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## From neglect to threat: feminist responses to right wing populism in the European Union

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores the response of a European Union (EU) feminist civil society organization (CSO) the European Women's Lobby (EWL) to right wing populist opposition (RWP) to gender equality in Europe. RWP forces rely on gender politics to advance their projects co-opting ideas used by feminists at the same time vilifying feminist idea and actors. Feminist oppositions to RWP are as such complicated by how RWP forces co-opt constructions of gender justice and the proximity between RWP and feminist critiques of economic governance, austerity and EU integration. The EWL work to counter RWP frameworks but are tied to EU imperatives, weakened by austerity and a neglect of gender equality at EU level. Social movement concepts of framing theory are applied to the EWL response to reveal counter framing directed to EU elites, underlining how illiberal threats to gender equality are emblematic of a deeper crisis facing European democracies and as such deserving of a robust and well-resourced defence. Frame saving aims to re-politicise gender equality as an EU ideal and feminism as a project for the common good. RWP opposition to gender equality creates a discursive opportunity for the EWL to claim relevance as a vanguard of progressive anti-populist values in Europe.

### KEYWORDS

Gender equality; right wing populism; feminism; European Union

Faith based and fundamentalist groups have worked to undermine gender justice for decades (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018), however, the current context sees the rise of nationalism, right wing populism (RWP) and xenophobic forces threatening liberal democracy, gender and minority rights in Europe and beyond (Verloo & Paternotte, 2018). Alongside and interacting with these threats are changes in the political opportunity context supportive of gender equality.

Two interrelated political developments shape opposition to gender equality. First, policy backsliding where policies supportive of gender equality are eradicated or undermined and discourse is used to de-legitimate gender equality as a policy objective (Roggeband & Krizsan, 2018, p. 39). Second, a narrowing of opportunities for civil society engagement on gender equality where states side-line or reduce funding and support of women's organizations. Both developments fuel the erosion of women's rights and weaken the capacity of domestic and international actors to respond (Roggeband, 2019). These developments are most sharply felt in Central and Eastern Europe (Krizsán

& Roggeband, 2018), yet are increasingly evident in in other European countries (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017) and at the EU and global level. At the same time the neglect of gender equality commitments at European Union (EU) level (Ahrens & Van der Vleuten, 2019) and longer term implications of neoliberal policies and austerity have increased gender inequality while undermining policies supportive of gender justice (Kantola & Lombardo, 2019).

Right wing populist (RWP) movements have always used ideas about gender to advance their goals sometimes in calls to revert to traditional gender roles, and more recently invoking ideas and ways of mobilizing people that resonate with seemingly more progressive and diverse constituencies (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018). Anti-gender equality discourses are an important part of populist anti EU integration rhetoric, as gender equality is perceived as a specifically EU value (Lombardo & Kantola, 2019, p. 69). Feminists in particular oppose RWP actors, and engage in struggles with RWP actors over how gender and gender equality is understood, enacted and or refuted in societal, cultural and political terms. RWP groups are often also critical of aspects of globalization, international economic governance and austerity in euro sceptical critiques of the 'elite' nature of European integration (Lombardo & Kantola, 2019, p. 69). Feminist organizations in turn target these issues for critical assessment. While their argumentation and objectives differ, a degree of proximity between feminist and RWP frameworks has complicated feminist opposition to gender equality. Such proximity is a function in part of RWP strategies to co-opt and subvert the frameworks of feminist actors to demobilize gender equality movements.

Analysis has found a range of responses to RWP from women's organizations including grass roots resistance, mass protest, coalition building and abeyance tactics (Krizsán & Roggeband, 2018). In some cases women's organizations, facing a loss of funding and exclusion from policy-making have closed or restricted their activities. While others have secured some partial wins for example in resisting a ban on abortion in Poland and feminist and left wing mobilization against restricting reproductive rights in Spain (Korolczuk, 2017; Lombardo, 2017). At the international level, where anti-gender equality forces target international treaties, women's groups are often forced into reactive, adaptive and defensive modes to retain rather than expand protections (Roggeband, 2019). In this way oppositional forces alter the context for feminist organizations' mobilization for gender equality.

This research builds on these insights to explore how women's rights organizations at European Union (EU) level are responding to threats posed by RWP forces to gender equality in Europe. This work shifts our attention from regional or national analysis and work on the UN to a specific focus on the EU and organized civil society that engages with EU institutions. Specifically social movement perspectives on movement and countermovement framing (McCaffrey & Keys, 2000; Roggeband, 2018) are used to assess how the EU level feminist organization the European Women's Lobby (EWL) has responded to RWP opposition to gender equality.

I focus on how the EWL has discursively addressed RWP efforts to define themselves as representing women's interests while rejecting gender equality objectives. To do this I analyse EWL communications that engage with that RWP ideas, political statements and interventions. I argue that as the EWL was founded to support the development of EU commitments to gender equality its opposition to RWP is weakened by the EU's neglect of these

