be comfortable with women in the highest political position, but only 65% would feel comfortable with a homosexual or bisexual person in the same position, and even fewer, 56%, would feel

comfortable with a transgender person in the highest position of power.

These findings reflect an increase in supportive attitudes towards women in positions of power and responsibility but indicate there is room for improvement when it comes to the inclusion of homosexual and transgender individuals into leadership positions.

To learn more, please see: Tracking gender equality infographic.

Gender Norms Continue to Predict Lower Levels of Women's Political Involvement

Evidence from the analysis of the 2017 Eurobarometer data from 28 EU (at the time) countries shows that both men and women who hold more traditional gender role attitudes, namely, they believe that women's place is in the private sphere of the home and the family and men's place is in the public sphere, are less likely to discuss national politics than those with more egalitarian views. This association is much stronger for women, indicating that holding traditional gender role attitudes can have a particularly negative effect on political involvement of women. Stereotypes about women in politics, on the other hand, have no additional effect at the individual level.

Similar relationships are observed regarding gender norms at the country level. The analyses show that in countries where gender norms tend to be more traditional, women (but not men) are less politically involved. Evidence also shows that political gender stereotypes, on the aggregate level, have a negative effect on women's political involvement. This suggests that in countries, where traditional norms and stereotypes prevail, women tend to be discouraged from taking an active interest in political matters.

These findings indicate that to close a gender gap in political involvement, traditional gender norms and (negative) stereotypes of women in politics need to be tackled.

Re-traditionalization of Women's Gender Role Attitudes due to Covid-19 Pandemic in Austria

Previous research has shown how the outbreak of the COID-19 pandemic led many families to revert to the traditional division of labor, with women disproportionately affected by the closure of schools and childcare facilities. Yet, we know little of whether these changes in employment and care work patterns during the pandemic have also impacted gender role attitudes.

Evidence from the analysis of the "Values in Crisis" data, a representative panel survey of the Austrian population in 2020-2022, shows that the changes in gender role attitudes were complex - but largely followed the changes in lived realities. This means that women who reported taking on additional childcare responsibilities in the first wave of the survey tended to become more conservative in their gender role attitudes in the second wave of the survey, suggesting that changes in behavior can lead to changes in attitudes. In contrast, the assumption of childcare responsibilities by men had the opposite effect, making men adopt more egalitarian gender role attitudes.

The findings suggest that changes in attitudes can follow – rather than precede – changes in behavior. This means that even a temporary return to traditional split of household chores and care work could potentially lead to more lasting changes in attitudes, suggesting that the effects of COVID-19 on gender equality could be more persistent than expected. On the flip side, the findings also suggest that policies that effect a change in gendered behavior, such as certain types of work-family policies, might lead to longer-term adjustment in gender role attitudes towards egalitarianism.

Impact of Covid-19 Policies on Employed Mothers' Political Trust and Risk Preferences in Italy

Italy is among the countries that enforced the strongest pandemic restrictions. This is especially the case for containment measures that are likely

to have a gendered impact, such as school closures. At the same time, women bore heavy socio-economic costs of the pandemic, accounting for 73% of job losses in 2020. Earlier studies have found that because women tend to be more cautious about taking risks based on gender differences, they were more inclined to favor putting health safety first over the economy. This also translated into greater support for government actions during the pandemic. Yet, this gendered divide in preferences has been shown to wane later in the pandemic.

Italy constitutes an interesting case to explore the impact of Covid-19 policies on risk preferences and trust in government due to regional variation in pandemic response policies between the North and the South. After the first pandemic wave, contrary to the South of Italy, northern regions had limited school closures, including limited closures of primary schools.

Analysis of the longitudinal survey data spanning 2020-2021 from the "ResPOnsE COVID-19 project" shows that while in the South of Italy initial support for Covid-19 government response was higher, it drastically dropped later in the pandemic, especially among mothers. The same is not the case in the North where mothers did not significantly decrease their support for response policies more than fathers, unlike mothers in the South. Please note that these results only hold for employed parents. Taken together, these findings indicate that gendered policies moderate changes in trust in political institutions and risk preferences of employed mothers during Covid-19.

Discriminatory Family Policies in Hungary

Discourse analysis of family policies in Hungary has revealed pro-natalist and anti-gender equality and anti-LGBTQI+ themes. This policy regime emphasizes that women are expected to combine the dual roles of child bearers and workers while minimizing the effect of a double burden on women, who also are expected to do the majority of care work at home. Additionally, family policy measures support higher-status families with two

working parents and give little or no support to low-status or unemployed families, thus tying family support to employment. Members from minority groups (i.e., Roma) with low employment rates cannot benefit from the family policy measures, as they are linked to employment. However, even when they do get employed, they still have limited access to care institutions and fewer resources to pay for them, making the double-burden of work and care more pronounced for them. Overall, family policies in Hungary tend to support the families that need the least support and do little for the support of families in need. They also overlook the needs of single-parent families. It is recommended to make family support more inclusive of various types of families.

