

Feminisation and rise of the far-right in Europe: the case of France

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Abstract

In the second round of the French presidential election of 2022, a large part of the left voted for Jacques Chirac in order to “barrage” Jean-Marie Le Pen¹. However, today, this “republican barrage” seems increasingly fragile: the National Rally, known until 2018 as the National Front, is more and more integrated into French political life, and its electoral scores are rising from elections to elections. This article argues that the rise of the far-right, observed in France as well as in other European countries since the 2010s, is closely linked to the feminisation of these radical right-wing parties, as part of their so-called “dediabolisation” strategy.

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¹ In French, the expression “*faire barrage*”, which could be translated as “to barrage” or “to block”, refers to the idea that the far-right should be prevented from winning the election when it is present in the second round, and thus calls on voters of both the right and the left to rally behind the candidate who does not belong to the extreme right. The term “Republican front” is also used, implying a distinction between republican and democratic parties and far-right parties that are not.

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INTRODUCTION

For a long time, women have played a secondary role in the European far-right, perceived as an intrinsically masculine environment. Nevertheless, since the beginning of the 21st century, a phenomenon of feminisation of the far-right ranks began, which reached its peak in France with the passing of the torch from Jean-Marie Le Pen to his daughter Marine Le Pen, becoming one of the few women to head a French political party. We can thus wonder whether this feminisation process of radical right-wing parties (RWPs) like the National Rally (NR) is associated with a real - more progressive - change in the attitudes and the ideas of the far-right in France. In other words, in which ways does the growing involvement of women in the French far-right redefine, or not, their ideology, strategies and agenda?

To answer this question, we will look back to the role that women historically held within the far-right, from the Nazi period to the contemporary one, when the ranks, but also the electorate, are feminising. We will then consider how far-right women act today and the strategies they use, marked by orientalism (construction of rapists as “Others”) and opportunism (inclusion of women and softening of the discourse to open up to a new electorate). These parties and their instrumentalisation of feminism are part of the “femonationalism” phenomenon, theorised by Sara Farris². Finally, we will go beyond appearances in order to defend the thesis that this feminisation has not resulted in a significant change in the misogynistic, racist, islamophobic and homophobic values and ideas defended by the far-right, as shown by their positions and discourses, which are still as conservative, or even reactionary. We will conclude on the role of feminism, especially an intersectional one, against the far-right.

THE EVOLUTION OF WOMEN'S PLACE IN THE FRENCH FAR-RIGHT

True “feminazis”? These Nazi women

The term “feminazi” is a neologism coined by the anti-feminist Rush Limbaugh and frequently used by the fachosphere to mock a so-called extreme or anti-men feminism³. We can therefore wonder if Nazi women really existed under the Third Reich. This question is legitimate, as the National Front (NF) has roots in fascist and Nazi movements. It was founded in 1972 on the ashes of Petenism and, for example, its co-fondator Léon Gaultier and the former treasurer Pierre Bousquet were former SS men⁴.

In her book *Hitler's Furies: German women in the nazi killing fields*, Wendy Lower reveals the complicity and active participation in to Nazi crimes of numerous German women, whose existence has often been denied or whose violence minimised. According to her, more than 13 million women were involved in the Nazi Party, and at least 500,000 women have contributed to the operations of the Third Reich. Even though the Nazi regime was deeply misogynistic, refusing to include women in their organs of power, it

² FARRIS, Sara. (2012). Femonationalism and the ‘Reserve’ Army of Labor Called Migrant Women, *History of the Present*, 2(2), pp. 184-199. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.5406/historypresent.2.2.0184>

³ LORRIAUX, A. (2015). À la recherche des « feminazies », ces féministes vraiment nazies. *Slate.fr*. [online] 23 Sep. Available at: <http://www.slate.fr/story/107273/feminazi-feministes-nazies>

⁴ MAYER, N. (2013). From Jean-Marie to Marine Le Pen: Electoral Change on the Far Right. *Parliamentary Affairs*. Volume 66, Issue 1, 160–178. [online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gss071>

relied on their complicity and sometimes even their active participation. It could for example be secretaries typing out killing orders and filing details of massacres, nurses administering lethal injections to disabled people or midwives pushing certain women to have abortions or sterilisations. There were even SS and kapos women: it was for example the case of Irma Grese, Ilse Koch or Savitri Devi. Women like Johanner Altvater and Liselotte Meier also massively killed Jews by shooting. However, the Holocaust was mainly perpetrated by men, and women were very few among the accused at Nuremberg or other war crimes trials⁵.

The participation of women in Nazi crimes allows us to put into perspective the thesis according to which the feminisation of the far-right is a recent phenomenon: it seems that far-right women have always existed. It also counterbalances the essentialist stereotype that women would not be able to use violence and would necessarily be gentler than men. We should not minimise the violence of which women are capable, who, just like men, were conditioned by the Nazi regime to accept and commit such violence⁶.

Even before the Nazi period, in the United-States, a lot of women joined the white-supremacist Ku Klux Klan movement and even created their own subgroup, the WKKK (Women of the Ku Klux Klan)⁷. This participation of women in right-wing movements has been invisibilised by researchers, who assumed that fascism was a misogynist movement that *de facto* excluded women⁸. Women participated in fascist politics in Germany, but also in France, in Italy under Mussolini, in the United-Kingdom or Spain under Franco. For instance, in the United-Kingdom, sending women canvassing helped Oswald Mosley's supporters to portray a softer and more reassuring image of fascism⁹.

The gradual feminisation of far-right parties

In recent years, especially since the early 2010s, we have witnessed a rapid feminisation of European RWPs, but also of extreme right-wing movements parallel to the political field. More and more women are leading European far-right parties, such as Marine Le Pen in France (NR former NF), Alice Weidel in Germany (AfD), Siv Jensen in Norway (Progress Party), Pia Kjaersgaard in Denmark (Danish People's Party) or Gionia Meloni in Italy (Brothers of Italy).