commitments (Ahrens, 2019). In its response the EWL has worked to negatively construct RWP adversaries, while simultaneously working to mobilize its constituents and institutional targets to defend gender equality. The EWL response includes blanket denouncements of RWP as an 'external' threat and more granular assessment of internal 'threats' embodied within EU institutions' and agents. Feminist opposition fundamentally relies on tying the defence of EU liberal democracy to a defence of gender equality in a 'feminist Europe, leaving no woman behind'.<sup>1</sup> However, this response is undermined by the absence of a robust defence by the EU and member states of gender equality as a foundational EU value. In what follows I outline my theoretical framework and detail the nature of RWP anti-gender equality oppositions. As part of this I outline the narrowing terrain for the EWL at EU level to counter such opposition. Next, I outline the thematic elements of the anti-gender equality frames alongside those of the EWL to indicate how RWP frameworks complicate feminist opposition. EWL communications that contain references to RWP opposition to gender equality are assessed by applying the concept of framing used by social movement theory. Framing is used to capture the ideational and interpretive aspects of movement mobilization found in rhetorical strategies used to mobilize constituents and supporters. Framing is defined as competitive when developed as a response to oppositional or counter movement forces (McCaffrey & Keys, 2000). I conclude with discussion of the limits and the possibilities of EU feminist opposition to RWP in Europe. This research contributes to literature that examines the role of gender in the rise of right-wing populisms, assessments of civil society organizations at EU level, and social movement theorization of counter framing and frame co-optation.

## 1. Frame alignment, counter framing and frame co-optation

A frame is 'an interpretive schema that simplifies and condenses the world out there by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of actions within one's present or past environments' (Snow & Benford, 1992, p. 137). Framing calls attention to the ideological constructions crafted by social movement organizations (SMOs) to both align the movement with the broader cultural context, overarching resonant and powerful 'master frames' and to mobilize supporters and defuse support for antagonists (McCaffrey & Keys, 2000, p. 43). Efforts at frame alignment<sup>2</sup> are shaped by dynamic competition with other frames from opposing social movements (McCaffrey & Keys, 2000). Frame co-optation, occurs when opponents adopt aspects of the content of a movement's discourse, while subverting its intent (Burke & Bernstein, 2014, p. 831). How movements respond to frame co-optation is shaped by the broader political opportunity context, which include counter movements, and movements' capacity to negatively construct adversaries while simultaneously preserving their own frames to maintain legitimacy and ideological supremacy (McCaffrey & Keys, 2000, p. 42).

Applied here, oppositional forces to gender equality operate as a counter movement that co-opt and create alternative frames communicated through counter framing and aimed at the de-legitimation and reformulation of the framing advanced by EU feminist CSOs. In this sense oppositional movements are involved in countermobilization dynamics as they respond to the relative success of women's rights advocates and the spread of gender equality norms viewed as a threat to their interests (Roggeband, 2018).

Research on right wing and conservative counter movements illustrate how they use frame co-optation often drawing on human rights frameworks to seize upon ideas used by feminist groups to mobilize for pro-life and traditional family values (Petö et al., 2017; Roggeband, 2019, p. 9). Analysis of such activism at UN level suggests that when other more moderate actors display ambivalence about gender equality and or do not actively oppose extreme right wing mobilization this can isolate and undermine feminist responses (Roggeband, 2019, p. 14). In this way, the opportunity context for struggles around gender equality include not just RWP oppositions but also the neglect of gender equality by more centrist forces. Resistance to RWP anti-gender equality forces is also complicated by how these movements are not simply anti-woman yet rather combine reactionary politics with advancing a version of some 'women's interests' (Blee, 2018). In Central and Eastern Europe this is evident in how RWP organizations link declines in socio-economic status (specifically for women) to the 'failed promises' of EU accession. 'Neoliberal market failure' is in turn equated to EU integration that has eroded women's status and rights.

Countermovement demands may also create threats that provide new opportunities for movements to mobilize support as they counter opposing frames (McCaffrey & Keys, 2000). In the case here EU concerns about illiberalism, Euroscepticism and populism offer opportunities to feminist CSOs to discursively oppose RWP threats as they frame progress on gender equality as a litmus test of EU democracy.

To understand how the EWL aims for frame alignment and responds to RWP frame co-optation, I draw on McCaffrey and Keys's (2000) analysis of movement-counter movement dynamics on abortion in the United States, with a focus on the pro-choice National Organization for Women (NOW). In their analysis, anti-choice activists used framing to discredit leaders, create an unpopular image of movement goals, and disseminated counter-ideologies attacking the basic tenets of feminism. NOW's response illustrated how when a movement ideology is threatened by external forces, steps are taken to restore its credibility. This was achieved by counter framing anti-choice claims that they, not pro-choice advocates, represented and protected women's 'real interests' (2000, pp. 52–53).

McCaffrey and Keys (2000) propose three counter framing concepts that support such feminist responses: polarization-vilification, frame saving, and frame debunking. Polarization establishes a definitional dichotomy of 'us versus them' while vilification involves attempts to discredit an opponent as malevolent and immoral (2000, p. 43). Frame debunking refers to how SMOs advance their own ideology by discrediting competing ideologies. Debunking aims to hold the claims of adversarial groups up for scrutiny and deconstruction. In contrast to frame debunking, frame saving denotes SMO efforts to rescue a frame that has been challenged or denounced. By frame saving, an SMO not only seeks to maintain or increase its own mobilization potential but also rehabilitate an existing frame (2000, pp. 42–46). McCaffrey and Keys (2000) trace over time an intensification of polarizing and vilifying frames alongside frame debunking and frame saving used by the pro-choice feminist organization to discredit and demonize their opponents, and to characterize themselves as a moral agent fighting against evil (2000, p. 41). Applied to this case, the interaction between movement and counter movement is a struggle over ideological supremacy and a competition for symbolic dominance (2000, p. 42) in an effort to shape the discourse about gender equality in Europe.