Online Anti-Gender Equality Mobilizations and Counter Strategies

Social media (X, YouTube) have played a big role in fostering the mobilizations of anti-gender equality actors and providing a platform for their views and campaigns. We have identified 110 most prominent pro- and anti-gender equality actors working on international level and on national level in Austria, Germany, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, and the UK. 60,000 tweets ranging from 2018 to 2023 by these actors have been retrieved.

First, very preliminary, findings show that across years abortion and reproductive rights are frequently reoccurring topics observed in all countries. Both pro- and anti-gender actors engage with these topics, but in different ways. Pro-gender equality actors frame the topic as health care and self-determination issue focusing on the impact of (lack of) abortion accessibility on women's lives. In contrast, anti-gender equality actors frame the topic in terms of morality, that is the "murder of innocent life". The abortion topic demonstrates a general pattern we see so far, that is anti-gender equality actors appeal to emotions and invoke moral concerns when discussing gender equality issues.

In Poland and Hungary, prevalent topic that emerged is school education about gender

diversity and sexual orientation. Pro-gender equality actors warn about the consequences of government implemented or suggested laws to prohibit education about these topics, while anti-gender equality actors celebrate the same laws as protecting children from indoctrination.

In Western European countries, we find an intensifying debate about inclusion of trans people. Namely, anti-gender equality actors as well as some feminist and LGBTQI+ actors are campaigning against the inclusion of trans people in sports and for biological women only spaces in public.

The topic of violence against women does emerge frequently in discussions of pro-gender equality actors, especially in discussions of international actors. There are three main ways in which it is discussed. First, actors try raising awareness by providing facts/numbers on the prevalence of violence against women/gender-based violence. Second, actors call on governments and institutions to make better laws to prevent online and offline violence but also to punish transgressions harder. Third, actors share the guidelines on how to be safe online/offline, and also how to report violence to official institutions. Anti-gender equality actors rarely mention violence against women. In the rare occasions that it is a topic, trans women are often framed as the perpetrators and a threat to women's safety, or victims are either blamed or discredited as liars.

Both pro- and anti-gender equality actors, which are primarily active/based in Europe, engage with gender-equality issues emerging across the world. For example, the protests in Iran or the anti-homosexuality laws in Uganda have received great attention by the actors. The reception of these events depends on the actor's own stand on the issue, and it seems that positive endorsement of one issue is not necessarily associated with the positive endorsement of other issues. For example, some anti-gender equality actors support the protest in Iran and also endorse the anti-homosexuality laws, while others support the protest, but do not endorse the anti-homosexuality laws. This highlights that with both groups - anti- and pro-gender equality actors - there is a wide range of variation among actors which implies that there are no two monolithic opposing groups, but rather that actors differ along multiple dimensions and pro- and anti-gender equality positions should potentially be considered on a continuum.

How Feminist Theory Advances Our Understanding and Practice of Democracy

Western and non-Western feminist research seeks to challenge and transform discriminatory and exclusionary political structures and practices and promote gender equality and gender justice in democratic practices and processes.

Western and non-Western feminist theories of democracy encompass a range of approaches that highlight the gendered and intersectional dimensions of political power within democratic systems.

While feminist theories of democracy can vary in their specific emphasis and approaches, some central concepts, such as citizenship, participation, and representation, feature prominently.

A feminist theory of democracy seeks to empower women and members from the historically underrepresented groups politically by making their membership, participation, and representation efficacious and promoting their active engagement and influence in political processes.

Transnational gender equality programs or national domestic policies often misrepresent marginalized and excluded women or otherwise make them invisible, as argued by Roma Feminism, Postcolonial-queer-feminist Studies, and Feminist Disability Studies.

Contemporary feminist analysis of democratic theory engages with intersectional analysis (examination of how different social categories such as race, ethnicity, class, migratory status, and disability produce specific forms of inequality and discrimination within democratic practices and processes), transnational perspectives, political-

economic questions, planetary and environmental concerns, social reproduction and care ethics, and the challenges and possibilities presented by technology, including online participation and deliberation.

Emphasizing gender equality acknowledges the historical marginalization and exclusion of various groups like women, LGBTQI+ individuals, people with disabilities, as well as Roma and Muslim communities in Europe. This focus aims to challenge and change existing power imbalances by including these groups in decision-making processes. It is not sufficient to have representatives of these groups in political positions; their presence should also lead to meaningful changes in policies, priorities, and decision-making processes that address women's and other historically underrepresented groups' concerns and interests.

Gendering democracy means a substantive practice of democracy understood as 1) a form of government that protects and enforces values such as pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity, and equality; 2) a political regime that commits to pluralism.