The NF was founded in 1972, making it one of the oldest far-right political forces in Europe. From the beginning, women were present, notably traditionalist and fundamentalist Catholics. They were usually

⁵ RENNELL, T. (2013). The Nazi women who were every bit as evil as the men: From the mother who shot Jewish children in cold blood to the nurses who gave lethal injections in death camps. Daily Mail. [online] 25 Sep. Available at: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2432620/Hitlers-Furies-The-Nazi-women-bit-evil-men.html>

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ LORRIAUX, A. (2015). À la recherche des « feminazies », ces féministes vraiment nazies, *op. cit.*

⁸ PROVOST, C. & WHYTE, L. (2018). Why are women joining far-right movements, and why are we so surprised? *Opendemocracy*. [online] 31 Jan. Available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/women-far-right-movements-why-are-we-surprised/>

⁹ *Ibid.*

mothers of at least 40 years old, very attached to the Church and from the upper middle class¹⁰. At the same time, from the 1970s onwards, a lot of young women participated in the Scouts d'Europe movement, or, in a completely different register, in the Skinhead or the Œuvre française. Some women were also part of the Groupe union défense (GUD), to which the FN moved closer in the 1990s¹¹. Unlike fundamentalist Catholics, Skinhead women came more frequently from disadvantaged backgrounds. Most of these women participated to far-right movements or joined the NF because their husband, brother or father were part of it, and already came from extreme right-wing families¹². To this day, family still plays an important role in the political socialization of female radical right-wing activists: it is still common for women to enter politics through the prism of a man¹³. The division of labour within these movements is extremely gendered: for example, it is expected that Skinhead women will play a protective role by stopping fights between men.

These women carry the same message as far-right men: they get involved in the name of the preservation of the traditional white family and French culture, undermined by immigration and racial and cultural mixing. They are generally opposed to feminism, especially the one of the French Mouvement de libération des femmes (MLF), Women's Liberation Movement in English, which is thought to be against men and the family. Some feel like feminism forces them to work, and therefore support the NF's proposal to pay housewives. Most of these women are against abortion, especially the more Catholic ones, which would, according to them, lower the number of births and would be misused as a contraceptive method. They consider abortion a crime, which they sometimes compare to the Holocaust. A lot of them claim to be fighting for maternity rights, that is against relatives or doctors who they believe pressure women to have abortions, as well as against drugs, AIDS, pornography and homosexuality, seen as a threat to the family and to children¹⁴. Even though it may seem surprising that some women are opposed to feminism, this phenomenon is not new: already in the twentieth century, Catholic women's associations opposed liberal suffragist feminism¹⁵. These anti-feminist women's views of gender roles are marked by the complementarity between men and women and by the consideration of gender as a natural category instead of a socially constructed one like the MLF claims. Men and women are seen as having natural duties to conform to, including the one for women to reproduce the nation and the race¹⁶.

¹⁰ VENNER, F. (1993). Le militantisme féminin d'extrême droite : « Une autre manière d'être féministe » ? *French Politics and Society*, 11(2), 33–54. [online]. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42844213>

¹¹ MACÉ, M. & PLOTTU, P. (2022). Brève histoire du GUD, ce groupuscule fascisant dont a fait partie Loïk Le Priol. *Libération*. [online] 25 Mar. Available at: https://www.liberation.fr/politique/breve-histoire-du-gud-ce-groupuscule-fascisant-dont-a-fait-partie-loik-le-priol-20220325_H4ASZBQSGRBHVBIQVMGOEN3NEE/?redirected=1

¹² VENNER, F. (1993). Le militantisme féminin d'extrême droite : « Une autre manière d'être féministe » ?, *op. cit.*

¹³ SCRINZI, F. (2014). Militantisme des femmes dans les partis de la droite populiste radicale. Une étude comparative de la participation des femmes et des hommes au sein de la Ligue du Nord (Italie) et du Front national (France). *University of Glasgow*.

¹⁴ VENNER, F. (1993). Le militantisme féminin d'extrême droite : « Une autre manière d'être féministe » ?, *op. cit.*

¹⁵ DELAPORTE, L. (2022). Chez les militantes de droite ou d'extrême droite, « il y a un usage stratégique de #MeToo ». *Médiapart*. [online] 15 Fev. Available at: <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/150222/chez-les-militantes-de-droite-ou-d-extreme-droite-il-y-un-usage-strategique-de-metoo>

¹⁶ VENNER, F. (1993). Le militantisme féminin d'extrême droite : « Une autre manière d'être féministe »?, *op. cit.*

The feminisation of the French far right intensified during the 1980s and 1990s, during which time Jean-Marie Le Pen gave prominence to certain women, such as Marie-France Stirbois, Marie-Christine Arnautu and, of course, his daughter, Marine Le Pen. However, the majority of FN activists remained men and a sexual division of functions and power still prevailed¹⁷. For example, only two women out of 30 were members of the FN's political board in 1999. Nevertheless, women were becoming more and more numerous within the party's organization, notably as secretaries, to run the offices, within youth associations such as the Front national de la jeunesse (National Youth Front), or among associations dealing with social and educational issues.

The turning point in the feminisation of the far right in France is of course the arrival in 2011 of Marine Le Pen as head of the NF. At the same time, many far-right women's groups were formed in the 2010s, such as the 100% female musical group Les Brigandes, the collective Némésis, named after the vengeful goddess, and the nationalist groups Les Antigones, Les Caryatides and Les Marianne pour tous, which were formed during the debate over gay marriage. The Manif pour tous, which emerged from the opposition to the 2012 Taubira Law seeking to legalise marriage between same-sex couples, is indeed a key moment in this feminisation of the far right: many women, mostly young and educated, participated in the movement, whose main figures are women (Frigide Barjot, Ludovine de La Rochère...). Many women also figure among the white supremacist and anti-Muslim group Génération identitaire, which was dissolved in 2021, including former spokespersons Anaïs Lignier and Thaïs d'Ecurfon.

If the latter declares herself to be antifeminist, considering that feminism undermines the family and gender harmony, the Antigones and the Nemesis collective claim to defend an identity-based feminism. These groups advocate for equal pay and equal access of men and women to education and paid work, while opposing abortion or rejecting the “left-wing feminism” of associations such as Osez le féminisme or Femen¹⁸. This far-right feminism seeks to defend an imagined Western civilisation, the existence of which is supposedly threatened by Islam and immigration. It insists on the insecurity experienced by women, places great emphasis on nature and believes in the existence of biological races¹⁹. As for the Caryatides group, which is close to Action Française, it claims to adhere to “Western feminism” and made a name for itself during the Mila affair by defending what it considered to be a victim of immigration and Islam, towards which left-wing feminists are said to be complacent.