## 2. Methodology

A case study approach is used as a 'bounded entity' (Yin, 2014, p. 6) to generate knowledge about the broader social phenomenon in a specific institutional context. The EU level is operationalized as a terrain of contest where commitments to gender equality have declined at the same time as RWP governments and organizations in some member states have undermined women's rights. The main data source is a sampling between 2014 and 2019 of documents from the EWL towards their constituents and EU institutions. First, a contextual data analysis indicates the overall frameworks that characterize the EWL discourse on gender equality. This involved document analysis of two central EWL work programmes on women and leadership and violence against women (VAW) and their broader statements on the direction of EU integration. Frames identified as occurring within EWL analysis are placed alongside those identified in scholarship on RWP organizational materials (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018; Roggeband & Krizsan, 2018; Verloo, 2018). This allowed for a comparison of how RWP forces co-opt frames in use by the EWL. This establishes the challenges that the EWL face in discursively responding to RWP frames that mimic feminist and human rights discourse. The second and primary empirical element involved the searching of EWL organizational materials for<sup>3</sup> reference to RWP and opposition to gender equality. Most focus was placed on key organizational campaigns and documents and specific political opportunities. Thematic analysis was applied to examine patterns in discourse used and framing of this 'threat'. First a word search of published materials available on the EWL website from 2014 to 2019 established the frequency and timing of references to RWP. A sample of 40 documents with more than two references to RWP were assessed with a subsample of 26 documents that contained more than two references identified as a substantive reference to RWP.<sup>4</sup> This gave general insights into the trajectory and intensity of the EWL response during the time frame. Further thematic analysis of the subsample identified references to populism and right-wing movements and ideas, anti-gender equality actions, and harassment of gender equality advocates. These elements were present in strategic framework documents, the EWL manifesto for the EP elections and the work of a task force. In addition, thematic analysis of EWL participation in a forum for feminist opposition to RWP, the European Feminist Platform provides insights as to the rationale and intent of EWL actors and members.

The presence of EWL responses to RWP in what are central communications for this CSO indicate the growing relevance of the issue for the organization over time. In later documents, and in response to political developments a discernible shift is observed as the EWL – shifts from a focus on 'external' threats to internal shifts in the EU institutions. Frame analysis was applied to understand whether communications could be characterized as polarizing in placing the EWL in direct opposition to RWP frames and or vilifying RWP actors and ideas, both common framing responses used by movements to counter right wing antagonists. Analysis proceeds in identifying an evolution in counter framing over time that includes polarizing and vilifying frames alongside frame debunking (offering evidence to correct false RWP frames) but relies predominantly on frame saving (rescuing or rehabilitating framing and associated ideas and constructs subverted in RWP discourse). Methodological limitations include a focus on one side of the framing competition, however, given the burgeoning research that documents this counter movement, a singular focus on an EU level CSO response is deemed novel and of merit.

### 3. Anti-gender populism and policy backsliding on gender equality

Grzebalska and Pető's (2018) work on populist illiberalism in Central and Eastern Europe revealed how feminism is equated with 'gender ideology' as a trope to denote the failure of multiculturalism, globalization, a threat to average people, and a deviant and minority view. Feminism is framed as imposed in an imperial project on European countries by the 'feminist lobbies' and 'elites from Brussels' (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018, p. 9; Korolczuk & Graff, 2018). Polarization and vilification are key elements of such framing that situate gender equality and feminist advocacy as dangerous 'foreign' threats to the family, society, state and the nation.

European and EU gender equality initiatives are also the target of such forces. Polish debates on 'gender ideology' started in 2012 in opposition to the ratification of the most prominent international tool on gender equality to emerge in recent decades, the Council of Europe 'Istanbul Convention' on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Graff, 2014). In Slovakia, Slovenia and Bulgaria, anti-gender activists claimed that this Convention would turn 'gender ideology' into the official ideology of the state (Kováts, 2017). Spain has experienced comparable debates on the issue of gender violence (Lombardo, 2017) while gender mainstreaming, a key EU gender technology, animated resistance to gender equality in Germany and Austria (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018, p. 9).

Two aspects of frame co-optation shape RWP projects. First right-wing political parties, claim to support aspects of gender and sexual equality when linked to stigmatizing and racializing notions of migrants and Muslims (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018, p. 14). Second, state controlled civil society organizations, sometimes funded by EU resources, espouse traditionalist gender ideologies as they campaign for labour rights of women or young mothers' reintegration into the labour force and against VAW, issues of significance to feminist groups (Petö et al., 2017). Co-optation is a core RWP strategy that allows such groups to claim to act in women's best interests while they lay claim to issues and ideas related to gender equality at the same time as vilifying feminist ideas and actors (Roggeband & Krizsan, 2018, pp. 372–378).

### 4. EU framing of gender equality: from justice to the market

The EU founding treaties include a commitment to advancing gender equality. Early initiatives on equal treatment for women and men in the labour market illustrated this commitment and were supported by binding legislation. By the early 1990s EU policy on gender equality shifted to less binding measures, understood as an outcome in part of the reticence of member states, some new to the EU, who were less supportive of EU level gender equality objectives (Ahrens, 2019, pp. 58–60). By the mid 2000s lobbying from the EWL and some national gender equality ministries was required to retain existing gender equality instruments (Ahrens, 2019, p. 60). During this period, forces, including nationalist conservative groups lobbied to end EU funding for gender equality programmes, including de-funding the EWL. Overall EU gender equality policy has changed from being rooted in equality and justice principles towards policy frameworks that link gender equality to economic competitiveness (Elomäki, 2018). Critique of this framing includes that it promotes apolitical and individualized understandings of gender equality.



