Gendering European politics: A story of Progress and Backlash

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ABSTRACT

In this review I discuss three important books on European gender politics. Two focus on the European Union (EU) and highlight the increasing feminisation of EU politics. More women have been elected/appointed and taken up leadership positions inside EU institutions, and gender equality legislation has made a positive difference to women. Still, gender equality remains, by and large, a female, and less prestigious domain. Also, Europe’s existing gender inequalities have been exacerbated by austerity, the migration crisis, Brexit, and Covid-19. The third book analyses the growing far-right populist ‘complex’ and its opposition to feminism, women’s (reproductive) rights, and LGBTQ rights. This backlash is embedded in the cultural and socio-economic contexts that enable far-right populist actors to flourish. Together, these insightful books shed light on gender equality progress and backlash in Europe. Yet as gender is linked to identity, rights, and much more, these books reflect on our societies more broadly.

KEYWORDS

Gender; gender equality; European Parliament; European Commission; feminisation; far-right populism

Abels, Gabriele, Andrea Krizsán, Heather MacRae, and Anna van der Vleuten (2021, eds.) The Routledge Handbook of Gender and EU politics. London and New York: Routledge.

Petra Ahrens and Lise Rolandsen (2019, eds.) Gendering the European Parliament. Structures, Policies and Practices. London: Rowman and Littlefield International Ltd.

Gabriele Dietze and Julia Roth (2020, eds.) Right-Wing Populism and Gender. European Perspectives and Beyond. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag.

European politics have ‘feminised’ (to use Joni Lovenduski’s concept) over the past decades, at the European Union (EU) and member state levels. More women have entered politics and taken up positions of leadership, and new policies have been introduced to improve gender equality. Furthermore, LGBTQ rights have been strengthened in parts of Europe, since same-sex partnerships and marriages as well as adoptions have become legalised in a number of European countries. Yet despite it being 2021, gender inequalities still matter a great deal. If anything, gender equality has become a more polarised topic over the past decade. In this review of three relevant edited books on the gendered nature of European politics, I will highlight some of the main findings as well as potential future research avenues.

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The EU as a gender(ed) regime

A new and welcome addition to Routledge’s handbook series is the one on Gender and EU politics, edited by Gabriele Abels, Andrea Krizsán, Heather MacRae, and Anna van der Vleuten. This book will be very useful for anyone teaching and researching EU integration, as gender impacts on all aspects of the EU. The authors analyse EU theories and conceptual approaches, the EU’s polity and governance, EU politics, policies, and a number of timely issues (Europe’s austerity, populism, and Brexit crises) through the gender lens. The overarching aim is to challenge the prominent one-sided telling of EU history by focusing on the EU’s herstory. That is, to study women’s contribution to the EU project – albeit without creating an exaggerated narrative of ‘herstorical heroines’.

Abels and MacRae rightly highlight in the introductory chapter that much of the existing EU scholarship concentrates on analysing big events (e.g. EU treaty changes), leadership and high politics. This narrow focus has contributed to ‘writing out’ women and gender relations of the history of European integration, as female leaders have been, and remain, a minority. Yet right from the beginnings of EU integration women have been involved in shaping the EU – from the first MEP, Marga Klompé (1952–1956), to the first female president of the European Parliament (EP), Simone Veil (1979–1982). Not to forget the many other female MEPs, civil servants, and activists who sought to make the EU more social and gender equal.

The EU’s gender equality agenda has grown over nearly seventy years from a few isolated policies addressing the gender pay gap to a complex web of egalitarian norms, rights, and court rulings, supported by institutions and interconnected opportunity structures. Thus, as Angelika von Wahlen writes, the EU has over time developed its own ‘gender regime’. Scholars have described and categorised it in different ways, but most agree that this gender regime has come under serious strain in recent years. Like the European project itself, the EU gender regime has been affected negatively by the Eurozone crisis, the challenges of dealing with the influx of refugees, the rise of populist and anti-EU parties, Brexit, and Covid-19. These crises have exacerbated existing structural and cultural problems, leading to cost-cutting, democratic backsliding (alongside anti-gender equality discourses), downgrading, and even dismantling of certain aspects of the existing gender equality architecture.