Lastly, it should be noted that the activism of these women can be an empowerment opportunity. While women have traditionally been seen by researchers as joining far-right movements and parties through the prism of a man, this is less and less the case today. Women are actively engaged in far-right organizations, which offer them the opportunity to empower themselves through political action and leadership, while paradoxically perpetuating oppressive gender norms and misogynistic ideas.

¹⁷ LESSELIER, C. (1991). De la Vierge Marie à Jeanne d'Arc : images de femmes à l'extrême droite. Dans : L'Homme et la société, N. 99-100, 1991. *Femmes et sociétés*. pp. 99-113. [online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3406/homso.1991.2541>

¹⁸ RUSCIO, L. (2022). Derrière le « féminisme » d'extrême droite : entretien avec Magali Della Sudda. *L'humanité*. [online] 17 Fev. Available at: <https://www.humanite.fr/politique/extreme-droite/derriere-le-feminisme-dextreme-droite-entretien-avec-magali-della-sudda>

¹⁹ *Ibid*

A feminisation of parties, but also of the electorate: the end of the “radical right gender gap”

The term “radical right gender gap” (RRGG) was theorized by the American researcher Terri Givens²⁰ and refers to the gap that has traditionally been observed between the votes of women and men for RWPs. Historically, men have been over-represented among the members, but also the electorate of the far-right. This situation seems to be changing today, as women constitute an important pool of votes for RWPs hoping to come to power.

Various authors²¹ notice the disappearance of the RRGG in France since the 2012 presidential elections. According to them, the votes of women for the NF is not any different from those of men and can be explained by the same factors, such as Euroscepticism, anti-immigration attitudes or economic insecurity²². The most important factor to explain the RRGG’s erosion in France seems to be the presence of Marine Le Pen at the head of the party since 2011. Indeed, it is from 2012 onwards that the NF’s electorate became increasingly feminized and that the RRGG disappeared: Marine Le Pen gained 19% of the male vote and 16% of the female vote in 2012, a gap that disappears once the results have been controlled for other factors such as gender, social class, education and age²³. The results of 2017 confirm the disappearance of the RRGG, as women were 22,8% to vote NF in the first round of the presidential elections against 20,2% of men, and 34,4% in the second round against 34,2% for men²⁴. Marine Le Pen is a woman, relatively young, twice divorced and the mother of three children, which conveys the image of a modern woman, less violent than the one of her father. She has also softened the party's positions, notably by stating that she does not wish to reverse the law on abortion, even going so far as to consider herself a “quasi-feminist” in her biography, or by condemning anti-Semitism or the Holocaust: Marine Le Pen appears more sympathetic, and there is no longer any “shame” in voting FN. There are other factors explaining the rise of the NF/NR among the female electorate, such as the economic crisis, the right-wingisation of the public debate, the presence of social measures in its programme, to which women are usually more receptive, but also the rise of Islamophobia. Indeed, the growing visibility of Islam, especially since the 2001 attacks and the debate on the wearing of the veil in public schools in 2004, have increased the fear of the Muslim religion and thus the vote for the far right²⁵. Another factor is the tertiarisation and therefore the feminisation of working class jobs: female cashiers, shop assistants,

²⁰ GIVENS, T. E. (2004). The radical right gender gap. *Comparative Political Studies*, 37(1), 30-54. [online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414003260124>

²¹ See for example: IMMERZEEL, T. COFFÉ, H., & VAN DER LIPPE, T. (2015). Explaining the gender gap in radical right voting: a cross-national investigation. In: 12 Western European Countries. *Comparative European Politics*, 13(2), 263-286. [online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1057/cep.2013.20> ou SPIERINGS, N. & ZASLOVE, A. (2015). Gendering the vote for populist radical-right parties. *Patterns of Prejudice*, 49(1-2), 135-162. [online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2015.1024404>

²² MAYER, N. (2015). The closing of the radical right gender gap in France? *French Politics*, 13(4), 391-414. [online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1057/fp.2015.18>

²³ MAYER, N. (2013). From Jean-Marie to Marine Le Pen: Electoral Change on the Far Right, *op. cit.* Although the gap in 2012 is 2% between the female and male vote for the far right, gender is not the determining factor in explaining this gap. Mayer uses a logistic regression to control for gender, age, education, religion and left-right placement.

²⁴ AMENGAY, A. DUROVIC, A. & MAYER, N. (2017). L’impact du genre sur le vote Marine Le Pen. *Revue française de science politique*, 67(6), 1067-1087. [online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3917/rfsp.676.1067>

²⁵ MAYER, N. (2013). From Jean-Marie to Marine Le Pen: Electoral Change on the Far Right, *op. cit.*

childminders, cleaners, etc., embody a new, poorly-paid “service proletariat”²⁶, which tends to foster identity-based withdrawal and therefore the NF/NR vote.

The collapse of the RRGG thus seems to reflect the success of the dediabolisation strategy undertaken by Marine Le Pen, which has softened its discourse, particularly by reappropriating certain left-wing issues²⁷. Appealing to women, who represent more than half of the population, has enabled Marine Le Pen to considerably broaden her electoral influence. The feminisation of the FN's electorate was one of the major reasons for its electoral dynamism in 2017: “*Marine Le Pen succeeded in attracting and securing the loyalty of a new generation of women, who reached voting age in 2012 and who only knew the NF in its “de-demonised” form embodied by its new president*”²⁸. A telling figure in this respect is the fourfold increase in support for the FN among women under 26 since 1988, while it has only doubled for men in the same age group²⁹.

Hence, the RRGG has disappeared, both in France and in other European countries such as Finland, Italy or Luxembourg, but this is not a universal phenomenon. In Norway, for example, the Progressive Party still receives almost twice as much support from men as from women³⁰.