These changes are evident in an institutional repositioning of gender issues, budget cuts, the intervention of corporate actors and decreased consultations with feminist civil society (Jacquot, 2017, p. 43).

A weakening of EU commitments to gender equality are also explained as an outcome of increasing contestation on gender issues in the EP. This is a result of the increased presence of a RWP populist parties resisting EU competencies on gender equality. At the same time austerity through social disinvestment has intensified gender inequalities and weakened feminist infrastructure across Europe. EU responses to economic crisis, RWP and Euroscepticism in turn have been gender blind (Guerrina & Masselot, 2018). Analysis indicates that progress on gender equality has stagnated in many members states at the same time it has fallen down the political agenda at EU level (EIGE, 2019). RWP ideas, actors and institutions that use gender to do political work benefit from the absence of a strong political commitment to gender equality at EU level (Lombardo & Kantola, 2019).

## 5. The European Women's Lobby

The European Women's Lobby (EWL), is an umbrella organization representing women's interests at the EU level established in 1990 and funded by the European Commission as a 'representative' organization bringing together national-level women's groups. It engages both in 'traditional' mobilization strategies and consultation processes of (gender) policy from a liberal feminist perspective. The EWL has been an important civil society actor for gender equality at EU level (Ahrens, 2019) however, its influence has been subject to debate, specifically its capacity to mobilize in the narrowing political context for gender equality (Cullen, 2015) and how well it includes a diversity of women's interests (Agustin, 2013).

The EWL and others did work to persuade the EU in the 1990s of the cost of gender inequality and pushed initiatives' aimed at the reconciliation of work life balance. However it is seen as not challenging enough with argumentation too close to market ideas (Guerrina, 2017). Strid asserts that 'a decade ago it was unlikely anything in the gender equality field could happen in Brussels without EWL staff lobbied for it, initiated it or having been informed about it before it happened' (2009, p. 209). However, by the mid 2000s the organization lost status and position as a feminist watchdog a function in part of a shift in the institutional location for gender equal policies that resulted in a loss of expertise and broken network ties (Ahrens, 2019, p. 45). Despite this shifting opportunity context, the EWL's continues to be funded by the EU institutions which allows it to maintain a presence in the policy field (Seibicke, 2019).

The EU is a political opportunity context that funds CSOs, even those critical of EU integration, that broadly align with supposed EU values and objectives. As the EU has turned towards governance and technocracy it has increasingly relied on CSOs to not only support its claims of democratic legitimacy, with CSO as conduits to EU citizens, but as sources of expertise. The EWL has responded to this providing expertise and adapting to the EU approach to gender equality linked to economic governance (Elomäki, 2018). This has provided opportunities and but also constraints for the organization to maintain a critical feminist perspective (Seibicke, 2019, pp. 5–6). As such while the EWL may offer framing that is critical of EU integration it is implicated as a site of EU norms and practices and an agent of Europeanization understood in technocratic and elite terms (Cullen, 2015;



Sanchez Salgado, 2014). This renders it vulnerable to attack from Eurosceptical and ‘anti elite’ framing associated with RWP forces. For professionalized SMOs such as the EWL, working at EU level, responses to RWP opposition are then shaped by both institutional context of the EU, and its instrumental framing of gender equality and the forms of frame co-optation used by diverse and complex oppositional or counter movements.

## 6. RWP and EWL: frames and frame co-optation

While acknowledging the complexities of the RWP project, specific themes can be identified that illustrate aspects of frame co-optation. First the theme of *victimhood and oppression* is used to organize a range of RWP frameworks (Petö et al., 2017). Second *human rights framing* is reframed to argue for ultraconservative religious positions on sex and reproduction (Roggeband, 2019). RWPs political parties and associated movements are often headed by and or fronted by female leaders, used as symbols to attract female supporters. RWP political parties do this in part by emphasizing *empowerment and choice* for women (Graff et al., 2019, p. 541).

The EWL rely on international *human rights* frameworks and define women’s rights as human rights. This framework is central appearing in over 2000 documents with specific links to work on violence against women (VAW), decision making and international action for women’s rights.<sup>5</sup> The EWL supports abolitionist platforms on sex work that also coalesce with right wing framing.<sup>6</sup> In addition they draw on frames of *victimization and oppression* particularly in their work on VAW and migrant women.<sup>7</sup> *Empowerment and gender representation* in decision making is also a central campaign framework that aligns with EU flagship initiatives on gender equality in the form of the directive on women on ‘boards’ of companies<sup>8</sup> and recent EP oriented campaigns for greater gender parity in politics.<sup>9</sup>

While RWP and EWL frameworks differ in important ways, they pivot around critiques of neoliberalism, European integration, sexual exploitation, VAW and the role of the state in support of women and children. Table 1 is based on analysis of frameworks used in the broad campaigns of the EWL and scholarship that has mapped RWP framing (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018; Roggeband & Krizsan, 2018). This broad stroke characterization indicates the similar and dissimilar frameworks that characterize RWP and the EWL frames as they communicate ideas about women’s interests. The points of comparison and contrast between frameworks present the EWL with a specific set of challenges as it responds to RWP opposition to gender equality.

In the next section I examine the EWL response to RWP. In this assessment I apply the concepts of polarization-vilification, frame debunking and frame saving (McCaffrey & Keys, 2000) to indicate how this feminist CSO adopts forms of frame alignment to differentiate and substantiate its position as the guardian of liberal democracy and gender equality at EU level.