Unsurprisingly, EU integration theorists have ignored gender for a long time. This volume therefore highlights how EU integration has benefitted (or would benefit) from a gendered lens. Maxime Forest argues in his chapter that the far-right’s campaign against gender, gender equality, and LGBTQ rights lends itself to being researched using discursive-sociological approaches derived from the new institutionalisms. While much of the existing institutionalist scholarship lacks gender awareness, Heather MacRae and Elaine Weiner provide a genealogy of the existing feminist institutionalist literature. It begins from the premise that it is not only institutions that matter, but their gendered nature, including actors, formal and informal rules, discourses, etc. The authors also highlight the political project embedded within this research, which is to bring about change. Yet change does not happen overnight, as (EU) institutions tend to be ‘sticky’. Feminist institutionalists therefore analyse the slow, incremental, and incomplete policy shifts that have taken place at the EU level towards more gender equality. For the EU to become more gender-sensitive and equal, critical actors matter. It will be
important to analyse the gendered impact of current female EU leaders (Ursula von der Leyen, Christine Lagarde) on the different EU institutions. At the same time, Jeff Hearn et al. remind us that if we want to understand the gendered nature of the EU, we also need to focus on masculinities and their role in the EU integration process. This is an emerging research agenda, and with the rising number of far-right populists inside the EP, studies into the performance of hegemonic and toxic masculinities are waiting to be done.

Miriam Hartlapp et al. focus their attention on the European Commission which has played a role in initiating, expanding and updating gender equality policies at the EU and member state levels. The Commission’s gender equality agenda, which kicked off in the 1970s and gained momentum in the 1990s, has moved more slowly in recent years. It was always a liberal feminist agenda with a strong focus on increasing female employment, closing the gender pay gap, and ending sexual discrimination. However, as Hartlapp et al. highlight, the more ambitious legal initiatives that the Commission has proposed more recently, with potentially higher implementation costs (such as the Anti-Discrimination Framework Directive) were blocked by member states. While the Commission has updated some of the policy objectives of earlier phases, it has proposed few if any successful new gender equality initiatives. Instead, it has relied on soft modes of governance and vague wordings.

Interestingly, the Commission is approaching gender parity, with 44% (political) and 36% (administration) women in the top posts. And with Ursula von der Leyen, the Commission has for the first time a female president. The same cannot be said about the European Court of Justice (CJEU). Jessica Guth and Sanna Elfving note that out of the current total of 92 judicial-level appointments, only 22 are women. Historically, very few women have been appointed, leaving the CJEU dominated by men. It is therefore unsurprising that the CJEU is not specifically gender aware. Although the CJEU has at times been instrumental in advancing women’s rights, it has not been a fervent promoter of gender equality. Guth and Elfving explain that, since law is not gender neutral, there is little the CJEU can do to address gender or intersectional inequalities if national or European legislation is drafted in discriminatory terms, or the legal questions arriving at the court have had gender filtered out of them. The CJEU can only act within the limits of its powers and the confines of the legislation granting those powers – no matter how feminist it might be.

Still, perhaps all EU institutions would be more gender-sensitive if there was more public knowledge and scrutiny on this matter. Jessica Fortin-Rittberger and Lena Ramstetter stress in their chapter that knowledge about the EU (and politics in general) is gendered. Standard surveys (such as the European Social Survey) indicate that all across Europe, women know less about EU politics than men. Yet Fortin-Rittberger and Ramstetter demonstrate that women don’t know less – they know differently. The mode of the survey, interviewer effects, and the content of the questions give undue privilege to male ways of knowing, thereby creating a false gender knowledge gap. The authors argue (216) that ‘we need to rethink what political knowledge is in the context of the EU. Women might know less about distant political problems but, as things draw closer to daily life, the gender gap closes or even reverses. We have not yet been able to design survey items that can adequately capture this relevant information.’
By bringing different ontological perspectives on gender and the EU together, this handbook will help to ‘gender mainstream’ future EU scholarship. (And yes, I am aware that the EU’s ‘gender mainstreaming’ agenda is not what it promised to be – but let us be optimistic).

The European Parliament: a gender equality trailblazer?

In their edited book Gendering the European Parliament, Petra Ahrens and Lise Rolandsen provide a very timely and comprehensive analysis into the EP’s gendered policies, politics, and polity. As the editors remind us, the EP is a unique parliamentary body, as it is the only directly elected supranational parliament with such wide-ranging competencies. Over the past decades the EP has become powerful. While the European Commission has the right of initiative for legislative proposals, the Lisbon Treaty (2007) put the EP and the Council at the same level in almost all legislative procedures. Over the years, the share of female Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) has gradually increased. At currently 41% it is now higher than that of most national parliaments in Europe. Gabriele Abels, therefore, challenges the popular argument that there must be a negative correlation between the empowerment of political institutions and women’s increasing representation in those bodies. Instead, Abels argues that the empowerment of the EP, together with the rise in female MEPs owes to the specific nature of the EU: as it was long perceived as weak, it was initially less interesting for male politicians.