THE CONTEMPORARY STRATEGIES OF FAR-RIGHT WOMEN

The racialisation of sexism: far-right and femo-nationalism

One of the main strategies and characteristics of contemporary RWPs is their instrumentalisation of women's insecurity for racist and islamophobic ends, based on the idea that sexual aggressors would almost exclusively be black or Arab. This myth of the “rapist migrant”, a so-called danger for white women, is not new: already in the 1980s, Jean-Marie Le Pen was using it as an anti-immigration argument³¹. In 1989 for example, following the murder of a woman in Avignon, the far-right organised a demonstration during which Jean-Marie Le Pen depicted this woman as a “martyr of savage immigration”³².

The figure of the immigrant has however changed, as in the 1980s and 1990s, it was embodied by men from Eastern Europe, already perceived as criminals and their wives as victims³³. On the contrary, since

²⁶ AMENGAY, A. DUROVIC, A. & MAYER, N. (2017). L'impact du genre sur le vote Marine Le Pen., *op. cit.*, p.1069.

²⁷ RUSCIO, L. (2022). Derrière le « féminisme » d'extrême droite : entretien avec Magali Della Sudda, *op. cit.*

²⁸ AMENGAY, A. DUROVIC, A. & MAYER, N. (2017). L'impact du genre sur le vote Marine Le Pen., *op. cit.*, p.1069 (free translation).

²⁹ *Ibid*

³⁰ IMMERZEEL, T. COFFÉ, H., & VAN DER LIPPE, T. (2015). Explaining the gender gap in radical right voting: a cross-national investigation, *op. cit.*

³¹ VENNER, F. (1993). Le militantisme féminin d'extrême droite : « Une autre manière d'être féministe » ?, *op. cit.*

³² LESSELIER, C. (1991). De la Vierge Marie à Jeanne d'Arc : images de femmes à l'extrême droite, *op. cit.*

³³ FARRIS, Sara. (2012). Femonationalism and the 'Reserve' Army of Labor Called Migrant Women, *History of the Present*, 2(2), pp. 184-199. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.5406/historypresent.2.2.0184>

the 2000s, this so-called danger of immigration refers to non-European and especially by Muslim immigration, regarded as a threat to the so-called Western values. This discourse on the rapist migrant or the rapist Arab and the white and Christian victim has thus been cultivated by far-right men and is today adopted by women, from the far-right but also from a part of the right, in a French context increasingly marked by Islamophobia. The NF plays on the fear and insecurity of white women by pretending to want to protect from sexual violences committed by Muslim or immigrant men. Analysing the NR electoral programme of 2013, researcher Francesca Scrinzi³⁴ notices that sexism is mentioned only once, associated with the so-called “communitarianism” of Muslims. The racist discourse is reactualised: there is nothing new in the construction of immigration as a threat to European civilisation, but the RWPs use feminist rhetoric to give a falsely modern appearance to this reactionary discourse³⁵.

The behaviour of RWPs towards migrants, but also veiled women, echoes the concept of Orientalism, theorized by Edward Saïd and promoted by post-colonialism, according to which the East would be a creation of the West to enhance itself. Migrants are constructed as being “Others”, as culturally different but also inferior to the West, which would be intrinsically better and the completed version of what should be realized worldwide. Orientalism is gendered: it confines Muslim women to the role of victims and Muslim men to that of oppressors, imputing sexism to a racialised Other. The discourse of white men saving racialised women from racialised men, as Gayatri Spivak famously put it³⁶, has thus long served to justify colonization, notably that of India by Great Britain³⁷.

The orientalist narrative of the RWPs promotes this binary idea of a clash of civilisations, between on the one hand the Western, European and Christian civilisation and on the other the misogynistic, patriarchal and anti-progressive Arab-Muslim world. Cultural essentialism is at work here: it would be in the culture of immigrants to rape and in the nature of Muslims to be fanatical and intolerant, against which we should protect white women, and which would prove that their culture is incompatible with France's values³⁸. European women are seen as liberated, as the ultimate model of emancipation, perpetuating the fantasy that the West is living in a post-feminist world where equality has already been achieved. Conversely, the Muslim woman, being necessarily submissive, is used as a counter-image of the liberated Western woman³⁹. In spite of the misogynistic rhetoric and ideas of the RWPs, putting forward liberated women allows them to maintain this idea of the superiority of Western civilisation. Many RWPs, such as the Northern League in Italy, embody this contradiction, claiming that immigrant culture is necessarily macho, while behaving as such themselves.

Gender equality is therefore used by the RWP as a tool against Islam, and especially against the veil. This is one of the elements of novelty between the old and the new FN: the racialised Other is no longer only

³⁴ SCRINZI, F. (2014). Militantisme des femmes dans les partis de la droite populiste radicale. Une étude comparative de la participation des femmes et des hommes au sein de la Ligue du Nord (Italie) et du Front national (France), *op. cit.*

³⁵ CHAKRAVERTY, C. (2021). Podcast : « In extenso » : Quand l'extrême droite joue au féminin. *The conversation*. [online] 25 Mar. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/in-extenso-quand-lextrême-droite-joue-au-feminin-157759>

³⁶ SPIVAK, G-C. (2009). Les subalternes peuvent-elles parler ?. Éditions Amsterdam, p. 69.

³⁷ EDNA, B. (2019). The Disturbing Rise of “Femonationalism. *The Nation*. [online] 7 May. Available at: <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/feminism-nationalism-right-europe/>

³⁸ MAYER, N. (2013). From Jean-Marie to Marine Le Pen: Electoral Change on the Far Right, *op. cit.*

³⁹ FARRIS, Sara. (2012). Femonationalism and the ‘Reserve’ Army of Labor Called Migrant Women, *op. cit.*

male, a female racialised Other is mobilised, that of veiled women, to illustrate the misogyny allegedly intrinsic to Islam⁴⁰. Marine Le Pen, for instance, refers to the headscarf as an “Islamist uniform” and has stated that she would ban it if elected in 2022. Far-right “feminist” groups such as Némésis are actively fighting against the Islamic headscarf, which they see as a symbol of a so-called Islamisation of French society. Veiled women are depicted as oppressed, victims of their culture and in need of liberation: this obsession of the right and the far right to unveil Muslim women can be described as neocolonialist and assimilationist. Women wearing veils are denied free will and are paradoxically being deprived of many rights under the pretext of liberation, as evidenced by the 2004 law banning the wearing of religious symbols in French public schools, which reinforced this association between Islam and the oppression of women⁴¹. While these measures are usually taken in the name of women's rights or secularism, dictating to women what to wear is in no way feminist.