## 7. The EWL response to RWPs

Framing is not always directed at antagonists and can be instrumentally oriented to broadcast a message to other constituents especially for CSOs engaging with intergovernmental

**Table 1.** RWP and EWL frames.

Right wing populist (RWP) frames	EWL frames
<i>Victimhood and Oppression</i> Women as victims, lone parents, child poverty-protected by paternal state. Traditional families fabric of society threatened by Islamic immigration. Prostitution/sex work as VAW.	<i>Victimization and Oppression</i> Women as victims & agents, lone parents' child poverty (economic independence) requires state support. Prostitution/Sex work as VAW (affecting migrant women).
<i>Human Rights as pro-life</i> (pro-familial constructions)	<i>Women's Rights as Human Rights</i> (Sexual Reproductive Human Rights).
<i>Feminization of leadership</i> Empowerment/choice, Non-elite women's access to leadership right-wing parties/movements, anti-Islamic construction of female empowerment.	<i>Feminist Leadership</i> Empowerment through gender parity in politics and economics to deliver more gender equality.
'Gender ideology' → threat & signifier of contemporary late modern crises & EU elite project	<i>Gender Equality</i> → core value of European liberal democracy enacted through feminist political intervention to confront crises/secure the 'good society'

institutions as reference publics (Ayoub & Chetaille, 2017). This is illustrated in how EWL opposition to RWP is directed to EU elites. In what follows I detail how the EWL uses an overarching frame emphasizing that 'illiberal' threats to gender equality are emblematic of a deeper crisis facing European democracies. From this perspective gender equality requires a robust and well-resourced defence not just from RWP opponents but also as a function of a longer term decline in EU support for gender justice. The preservation and deepening of gender equality is then the front on which the battle for Europe's future should be fought. In this way, far right populist opposition to gender equality also creates a discursive opportunity for EWL mobilization to communicate the urgency of multiple threats while reinforcing their relevance and credibility as a vanguard of progressive anti-populist values in Europe.

Thematic analysis of EWL communications reveals episodic mention of RWP in organizational materials dating from 2014 in reference to the migration crisis, and the rise of right wing political parties in the 2014 EP elections. RWP is constructed in this period as an external threat residing in newest member states. A more concerted response is evident since 2017 with the first standalone communication on RWP, a dedicated report on RWP political parties. The EWL's other main source of analysis and campaign materials on RWP are found in the work of its task force of member organizations from Central Eastern Europe, the Balkan and the Baltic States (CEEBS) established in 2014 (EWL, 2018 .p 2) yet most visible from 2017. As such RWP gains visibility incrementally in EWL materials but often as an adjunct to other policy issues. 2017 is though a turning point in that it also marked the EU taking a first step in becoming a party to the Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention, a source of considerable contest by RWP forces. The Convention dates from 2011 and is the main legislative instrument at EU level on VAW and a core element of EWL activism. EWL mobilization on the Convention also increasingly features analysis of member states with RWP governments' or parties who refuse to ratify it and or to frame it as a threat to family, nation and traditional gender roles. The widely predicted rise of RWP parties in 2019 EP elections also provided a specific opportunity for a EWL response as did the appointment of a new Commission (Table 2).

**Table 2.** EWL counter framing.

EWL counter framing	RWP target	Political context
<i>Polarisation and Vilification</i> sense of urgency. <i>Frame Saving</i> Feminism as a public good delivered by EU integration	External threat in Central Eastern Europe, Balkans, Baltic States	2014–2016 EP elections. Migrant crises and Austerity
<i>Polarisation and Vilification</i> Enemy of women's interests <i>Frame Debunking</i> discredit RWP parties	RWP in Western European States as threat to Parliamentary Democracy	2017–2019 RWP in 'heart of Europe' Istanbul Convention
<i>Frame Debunking</i> Deconstruct new EU agenda on equality and democracy <i>Frame Saving</i> establish credibility shape new EU political commitment to gender equality	RWP as an internal threat in EU institutions	2019–2020 EP elections and new Commission

## 8. Frame alignment: a feminist Europe in defence of liberal democracy

The EWL strategic framework (2016–2020) written in 2015 is framed as a response to multiple crises making links between enlargement, transition, recession and gendered implications of austerity that 'have left the EU without a progressive vision' (EWL, 2015, p. 4). RWP does not feature as a specific topic within the framework but is referenced throughout in the section entitled 'The External Context of the World 2015' characterized with the statement

5 years of austerity have also contributed to the backlash against women rights combined with the rise of populist nationalist movements in parts of Europe has distracted political efforts away from measures to promote core European values of equality between women and men; human rights and social justice. (EWL, 2015, p. 6)

Efforts to align with master frames of European liberal democracy are clear and to situate gender equality as a front to defend against a broader assault on European democratic values. Broad processes of neoliberal economic change and patriarchy are tied to the rise of populist conservative forces that are 'increasingly organizing themselves to question the very principle of equality between women and men' (EWL, 2015, p. 6). Here analysis of the 'roots' of populism lean on materialist and cultural backlash analysis shared by RWP forces of those 'left behind' with austerity understood as the fuel that has ignited underlying tensions and discontents. Yet in distinction from RWP analysis, male power is situated as the consistent variable.