But does the higher-than-average representation of women mean that the EP has been a promoter of gender equality? This has become somewhat of a ‘foundational myth’ that Anna van der Vleuten investigates in her contribution. She notes that since the early days of EU integration, critical actors – that is, feminist MEPs in collaboration with the women’s movement, feminist academics, and ‘femocrats’ in the European Commission – have fought for more gender equality. In the early days, however, the EP lacked the power to change legislation. In recent years, the empowered EP has pushed for new gender equality legislation in areas such as parental leave and gender-balanced company boards. But these initiatives were blocked by the member states in the Council, which remains an overwhelmingly male (white) and conservative institution. It would take a coalition of left-wing feminists in the Council (and of course the Commission) to move the EP’s gender equality agenda forward. But then, van der Vleuten reminds us that the EP itself is divided on gender equality. The steadily growing far-right populist groupings, alongside the religious Conservatives, oppose feminist legislation. Furthermore, the EP’s gender agenda is by no means radical, intersectional, or inclusive. Julia Maria Zimmermann stresses in her analysis of parliamentary discourses that gender equality tends to be framed in exclusively economic terms. Zimmermann (64–65) thereby notes that inside the EP, ‘equality means equality of women and men in a men’s world. It means further equality between the best qualified, the most flexible and most competitive members of both genders.’

Interestingly, and despite it now being deeply rooted in primary law as a fundamental value of the EU, gender equality has faced new hurdles in recent years. Joyce Marie Mushaben argues that ‘a critical mass’ of female MEPs isn’t enough to create a more progressive gender regime inside the EP and the EU as a whole. There are also new, informal processes in place that exclude gender experts from decision-making power. Mushaben focuses her attention on the ‘trilogues’, which are the informal and secret
meetings between EP leaderships and Council staff that have emerged in recent years. Their purpose is to reconcile the two co-legislators’ respective positions early on in the legislative cycle. Yet ‘reducing open conflict, political competition and direct debate between the EP and the Council precludes transparency, accountability and external monitoring by civil society groups’ Mushaben (78) writes. Gender experts – mainly those MEPs who are members of the EP’s Women’s Right and Gender Equality (FEMM) Committee, are often excluded from trilogues. Yet it takes ‘critical actors’ (feminists, female or male) in strategic positions to make EU legislation more gender-sensitive. Mary K. Nugent takes a closer look at the gendered division of labour inside the FEMM Committee, underlining that FEMM’s membership and leadership continues to be largely female. She argues that FEMM likely has fewer men ‘because it is low status and relatively unimportant to the work of the parliament – but since the power remains primarily with men and male-dominated structures, that the lack of men on FEMM likely also perpetuates the low status nature of the committee’ (138). Thus, within the EP, which has a higher-than-average share of women MEPs, roles and jobs remain gendered.

In any case, gender equality has become increasingly contested inside the EP. In their chapter, Markus Warasin et al. analyse the internal cohesion of party groups and intra-group coalitions when it comes to voting on gender equality policies, both within committees and the plenary. Unsurprisingly, there are clear differences between the left and right. Interestingly, however, the party groups were internally less cohesive on gender equality policies than on average for all EP policy-making processes. Especially the centre right EPP group and the liberal ALDE group were divided on gender equality. How to explain such contestation? The authors suggest that the stakes are high in the area of gender equality, as it relates to conflicts over fundamental values – equality and non-discrimination – which are at the heart of the European integration project.

By focusing on the EP through the lens of gender, this book provides a much broader perspective on the EP’s internal workings, norms, and ways of doing things. Post Brexit, I look forward to reading more on gender and the EP. British MEPs of all colours (from the reactionary right to the left) have played a major role in shaping the institution and its gender regime. Also, the centre-left S&D group has (finally) got a female president, the Spanish MEP Iratxe García Pérez. Will she be seen as a ‘critical actor’ in advancing gender equality inside the EP?

The far-right populist backlash and masculinist identity politics

Gabriele Dietze and Julia Roth, in their edited book Right-Wing Populism and Gender focus their attention on what happens in individual European countries (and America). They analyse what they term the ‘right-wing populist complex’ (parties, movements, organisations, media discourses, narratives, and forms of action) and its ‘obsession with gender and sexuality’. As the editors note, right-wing populist (FRP) actors across the world push for the heteronormative nuclear family to remain in place as the model of social organisation. These actors challenge LGBTQ rights such as same sex marriage and adoption, as well as women’s reproductive rights by wanting to restrict or abolish abortion. Unsurprisingly, the right-wing populist complex rejects the notion of a socially constructed gender, as it undermines their binary view of the sexes. In Europe and elsewhere, the right-wing populist complex has mushroomed over the past two decades. Its success
has to do with global economic liberalisation, the rise in precarious jobs, and – as a result – an increase in social inequality. Importantly, however, its success is also a rejection of our increasingly multicultural, ethnically, and socially diverse societies. Throughout the book, the intersections between gender, race, ethnicity, religion, and class are analysed across different geographical zones of Europe and the Americas. In addition, particularly intriguing aspects are explored in depth, such as the counter-intuitive attraction of the FRP complex for women and LGBTQ people.