In order to refer to this instrumentalisation of feminism by nationalist and populist parties for racist purposes, Sara Farris coined the term “femonationalism” in her book *In the Name of Women's Rights: the Rise of Femonationalism*, published in 2017. Femonationalism refers to the practice of “*advocating for xenophobic and racist measures or policies on the grounds that they are necessary for women's liberation*”⁴². Farris⁴³ explains that the term was inspired by homonationalism, which Jasbir Puar coined to refer to the construction of Islam as homophobic and contrary to the values of American civilisation.

Even though feminism is traditionally rooted in left-wing values and struggles, it can easily be appropriated by the right and the far right⁴⁴. The NF is articulating a project of femonationalism since 2012 by standing up for women and opposing the veil in the name of feminism. Marine Le Pen's response to the attacks in Cologne in 2016 is striking in this respect, as she stated in an op-ed: “*I am afraid that the migration crisis marks the beginning of the end of women's rights*”⁴⁵.

Hence, a far-right “feminism” seems to be emerging, opposing homoparentality, the veil, immigration and sometimes abortion, and declaring left-wing feminism to be Islamo-feminism, that is to say a feminism submissive to Islam. “[*Since*] *appearing as a party that advocates for women's rights has become a resource of legitimation in the political arena*”⁴⁶, the NF tries to discredit its opponents, whom would not be truly feminist, because they would not pay attention to immigration, which is thought to be

⁴⁰ SCRINZI, F. (2017) A ‘new’ national front? Gender, religion, secularism and the French populist radical right. In: Köttig, M., Bitzan, R. and Petö, A. (eds.) *Gender and Far Right Politics in Europe*. Londres: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 127-140. doi:10.1007/978-3-319-43533-6_9.

⁴¹ FARRIS, Sara. (2012). Femonationalism and the ‘Reserve’ Army of Labor Called Migrant Women, *op. cit.*

⁴² CARRERAS, J. (2020). Féminisme & Extrême droite. Nouvelles droites et antiféminisme. *Viento*, n°670-671, para. 7. [online]. Available at: <http://www.inprecor.fr/article-Nouvelles-droites-et-antif%C3%A0ominisme?id=2339> (free translation)

⁴³ FARRIS, Sara. (2012). Femonationalism and the ‘Reserve’ Army of Labor Called Migrant Women, *op. cit.*

⁴⁴ LORRIAUX, A. (2015). À la recherche des « feminazies », ces féministes vraiment nazies, *op. cit.*

⁴⁵ BRETEAU, P. & LAURENT, S. (2016). Marine Le Pen, une féministe à la mémoire courte. *Le Monde*. [online] 15 Jan. Available at: https://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2016/01/15/marine-le-pen-une-feministe-a-la-memoire-courte_4848295_4355770.html (free translation)

⁴⁶ SCRINZI, F. (2014). Militantisme des femmes dans les partis de la droite populiste radicale. Une étude comparative de la participation des femmes et des hommes au sein de la Ligue du Nord (Italie) et du Front national (France), *op. cit.*, p.8 (free translation)

the real danger for women's rights. This illustrates the ability of the far right to reclaim and change the meaning of left-wing concepts. For example, Alette Espieux's March for Life uses the feminist slogan "my body, my choice" to assert women's freedom not to have an abortion in the face of so-called pressures from family and state to do so⁴⁷. The femonationalist collective Némésis also reappropriated feminist methods such as the Femen actions or the feminist collages, on which one can for example read "Rapefugees not welcome"⁴⁸.

While some far-right women's groups identify themselves as anti-feminist, such as Thais d'Escufon, and others claim to be identitarian alter-feminists, such as Némésis or Les Antigones, antifeminism and femonationalism are closely linked⁴⁹. For example, both use women's bodies as a battleground, seeking to control them, whether through restricting reproductive rights or the wearing of the veil. The role of women remains that of reproducing the nation, in the face of an alleged Muslim migratory invasion (theory of the great replacement).

Anti-feminism and femonationalism are used simultaneously by RWPs: both are opposed to contemporary feminism, denounce the patriarchy of Others, but not that of Western countries, value an essentialist female identity and defend a so-called natural complementarity between men and women, in accordance with the traditional model of the heterosexual nuclear family. These groups are therefore reinvesting feminist issues while adapting them to their conservative values, thereby carrying a project opposed to progressivism: many right and far-right "feminists" for example wish to reestablish the death penalty against rapists⁵⁰. This carceral feminism⁵¹ can also be seen in the defense, by right and far-right "feminists", of increased penalties for sexual violence, the introduction of chemical castration for pedophiles or the regulation of sex work.

The instrumentalisation of feminism for electoral and dediabolisation purposes

The NF/NR is seeking legitimisation and normalization, to distinguish itself from its fascist past and radical positions. Since 2011, Marine Le Pen has been trying, as part of her "dediabolisation" strategy, to present the NF as a modern party with the ability to govern.

Marine Le Pen plays with the fact that she is one of the few presidents of a French political party in order to attract the female electorate, especially middle-class women and single mothers⁵². Since 2012, Marine

⁴⁷ DELAPORTE, L. (2022). Chez les militantes de droite ou d'extrême droite, « il y a un usage stratégique de #MeToo », *op. cit.*

⁴⁸ DASINIERES, L. (2021). Les petits secrets du Collectif Némésis, ces « Femen d'extrême droite ». *Slate.fr*. [online] 19 Feb. Available at: <http://www.slate.fr/story/201738/collectif-nemesis-feministes-identitaires-extreme-droite-conservatrices-methodes>

⁴⁹ CARRERAS, J. (2020). Féminisme & Extrême droite. Nouvelles droites et antiféminisme, *op. cit.*

⁵⁰ VANNER, F. (1993). Le militantisme féminin d'extrême droite : « Une autre manière d'être féministe » ?, *op. cit.*

⁵¹ According to Bernstein, they are feminists in favour of the extension of the criminal sphere, calling for increased criminalisation of certain acts, without questioning who is being criminalised. In BERNSTEIN, E. (2007). The Sexual Politics of New Abolitionism, *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, vol. 75, n°3, p. 128-151.