Frame saving is evident in how gender equality is reframed as a progressive project, rather than as the threat suggested by RWP framing in a call 'to understand and better tackle the opposition by communicating that equality between women and men is essential in creating a better society. It is a benefit – not a threat – for all' (EWL, 2015, p. 7). This document also marks the first consistent use of the frame 'Feminist Europe' as a routine part of the CSO's narrative. Feminism is reframed with the question 'What if decision makers – local to national to EU level – understood that feminism means well-being, sustainability, inclusion and justice for all?' (EWL, 2015, p. 9). Here frame saving is used to preserve and restore a 'battered ideological package' (McCaffrey & Keys, 2000, p. 45) as feminism is framed as a 'common good' to be secured by 'feminist leadership'.

Frame saving continues in the EWL claim to be the legitimate advocates of women's interests. 'We are a credible source of expertise and experience on women's rights and equality between women and men, representing the diversity of the women's movement across the European Union' (EWL, 2015, p. 7). The Strategic Framework reflects an EU level CSO navigating a stagnant policy space and making intellectual and normative arguments for the relevance of pursuing gender equality as part of the broader front against neoliberal austerity on the one hand and RWP on the other. Frame debunking is less evident in the strategic framework as RWP claims are not challenged in detail so as to delegitimize them with evidence or additional analysis. Rather broad forms of frame saving feature in the prominence given to the idea of a feminist Europe and feminist leadership, connected to a broader conceptualization of shared social progress.

The 2019 EP elections illustrate the evolution of efforts at frame alignment as the EWL called for candidates to sign a pledge to defend gender equality and by extension demonstrate their opposition to hard right politicians and parties. The preamble of their campaign frames the threat as 'global', and as an attack on women's human rights.

The global backlash against women's rights, from the rise of right wing populism and nationalism to an erosion of the very basic values the European Union was built on, continues to create a challenging environment for a diverse and inclusive society that respects women's and human rights and actively promotes gender equality. (EWL, 2019a, p. 2)

The EP has been an important context for the EWL, where working with other EU officials and feminist movements, it had secured EU gender equality gains. The EP is also the context where right wing politicians had attempted to defund the EWL (Ahrens, 2019). For the 2019 EP election, the EWL Women in Politics Working Group, created the campaign document entitled 'Feminist Manifesto: Women for Europe, Europe for Women'. This model was used and adapted for the EP elections across its members (EWL, 2019a). Aspects of vilification emerge with RWP opposition linked with 'a denial of sexual and reproductive health and rights or oppressive prioritisation of racist and nationalist viewpoints' (EWL, 2019a, p. 20). Increasing the descriptive representation of women in the 2019 EP elections is framed as an antidote to illiberalism. Feminist leadership is called on to stem,

The rise of anti-feminist populism and isolationist nationalism has drastically changed the political landscape in recent years. Therefore, we call on all progressive political candidates to join us in shaping and safeguarding the Europe we want; to ensure that all women and girls in Europe have and enjoy equal rights. (EWL, 2019a, p. 3)

Part of these demands are initiatives that require increased European level regulation of gender matters. These include the target of RWP movements, the Istanbul Convention that the EWL asks for the EU to ratify, alongside the introduction of an EU wide Directive on VAW, and the appointment of an EU commissioner on gender equality to support programmes including gender budgeting. All of these calls place them in direct conflict with RWP forces that oppose greater EU competencies. In associated campaign materials, the EWL commit to 'build strategies to resist the normalisation and spread of anti-feminist populism and the increasing presence of conservative religious values in political spaces' (EWL, 2019a, p. 7).

Party political elites are the target of this campaign, with a pledge aimed at candidate MEPs and a number of profiles of female candidates espousing feminist commitments. Overall, framing aims to illustrate the polarity between progressive and regressive candidates, and align feminist framing with a more general alarm about the threat of right wing forces to European parliamentary democracy.

## 9. Polarization, vilification and frame debunking: RWP as an ‘enemy’ of women

The first concerted EWL analysis of RWP outside of Central and Eastern Europe emerged in 2017 in research on the manifestos of RWP parties. This work was assisted by the EWL working group on women and politics entitled *Getting to know you: mapping the anti-feminist face of right-wing populism in Europe*. In the report, ideas about gender communicated by the largest right-wing populist parties in France (Front National, FN), the Netherlands (Partij voor de Vrijheid, PVV) and Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, AFD), are disaggregated and debunked while the parties and their manifestos are vilified. The political parties are debunked as advocates for women with the statement ‘The European Women’s Lobby aims to uncover the antifeminist workings of right-wing populist parties in order to clearly show how these parties act against the interests of women’ (EWL, 2017, p. 2). Vilification is apparent in the declaration that at EWL, ‘we and our members continue to keep track of these dark forces and we will continue to develop strategies to resist’ (EWL, 2017, p. 3). Polarization is evoked in efforts to set the EWL apart from RWP as the authentic representative of women’s interests. Rather than characterize the parties as an undifferentiated threat, the analyses is a nuanced account that captures the strategic ambiguities inherent in the manifestos and voting records. Such ambiguities include support on issues including gender quotas and LGBT rights while maintaining regressive and or Islamophobic agendas.