Feminist approaches to democracy acknowledge that although the role of rights cannot be underestimated when mitigating gendered vulnerability and discrimination, the law does not always guarantee justice.

To learn more, please see: Integrated report on the contributions of feminist theory.

Effective Practices to Resist Attacks on Gender Equality: Lessons from the EU, 27 Member States, and the UK

Governments, political parties, and civil society actors, primarily women's rights organizations have been implementing strategies to counteract attacks on gender equality and democracy and to resist anti-gender discourses and practices.

Legislative and policy frameworks were analyzed for EU, 27 Member States and the UK between 2010-2023.

Over 50 EU-level strategies emerged and were categorized into four clusters: legislative reforms, advocacy, addressing structural inequalities, and building networks and alliances among pro-gender equality civil society actors.

The EU serves as a champion in fostering gender equality reforms within its Member States and candidate countries to align with its standards on gender equality. The EU's commitment to gender equality has positioned it as a global leader, as evidenced by its accession to the Istanbul Convention in 2023. However, despite progress, gender equality remains a contested concept within the EU, with challenges stemming from anti-feminist sentiments and political opposition. Disagreement and resistance to gender equality persist, particularly in the European Parliament, where Eurosceptic groups impede the adoption of new measures.

Similarly, the European Council faces challenges in advancing gender-related initiatives due to opposition from some Member States. While recognizing the importance of the EU's gender equality policy and legal structures in framing pushback strategies, the analysis has uncovered certain challenges and possibilities.

These include:

- Limited emphasis on women's quantitative underrepresentation.
- The need for greater attention to intersectionality.
- The misunderstanding of 'gender mainstreaming,' and the necessity of engaging men in tackling gender imbalances.

Multiple context-specific strategies to counteract anti-gender discourses have emerged in 27 Member States and the UK, illustrating the need to tailor approaches to the unique challenges and opportunities in each country.

Most visible strategies include:

- Initiatives that empower and engage women, including women with migrant backgrounds and, in some countries, LGBTQI+ individuals, in local politics and tackle gender stereotypes in leadership. I.e., "Citizenship Workshops" (France), "Women in Politics Training" (Poland), "Women Breaking Barriers" (Spain), "Civic Empowerment Workshops" (Greece).
- Advocacy (i.e., lobbying for the ratification of the Istanbul Convention).
- Legislative reforms (i.e., the Swedish Consent Act of 2018, the German 2018 Act on Pay Transparency).
- Promotion of gender-inclusive curricula to fight stereotypes and misinformation (Sweden, Italy, Portugal).
- Promotion of gender-sensitive educational materials (Sweden, Denmark, Spain, Germany, Finland, the Netherlands).
- Empowerment of marginalized voices (the UK, the Netherlands, Sweden).
- Empowerment of women with disabilities (Sweden, Germany, Ireland, Finland, the UK, Croatia).
- Initiatives to engage men and boys (Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Germany, Ireland, Spain, the Netherlands, Portugal, Belgium, Austria).
- Grassroot organizing and networking among pro-gender equality actors (transnationally and nationally in Poland, Hungary, Greece, Bulgaria, Malta, Italy, France, Spain, the UK).

To learn more, please see: The pushback against anti-gender discourses: preliminary report.

Preliminary Recommendations

1. **Build agency and autonomy of women and historically underrepresented groups** (i.e., gender mainstreaming, diversity and inclusion programs, micro-credit and women-owned business support, democratic education).

2. **Empower women and** other historically **underrepresented groups** to run for office and participate in politics and political discussions in other ways.

3. **Improve substantive representation –** consider issues and lived experiences of various groups of women and subgroups of historically underrepresented people in policy-making process and policies and **design targeted solutions.**

4. **Consult stakeholders from underrepresented backgrounds** for solutions that will work for their groups.

5. **Design online spaces and systems** (including artificial intelligence algorithms) used for democratic processes and procedures **free from existing biases** and discriminatory norms. Consult social scientists and feminist scholars and members from the historically underrepresented groups to ensure the algorithms and online systems do not perpetuate inequalities and systematically disadvantage some groups.

6. **Audit existing systems and procedures** to ensure they do not perpetuate biases and inequalities and are accessible and inclusive of the historically underrepresented groups.

7. **Conduct systematic comparative analysis on post-adoption implementation** of **gender equality policies**. This approach is rarely used, but it can reveal the conditions conducive to effective policies.

8. **Emphasize monitoring, reporting, and impact assessment mechanisms** to ensure the thorough evaluation of policy impact.

9. **Adopt comprehensive and transformative policies** that challenge inequality-perpetuating societal norms and structures. These policies should go beyond surface-level changes and address the root causes of gender inequality and the rise of anti-gender actors and rhetoric.

10. **Integrate an intersectional approach to policy development.** Recognize and address the intersecting factors of discrimination and inequality by giving voice to the members of historically underrepresented groups.

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