As Niels Spierings highlights, a patriarchal gender agenda is ‘trivotal’ for the far-right populist project: it might not be their raison d’être (therefore, it can be considered trivial), but it is nonetheless pivotal, as it speaks to all the elements of the FRP ideology and touches upon fundamental aspects of people’s identity (sexual, social, cultural, economic, etc.). Yet Spierings also underlines a large degree of variation, as some FRP parties in the Netherlands and the Nordic countries are less conservative when it comes to LGBTQ rights or childcare policies, as these are taken for granted in Europe’s socially more liberal societies. Still, most FRP actors ‘gender’ their anti-immigration agenda by portraying Muslim women as oppressed and Muslim men as aggressive. Islam is thought to threaten women’s emancipation, which FRP actors argue has been fully achieved in Europe.

Birgit Sauer describes right-wing populist mobilisation as a ‘project of masculinist identity politics’: The populist far-right frames the marginalisation of working- and middle-class men as a ‘crisis of masculinity’ and blames female labour market integration, gender equality, and Muslim migrants for their deprived class status of ‘subordinated men’ (drawing on the work by R.W. Connell and James Messerschmidt). Against this backdrop, it is important to investigate why women vote for, or even join, the FRP complex. There might be fewer female than male FRP supporters, activists, and politicians, but the gender gap is closing in some countries.

Here, Gabriele Dietze makes three relevant points. First, there appears to be an ‘emancipation fatigue’ amongst the FRP’s women, many of whom did not experience the 2nd wave feminist movement’s struggles for gender equality. They want to be protected and financially cared for by their husbands. As housewives, they feel devalued and antagonized by requests ‘to emancipate.’ Instead, they want recognition of their position, which is elevated in the FRP’s discourse as ‘choice’. By doing so, they also seek to differentiate themselves from the so-called ‘liberal elite’ (feminists, in this case) which FRP actors despise. But Dietze also notes that for many working mothers in Germany, which can still be described as a conservative gender regime, emancipation isn’t all that it was cracked up to be. Work and family are often difficult and stressful to combine, as women still do the majority of unpaid care work on top of their paid jobs. Second, FRP actors often use ambiguity in their discourses to attract young women by presenting emancipatory sexual politics (free native women versus oppressed Muslim women) together with traditional programmes in support of heteronormative family values. These do attract some women. Finally, Dietze points to a ‘new maternalism’ that the FRP complex has embraced in an attempt to promote motherhood amongst native (white) women to combat demographic decline. In a similarly ambiguous way, the FRP complex seems to gain (some) LGBTQ supporters, namely by claiming to protect LGBTQ people from socially illiberal Muslims who threaten gay rights. Patrick Wielowiejski finds that ‘protecting’ German cultural identity from Islam is tantamount to protecting gays for the Alternative for Germany’s LGBTQ activists. His is a rare ethnographic study into the far-right’s
grassroots. Hopefully, more such insightful research will be conducted into what motivates LGBTQ activists (and women) to join the FRP complex across Europe, when these actors seek to weaken their hard-won rights.

This book also provides valuable insight into the gender politics of FRP actors in Hungary, Poland, and Slovenia. This is particularly relevant, given the radical changes in these countries’ gender regimes after 1989. Writing about Hungary post 2010, Kováts (83) explains that it is in this ‘post-socialist, power-laden context of neoliberalization, NGO-ization and Europeanization’ that we need to understand the right-wing’s framing of ‘gender’ and its references to Western colonialism. Roman Kuhar and Mojka Pajnik demonstrate how the anti-gender campaign in Slovenia, led by the Roman Catholic Church and other right-wing actors (such as the so-called ‘concerned citizens’) draws on populist strategies to make its presence felt. It pitches the (good) ordinary people against the (morally corrupt) elite who want to ‘impose gender ideology’ on ‘our children’.

By focusing on gender and the far right, this book reflects much more broadly on our contemporary Western societies, and on the values we (mistakenly) began to take for granted. Now we need to respond to this crisis of social liberalism.

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