Frame debunking is illustrated where party positions are refuted, ‘According to AFD, working mothers, immigration, ‘free sex’, ‘gender mainstreaming’ and marriage equality legislation threaten the traditional family. AFD wants to end discrimination against stay-at-home-mothers. In fact the AFD is fostering a classist and racist demographic policy’ (EWL, 2017, p. 4). In response to RWP framing on sexual reproductive health and rights (SRHR), AFD stands for a

“welcoming culture for new and unborn children”, which in reality is a deeply anti-liberal family policy. They talk about how abortion is trivialized and played down in Germany today, which gives the impression that it would be easy to get an abortion in Germany, while in fact, Germany has one of the most complicated abortion laws in Europe. (EWL, 2017, p. 5)

EWL annual attendance at the UN annual Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), offers similar opportunities to counter oppositional frames. Participation in this venue is understood as ‘In a global context of backlash, the annual CSW meeting remains an important strategic and political moment for the women’s movement to make its voice heard at international level, where contentious issues around family, diversity, national sovereignty were challenged ...’ (EWL, 2019c). The CSW works to agree an annual declaration and is understood by the EWL as the context to

enable women's organizations and the feminist movement to be the watchdog of agreed language, to prevent attacks from different stakeholders and countries: on sexual rights, on families on LGBT rights, on prostitution (and not "sex work"), on the universality of women's human rights, on the role of NGOs. (EWL, 2019b)

However, frame co-optation complicates these strategies, as rights-based language alongside the EWL position on sex work/prostitution as VAW situates the organization close to conservative faith based and RWP factions.

The EWL support for the Istanbul Convention, a central battle ground for contests over gender equality, also relies on rights-based framing and recourse to international law. This reliance brings risks of displacing responsibility for gender equality to international bodies and treaties that states may formally comply with in ways that obstruct or undermine their intent. This is evident in countries including Poland and Hungary that undermine or periodically threaten to withdraw from the Convention. Recourse to venues such as the Council of Europe or the UN then also reaffirm RWP framing of EWL initiatives as shaped by Western European perspectives and in league with donors with ulterior motives (Kováts, 2017, pp. 73–75).

## 10. Frame saving: feminism as a European value

The EWL task force on Central Eastern Europe, the Balkan and the Baltic States (CEEBS) represents the organizations most substantive engagement on RWP. A key priority includes 'Reclaiming feminism and equality between women and men as European values' (EWL, 2018, p. 2). RWP forces in the region are vilified by their 'increased attacks on women's rights, denouncing "gender" as a criminal ideology' (EWL, 2018, p. 14). The main constraints on women's rights in the region are illustrated by examples but described in broad terms as 'Reluctance to recognize gender equality as a democratic value and a fundamental human right; A strong religious, anti-women's human rights lobby and the rise of right wing populist politics, growing nationalism and conservatism' (EWL, 2018, p. 5). These developments are linked to the suppression of civil society, freedom of speech and assembly. Considerable attention is paid to contextualizing the regional dynamics that make feminist resistance especially difficult (EWL, 2018, p. 12). Opposition to feminism in the region is explained as

Paradoxically, the effect of the strong rhetoric of socialist authoritarian regimes on the equality between the sexes sometimes led to a total rejection of feminism, gender equality and women's rights issues during the democratisation period, often portrayed as signs of a defunct political order. (EWL, 2017, p. 8)

The EU is credited with enabling progress on women's rights yet,

The situation worsened in the region as women's rights advocates lost influence and leverage through the marginalisation of women's rights and gender equality as a European priority (an external challenge) and the rise of conservative populist politics in some countries and neo-liberal economics (a domestic one). (EWL, 2017, p. 9)

Opposition to these multiple crises lies with decision makers asked to promote equality and the long traditions of feminism that have made possible the recognition of women as full members of our societies. (EWL, 2017, p. 16). Frame saving is evident in their ask

for to 'Re-value European feminist history as a progressive social movement and its contribution to EU Enlargement and EU values' (EWL, 2018, p. 14). Rights based framing supports the analysis that evokes recourse to UN processes and EU legal frameworks.

Country specific struggles featured again in the 2019 general Assembly, that detailed support for emergency motions from Czech, Italian and Hungarian members linked to the 'rising populism and backlash against women's rights'.<sup>10</sup> Support for members were also evident in The EWL and the pro-EU European Movement International 2019 'Women of Europe' awards dedicated 'to honour women striving to advance the European project' that selected Romanian, Czech and Bulgarian women activists.<sup>11</sup>

## 11. Framing a feminist future Europe: the European feminist platform

While much of EWL engagement on RWP is directed towards populist movements and governments the EWL have shifted to look towards more proximate threats. This is illustrated by EWL participation in the inaugural meeting in October 2019 of the *European Feminist Platform* an 'intellectual hub and network for feminist scholars, writers, thinkers and activists living and working in different EU Member States. To address the root causes of anti-feminism and anti-equality movements' (European Feminist Platform, 2019). The EWL alongside, member organizations and feminist academics, and EP officials participated in a public event and a private workshop on 'Overcoming the Backlash – Strategies Against Anti-Equality Movements in the EU: From Understanding to Counter Strategies and Narratives' (European Feminist Platform, 2019). This forum reviewed expertise on RWP in specific national contexts but predominantly focused on opportunities and threats embodied within the newly appointed European Commission and the EP. This took the form of a granular assessment of the 'gender equality' record of new Commissioners, Parliamentarians and new portfolios presented alongside warnings about the establishment of Vice Presidency for Demography and Democracy' headed by a right wing politician. Other new portfolios assessed included 'Promoting the European Way of Life', proposals for a new strategy on Gender (rather than gender equality) and a planned EU initiative on the future of the EU 'the Convention on the Future of Europe'.