⁵² CHRISAFIS, A. CONNOLY, K. & GIUFFRIDA, A. (2019). From Le Pen to Alice Weidel: how the European far-right set its sights on women. *The Guardian*. [online] 29 Jan. Available at:

Le Pen's femininity even became a campaign argument, as shown for example by her recent poster "Marine, femme d'État" (*Marine, stateswoman*) or her participation twice in the programme *Ambition intime*. Having a woman at the head of the party or in influential positions makes it easier to improve the image of the far-right, to present it as more modern and progressive, and thus to seduce the female electorate. As such, what used to exclude women from politics can now contribute to their success: the so-called softness or great compassion of women were indeed used to keep women out of politics, but are now used to include them, according to the idea that women would do politics differently than men⁵³.

For instance, Marine Le Pen frequently puts forward her maternity, as she is the mother of three children: family responsibilities, which used to be considered contradictory to political involvement, have become a strategic argument to assert one's proximity to the people. The intimate is thus increasingly made public by politicians to make them appear more human, more sympathetic⁵⁴. RWPs actively use this strategy of using femininity to better disguise the violence of far-right ideas, particularly through the role of the mother⁵⁵. The image that Marine Le Pen conveys "*is reassuring, she likes to represent herself as a mother who has to cope with the difficulties of combining work and family*"⁵⁶. As a divorced, active and modern woman, she breaks with the ageing image of her father, although this does not mean that the modernity of her character is reflected in the ideology of her party. Women leaders of the RWPs tend to take care of their appearance, and even to use it to soften the radicalism of their discourse. Thus, the stereotype that women, in politics as elsewhere, are gentler and more sensitive contributes to the dediabolisation of these parties. Putting forward young people is another strategy used to give an appearance of modernity: the NR uses it, with Jordan Bardella for example, but also Génération identitaire or the Némésis collective, which are almost exclusively composed of young people⁵⁷.

From 2012 onwards, Marine Le Pen has increasingly mentioned women's rights. After the Cologne crisis in 2016, she even quoted Simone de Beauvoir and Elisabeth Badinter in an op-ed and declared in her autobiography, *À contre flots*, that her time as a single mother had made her "quasi-feminist"⁵⁸. As the imaginary associated with feminism has moved away from the radical MLF activists of the 1970s and as calling oneself a feminist has become more socially acceptable, Marine Le Pen has moved closer to the term to the point of almost identifying with it. It seems that "*Marine Pen is trying to redefine the FN's policy to make it more in line with republican values*"⁵⁹, especially through more moderate positions on

<https://www.theguardian-com.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca/lifeandstyle/2019/jan/29/from-le-pen-to-alice-weidel-how-the-european-far-right-set-its-sights-on-women>

⁵³ BOUDILLON, J. (2005). Une femme d'extrême droite dans les médias. Le cas de Marine Le Pen. *Mots. Les langages du politique*, 78. [online]. Available at: <https://doi-org.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca/10.4000/mots.392>

⁵⁴ BOUDILLON, J. (2005). Une femme d'extrême droite dans les médias, *op. cit.*

⁵⁵ VENNER, F. (1993). Le militantisme féminin d'extrême droite : « Une autre manière d'être féministe » ?, *op. cit.*

⁵⁶ SCRINZI, F. (2014). Militantisme des femmes dans les partis de la droite populiste radicale. Une étude comparative de la participation des femmes et des hommes au sein de la Ligue du Nord (Italie) et du Front national (France), *op. cit.*, p.5 (free translation)

⁵⁷ CHAKRAVERTY, C. (2021). Podcast : « In extenso » : Quand l'extrême droite joue au féminin, *op. cit.*

⁵⁸ LORRIAUX, A. (2015). À la recherche des « feminazies », ces féministes vraiment nazies, *op. cit.*

⁵⁹ SCRINZI, F. (2014). Militantisme des femmes dans les partis de la droite populiste radicale. Une étude comparative de la participation des femmes et des hommes au sein de la Ligue du Nord (Italie) et du Front national (France), *op. cit.*, p.4 (free translation)

abortion and gay marriage. The change of name of the National Front to the National Rally following the 2017 presidential elections is also part of this renewal strategy, as well as the conflicts between Le Pen father and daughter, which creates the idea of a rupture: it is no longer the sexist, racist and Nazi-derived party of Jean-Marie Le Pen. During the 2022 presidential campaign, the name Le Pen was even removed in favour of a “Marine présidente” poster. This first name without a surname fulfils a double function: it distances her from her father, but also makes her more sympathetic, closer to the people.

Marine Le Pen has adopted a much more tolerant position towards same-sex couples and abortion, whereas other European parties such as Vox in Spain or PiS in Poland do not hesitate to undermine these rights⁶⁰. The strategy of dediabolisation also involves the use of new media: Marine Le Pen often uses YouTube to play the proximity card, talking about her personal life and putting forward her passion for cats. Moreover, she has repeatedly mentioned her difficult childhood, having suffered exclusion because of her father's political opinions⁶¹, a narrative that also contributes to making her more sympathetic and to distinguishing herself from the ideas and legacy bequeathed by her father, who was excluded from the party in 2015.

Before the arrival of Marine Le Pen, the NF defended a very essentialist discourse on the role of women, with reproduction considered as the destiny of women and the family as the pillar of the social and natural order, allegedly threatened by feminism and immigration. The NF's family policy aimed to increase the French birth rate and to revalue marriage and the family. Jean-Marie Le Pen's political programme also included the banning of abortion and the creation of a maternal wage to pay housewives⁶². Marine Le Pen transformed this maternal salary into a parental one. According to political researchers Rainbow Murray and Réjane Sénac, “*the policy transition from a maternal to a parental salary (thus envisaging stay-at-homes fathers) was designed to reflect the renewal of the FN electorate, which was younger and more used to modern family models*”⁶³. While still maintaining conservative ideas, Marine Le Pen has therefore added liberal and moderate ones in order to adapt to social changes and to open up to a new, more feminine and younger electorate, as well as to a part of the Republican right. Despite this, her position on abortion remains ambiguous, and there is a strong continuity between the past and present ideology of the NF/NR, still very much focused on the defence of the family, the fight against immigration and the naturalisation of social relations, although its links with fascism are more subtle.