Analysis involved efforts to locate potential allies, areas of 'threat' to existing gender equality programmes and alignment of EWL messaging with those of the new EU Commissioner for Equality.<sup>12</sup> Inputs reflected frustration at the lack of resources available to and traction for current feminist opposition to RWP. The president of the EWL illustrated the central theme with her statement 'Instead of replying to far-right parties and anti-equality movements, which takes us a lot of time, how we develop together our own alternative and positive narrative/proposals for Europe and its inhabitants?' Other contributors were more markedly critical emphasizing the limits of state, white and liberal feminisms to develop the intersectional responses required to reach those disadvantaged by austerity and drawn towards RWP ideas.

In response to the perceived limits of existing strategies, inputs were sought from 'successful recent feminist stories and strategies against the increasing influence of far-right movements and concepts'. The key intervention was that of the Irish EWL member on delivering repeal of the abortion ban in Ireland, widely celebrated as a successful 'middle ground' campaign that avoided vilification of opponents and moved beyond earlier polarized debates. Framing that eschewed radical feminist ideas and appealed to 'everywoman'



opened a space that de-legitimated right wing and anti-feminist opposition and mobilized widespread public support for reproductive rights. In late 2019 the EWL adopted the slogan a 'Europe with no woman left behind' an inclusive framing supporting calls for a new political strategy for equality between women and men in Europe.<sup>13</sup>

## 12. Discussion and conclusion

EU policy on gender equality has stagnated, at the same time RWP forces work to undermine gender justice. Feminist responses are complicated by multiple crises, of austerity, illiberalism and populism and a lack lustre defence of gender equality as a European value. Analysis of feminist resistance to RWP at national and local level suggest that autonomous and grass roots women's organizations have mounted strategic and at times impactful resistance to RWP discourse and policies (Lombardo & Kantola, 2019). Yet while RWP threats to gender equality play out in context specific ways, they are also embedded in a broader transnational network that necessitate a transnational response. Situated and culturally resonant feminist responses evident at the national and local level, are less possible for EU professionalized feminist organizations anchored to EU funds and programmes. Both RWP and the EWL rely on transnational frameworks that include reference to human rights, empowerment and claims to represent women's interests neglected by EU elites. This challenges the EWL to calibrate frames that remain reflexive on the limits of EU integration for gender equality yet avoid alignment with RWP constructs of Euroscepticism. EU human rights mythology (Ruzza, 2019), liberal democratic ideas, specific EU treaty obligations and founding values on gender equality are key symbolic referents used to align the fight against RWP with the defence of gender equality. The EWL response illustrates an evolution in strategy in response to shifting political opportunities associated with EU integration and the breadth of RWP outside of enlargement member states.

Feminist responses to RWP frames, have relied on frame alignment with a broad discourse of the EU as a guarantor of liberal democracy while rescuing spoiled or co-opted frames and affirming credibility. Initial framing drew on polarization and vilification to communicate a sense of urgency, outrage, and imminent threat. Frame saving and frame debunking are used to discredit the frameworks of RWP antagonists at the same time that a feminist Europe secured through feminist leadership is advanced as an antidote to illiberalism. For the EWL, resistance to RWP threats lies in re-prioritization of gender equality as an EU policy objective as they seek re-politicize gender equality as central to the European project. More recent inward focused capacity building events communicate RWP anti-feminist opposition as a complex phenomenon that has mimicked and outpaced progressive movements in their expertise in on-line social mobilization, big data analytic and 'judicialisation' and litigation of gender/human rights related issues (European Feminist Platform, 2019). Counter framing that relies on polarization and vilification, are deemed ineffectual responses to these strategies and frames, frame debunking may also have limited effect. Analysis of RWP appeal especially to women see them not as simply 'masculine projects' but also ambiguous venues for advancing certain women's interests and aspirations, and pushing for political change that women find important (Roggeband & Krizsan, 2018). From this perspective, feminist responses must be inclusive, and include analysis the role of neoliberal austerity in creating gender inequalities and

fuelling normalization of right-wing remedies. The challenge remains in how a transnational feminist opposition to RWP can offer a Europe of/for Women.

## Notes

1. <https://womenlobby.org/From-commitments-to-actions-the-EWL-s-call-to-the-new-European-Commission>.
2. This involves frame alignment processes that are: diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framing.
3. Approximately 40 documents were coded these include policy statements, annual reports, task force reports, press releases and policy submissions. 26 documents were then chosen from this sample and recoded and classified as containing a more significant level of reference.
4. The EWL site contains links to more than 2000 documents these include press releases, reports, statements and blog posts. The time frame here narrowed the document trawl yet for documents to qualify they must have given at least several paragraphs or specific topical focus on the issue of populist and right wing threats.
5. <https://womenlobby.org/spip.php?page=recherche&lang=en&recherche=human+rights+>.
6. <https://womenlobby.org/-Together-for-a-Europe-Free-From-Prostitution->.
7. <https://womenlobby.org/spip.php?page=recherche&lang=en&recherche=victim+and+oppression+>.
8. <https://womenlobby.org/Women-in-Business-7447?lang=en>.
9. <https://womenlobby.org/-Women-in-Politics-507-?lang=en>.
10. <https://womenlobby.org/Five-emergency-motions-adopted-by-EWL-s-General-Assembly-in-2019>.
11. <https://www.womenlobby.org/The-2019-Women-of-Europe-Awards-the-WINNERS>.
12. [https://www.womenlobby.org/IMG/pdf/2020.02.05\\_-\\_ewl\\_position\\_on\\_ec\\_strategy.pdf](https://www.womenlobby.org/IMG/pdf/2020.02.05_-_ewl_position_on_ec_strategy.pdf).
13. <https://womenlobby.org/From-commitments-to-actions-the-EWL-s-call-to-the-new-European-Commission>.

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