This strategy of dediabolisation and normalization of the far right seems to have been a success, as shown by Marine Le Pen's increasingly high scores. Yet, by softening her discourse, she has lost some of the NR's historical voters, who have adhered to Eric Zemmour's more radical statements in the 2022 presidential elections. During this campaign, Marine Le Pen did not make any big splashes, and campaigned more on purchasing power than on Islam or immigration. It was therefore Eric Zemmour who embodied radicalism, thus contributing to trivializing Marine Le Pen's ideas by making her appear almost moderate.

⁶⁰ CARRERAS, J. (2020). Féminisme & Extrême droite. Nouvelles droites et antiféminisme, *op. cit.*

⁶¹ BOUDILLON, J. (2005). Une femme d'extrême droite dans les médias, *op. cit.*

⁶² LESSELIER, C. (1991). De la Vierge Marie à Jeanne d'Arc : images de femmes à l'extrême droite, *op. cit.*

⁶³ MURRAY, R. & SÉNAC, R. (2014). Mapping 'Feminist' Demands Across the French. In: Celis, K., Childs, S. *Gender, Conservatism and Political Representation*, European Consortium for Political Research Press, p. 235.

RWPs tended to quickly appear and disappear, which has not been the case of the NF, which survived the change of its party leader⁶⁴. The NR has become a mass party, stable and fully integrated into French political life. However, it is still difficult for it to form alliances with other major parties: the “Republican front” is still in place, even though much more fragile. During the June 2022 legislative elections, 48% of electors of the “Ensemble” formation (presidential majority) did not vote in case of a second round duel between the National Rally and the left-wing alliance “Nupes” in their electoral district. Similarly, 45% of voters who voted Nupes in the first round abstained in the case of a dual between Ensemble and the National Rally in the second round⁶⁵. As a result, 89 NR deputies were elected, a historic score that reflects the crumbling of the “front républicain”. RWPs thus no longer seem to be outsiders to political life, they have become parties like any others, just like their female electors, who are no longer only marginalized women, but also ordinary women, students, from all social classes. The success of RWPs can also be seen in the right-wingisation of the public and political debate, with themes carried by the far right since the 1980s now flooding the media space: security, Islamo-leftism in universities, immigration, the wearing of the veil, etc.⁶⁶, as opposed to, for example, ecology, social justice or purchasing power.

BEHIND THE FACADE: THE REALITY OF THE FAR-RIGHT REGARDING WOMEN

Recurring attacks on the rights of women and LGBTQ+ people

If the electoral base, the strategy and the communication of the NR in France have changed, can the same be said about its ideology and values? Has the far-right stopped being a threat to women?

In spite of the change of discourse, women’s rights are still not present in the NR programme, except through the prism of family or immigration. In the 24 pages of her 2017’s programme, the word “woman” appears only once, compared to 12 times for “foreigner” and nine for “security”, and this only mention to women’s rights is linked to the “fight against islamism”⁶⁷. Marine Le Pen is opposed to parity, to quotas and other positive discrimination measures, which she considers to be contrary to meritocracy and even reverse discrimination. “The first victims [of parity] are white heterosexual men”, her party website said in 2017⁶⁸. She declared that she wanted to put an end to parity in both her 2012 and 2017 programmes. Even though several of these measures are no longer present in her 2022 programme, these changes are coherent with her strategy of dediabolisation and can therefore hardly be attributed to a sudden change in her ideas.

⁶⁴ FROIO, C. (2017). Comparer les droites extrêmes : État de l’art critique et pistes pour de futurs chantiers de recherche. *Revue internationale de politique comparée*, 24, 373- 399. [online]. Available at: <https://doi-org.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca/10.3917/ripc.244.0373>

⁶⁵ ALIX, E. (2022). Législatives 2022. Nupes, RN, Ensemble : comment s’est effectué le report des voix au second tour ? *Ouest France*. [online] Available at: <https://www.ouest-france.fr/elections/legislatives/legislatives-2022-nupes-rn-ensemble-comment-s-est-effectue-le-report-des-voix-au-second-tour-47e09e78-f09b-11ec-a1f9-96fad4cda185>

⁶⁶ CHAKRAVERTY, C. (2021). Podcast : « In extenso » : Quand l’extrême droite joue au féminin, *op. cit.*

⁶⁷ LORRIAUX, A. (2015). À la recherche des « feminazies », ces féministes vraiment nazies, *op. cit.*

⁶⁸ BRETEAU, P. & LAURENT, S. (2016). Marine Le Pen, une féministe à la mémoire courte, *op. cit.* (free translation)

The position of the RN on abortion is ambiguous: Marine Le Pen says she understands women who abort and does not want to go back on the legality of abortion, but in 2012 she talked about an increase in the number of “comfort abortions” and was considering de-reimbursing abortion except in cases of rape. She also declared herself against the extension of the legal deadline for abortion, which was raised from 12 to 14 weeks last February. She attacked Planned Parenthood in 2012, 2017 and 2022 and is still insisting on women's freedom of choice not to have an abortion as well as not to work⁶⁹. Many members within her party also remain openly anti-abortion, and if elected, Marine Le Pen plans to rely on European allies known for their anti-abortion and anti-LGBT+ positions, such as Viktor Orban and Mateusz Morawiecki. We have thus gone from firm opposition to abortion in the 1980s to “timid acceptance” today⁷⁰.

In addition, the NF has for a long time proposed the creation of a parental salary equivalent to 80% of the SMIC paid from the second child onwards⁷¹. Although this is theoretically aimed at both women and men, it would certainly be used much more by women and would encourage them to return to the home. “Progress for women means staying at home”, said Marine Le Pen in 2012. One can still see in the discourse and proposals of the far right a certain essentialisation of women, particularly by assigning them to the role of mother and wife. Even if we considered the NR to be feminist, it would therefore be a differentialist, essentialist one, relying on a tradition view of the so-called natural roles of men and women.

In regard to LGBTQ+ rights, Marine Le Pen proposed in commitment 87 of her 2017 program to replace same-sex marriage with an improved PACS⁷², and opposed the adoption of same-sex couples as well as the opening of medically assisted reproduction to female couples, which she voted against in 2021⁷³.

On top of that, Marine Le Pen has always voted as a European deputy against European resolutions aimed at extending women's rights, such as the Simone Veil pact, but also the resolution on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in the Digital Age in 2016 or the one that proposed a 20 weeks of maternity leave fully covered throughout Europe. Similarly, NF/NR deputies in the National Assembly consistently oppose measures related to women's rights⁷⁴.

In the end, it seems as if the “quasi-feminism” of the NF/NR is aimed at white, economically privileged women, and not at women as a whole. The NF's program, whether in 2017 or 2022, includes, for example, a ban on the veil in public space and the abolition of the reduction in the family allowance and state medical aid, both of these measures being especially penalizing migrant or precarious women. The NF's program also defends the principle of national priority for employment, housing and social benefits,

⁶⁹ SCRINZI, F. (2017). Gender and women in the Front National discourse and policy: from ‘mothers of the nation’ to ‘working mothers’. *New Formations*, 91.

⁷⁰ LORRIAUX, A. (2015). À la recherche des « feminazies », ces féministes vraiment nazies, *op. cit.*

⁷¹ BRETEAU, P. & LAURENT, S. (2016). Marine Le Pen, une féministe à la mémoire courte, *op. cit.*

⁷² The acronym PACS stands for “Pacte civil de solidarité”, which could be translated as Civil solidarity pact. It is a form of civil union between two people, established in France in 1999. It is open to both heterosexual and same-sex couples. However, the PACS does not give the right to the same benefits as marriage.

⁷³ LORRIAUX, A. (2015). À la recherche des « feminazies », ces féministes vraiment nazies, *op. cit.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid*

with family allowances restricted to families where at least one of the parents is French⁷⁵. Thus, there is a strong similarity between the NF of Le Pen father and that of Le Pen daughter, with the latter following the style, ideas and strategy that led to the success of the former in 2002.

Consequently, the NF/NR appears to be using the notion of women's rights only as part of their anti-immigration rhetoric and not for social justice purposes. The RN's de-demonization effort is a strategy for conquering power, not a reflection of a de-radicalization of its ideas. One cannot deny that the rise of ultra-conservative far-right policies endangers the rights of women and other minorities, as evidenced by the retreat of LGBTQ+ rights and gender equality policies in Hungary and Poland.

The role of feminist against the far-right

The growing presence of women in right-wing parties leads us to reconsider the links between gender, parties and the substantial representation of women⁷⁶. The gendered study of RWPs indicates that descriptive representation does not necessarily translate into substantive representation, that is, having women in politics (descriptive representation) does not mean that their rights will be defended (substantive representation). Is it then possible to be a feminist from the right or the extreme right? Can one combine feminism and conservatism? By claiming to defend women, the activists of the NF or of the Némésis collective question the monopoly of the substantial representation of women by the left⁷⁷. Perhaps the definition of substantive representation should be broadened to include not only feminist positions, but also anything that is done on behalf of women. Conservative parties, for example, can substantially represent conservative women. According to Murray and Sénac⁷⁸ women in politics are more likely than men to take an interest in women's rights issues. Gender, they argue, is a better indicator than partisan differences to explain legislators' behaviour in this regard, reinforcing the idea of a politics of presence rather than a politics of ideas.

However, in my opinion, a "true" feminism should be intersectional, anti-fascist, anti-racist and anti-capitalist, so that it does not defend only privileged white heterosexual women, but rather women in all their heterogeneity. These far-right women are reappropriating the proposals and modes of action of feminist movements, but are distorting the social project carried by feminism, towards more justice and equality.

For instance, the Nemesis collective defends a security, identity-based and conservative "feminism", whereas feminism is inherently progressive⁷⁹. Femonationalism claims to liberate Muslim women, but does the opposite, by controlling the bodies of women wearing the hijab and restricting their access to education, employment or leisure activities. The far right is thus an obstacle to the construction of an

⁷⁵ MURRAY, R. & SÉNAC, R. (2014). Mapping 'Feminist' Demands Across the French, *op. cit.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid*

⁷⁷ SCRINZI, F. (2014). Militantisme des femmes dans les partis de la droite populiste radicale. Une étude comparative de la participation des femmes et des hommes au sein de la Ligue du Nord (Italie) et du Front national (France), *op. cit.*

⁷⁸ MURRAY, R. & SÉNAC, R. (2014). Mapping 'Feminist' Demands Across the French, *op. cit.*

⁷⁹ DASINIERES, L. (2021). Les petits secrets du Collectif Némésis, ces « Femen d'extrême droite », *op. cit.*

egalitarian society, and femonationalism is not feminism, but ethnic nationalism⁸⁰. A feminism that wishes to liberate women should, unlike femonationalist groups that reject racialized, migrant and LGBTQ+ women, take into consideration all power relations by adopting an intersectional approach.

CONCLUSION

Gender is often neglected in the literature on RWPs, yet a gendered perspective allows us to fully grasp the mutations and reasons for the rise of the populist radical right in Europe. The feminization of RWPs has indeed allowed them, as we have seen, to diversify and thus increase their electoral base. The emphasis on women's rights has been crucial to the anti-immigration strategy of the NF/NR. Nevertheless, the emphasis of this party on women's rights is only for Islamophobic and electoral purposes, and has therefore not translated into a real change of position on the role of women in society. It is thus an opportunistic feminism of appearance: their discourse has sometimes softened, but actions have not followed and the far right remains a threat to women, especially those who are not white. Hence, the feminisation of the far right described in the first part is a more political strategy to dediabolise and normalise the RDPs than a genuine shift towards more feminist values. Feminism needs to fight this reappropriation of its struggles by femonationalist movements. Marine Le Pen remains the heir to a far-right tradition that has its roots in the France of Vichy and is still a danger to the rights of women, LGBTQI+ people, immigrants, Muslims and democracy in general.

⁸⁰ EDNA, B. (2019). The Disturbing Rise of “Femonationalism”. *The Nation*. [online] 7 May. Available at: <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/feminism-nationalism-right-europe/>

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