

## Understanding populist far-right anti-immigration and anti-gender stances beyond the paradigm of gender as ‘a symbolic glue’: Giorgia Meloni’s modern motherhood, neo-Catholicism, and reproductive racism

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### Abstract

Building on theoretical framings in critical race and queer studies, this article focuses on the first female prime minister of Italy, Giorgia Meloni, as an entry point to examining the current alignment between far-right populism, anti-gender movements, and White supremacist conspiracy theories in Europe. First, considering the contradictions that female leaders of far-right populist parties seem to negotiate, this article compares Meloni’s communication strategies and political interventions to those of her counterparts in Europe. Second, employing the concept of ‘productive racism’, the article examines Meloni’s birth rate agenda and related ambivalent stance towards ‘migrant’ women. In so doing, this article first demonstrates how existing theoretical frames, developed to examine current entanglements between feminist, anti-gender, and anti-immigration discourses, fall short of explaining why ‘gender’ can be used to ‘stick’ ‘migrant’ and queer subjects together, characterising both as threats to the sexual order of Europe. Even when ‘migrant’ women are depicted as hopeless victims, populist far-right leaders appraise them as either aberrant or otherwise deficient mothers. The article concludes by urging scholars of far-right populism, migration, and religion and

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their intersections with gender, to adopt race as a primary category of analysis and, therefore, consider that it is race that makes gender 'stick' as the common enemy of disparate political actors.

### Keywords

Anti-gender ideology, anti-male migrant consensus, far-right populist female leaders, Giorgia Meloni, great replacement conspiracy theory, reproductive racism

## Introduction

In the past few decades, in Europe, we have witnessed the rise of populist far-right parties, anti-immigration racism turning into 'feminist' policies, the rolling back of sexual reproductive rights, and sexual minorities' rights alongside the mainstreaming of White supremacist conspiracy theories. Despite the convergence of these issues in public discourses and entanglements in everyday politics, scholars of far-right populism, migration, and religion and their intersections with gender continue to approach these occurrences as if they were contingent upon short-term political objectives, for example, winning elections or maintaining the status quo. Various competing frames have been brought forward to explain the above listed phenomena independently from each other, leading many scholars to claim that gender appears to act as a 'symbolic glue' that 'allows actors with diverging goals and strategies to work together against a common enemy' (Colella, 2021: 284; Kováts and Põim, 2015; Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017: 13). Building on theoretical framings in critical race and queer studies, this article focuses on the communication strategies and political interventions of the first female prime minister of Italy, 'femme fascist' (Nadeau, 2018) Giorgia Meloni,<sup>1</sup> to show how populist far-right leaders, White supremacist organisations, and church-led anti-gender movements endorse each other's agendas, not only to achieve short-term objectives but also to defend a shared vision of the sexual order within Europe.

As head of her political party, *Fratelli d'Italia*, *Fdi* [Brothers of Italy], Meloni has ridden the wave of nationalistic politics sweeping through Europe. Without a doubt, it was her hard-line anti-migration, anti-feminist, and anti-LGBTQIA+<sup>2</sup> rights stance that handed her a landslide victory in the Italian general election of 2022.<sup>3</sup> Throughout her political career, Meloni has been able to slalom a fine line between stoking fear and evoking national pride. She has dabbled in anti-Europe and anti-gay 'banter', opposed citizenship rights for children of immigrants, and supported a pro-birth rate agenda, which all played well into the 'Italy first' sentiments of her far-right constituency (Nadeau, 2018: 18). Despite not being new to national politics,<sup>4</sup> Meloni's popularity skyrocketed in 2019 when a parody-remix video of her speech attacking the LGBTQIA+ movement went viral on YouTube.<sup>5</sup> Instead of tainting her image, the incident worked in her favour. It helped Meloni appoint herself as the last guardian of the 'traditional' Italian family<sup>6</sup> and, consequently, she achieved an iconic status within national politics.

Meloni perfectly embodies the current convergence of anti-immigration, anti-feminist, anti-LGBTQIA+ positions with White supremacist conspiracy theories. As such,

there is no better-suited far-right populist female leader to assist us with examining the entanglement of these issues in everyday politics, beyond observing ostensible paradoxes such as seeing 'emancipated' women at the head of political parties that advocate traditional gender roles; populist far-right parties that hold up gender equality as a marker of their superiority, while sacralising 'motherhood'; and church-led movements that demonise both heteropatriarchal migrant families and 'sexually deviant' LGBTQIA+ subjects demanding equal sexual citizenship rights.

To address this gap, the authors conducted participant observation at the electoral rallies at which Meloni delivered speeches as part of her party's political campaign *L'Italia del Riscatto* [The Italy of Redemption], which she ran for the administrative election of 2021.<sup>7</sup> The authors integrated the observations made during these rallies with the close reading of selected passages from the autobiography and Facebook posts that Meloni published before and during said election campaign. Considering Meloni's endorsement of anti-migration and anti-gender stances alongside White supremacist conspiracy theories, the authors paid special attention to any comment she publicly made about various 'migrant' groups in Italy, gender roles, and reproductive rights.

Building on this work, the first section of this article critically reviews existing literature on populist far-right female leaders, positioning Meloni's communication strategies and politics accordingly. The second section deploys the concept of 'productive racism' to examine the hidden agenda of populist far-right preoccupations with national birth rates as well as parse the limitations of the frames developed to study the rise of anti-immigration and anti-gender politics in Europe. The article advances a race-informed understanding of gender to unravel Meloni's objective when defending 'traditional' gender roles and family, namely upholding whiteness. The article concludes by urging scholars of far-right populism, migration, and religion and their intersections with gender, to adopt an interdisciplinary framework through which race is seen as central to making gender 'stick' as the common enemy of disparate political actors.

### **'Mother of the nation': Meloni's communication strategies, gender politics, and anti-migration nationalism**

Female leaders of far-right populist parties, such as Meloni, represent a complex phenomenon highly worthy of academic attention. Considering how these parties have been correctly described as aggressively masculine, anti-feminist and, more broadly, anti-progressivist, the presence of women in their ranks has created the impression of an ostensible self-contradiction. Accordingly, scholars of political science, especially those who are engaged with the rise of populism in Europe, have examined how far-right populist female leaders represent themselves and, accordingly, 'solve' the contradictions inherent in their position of leading political parties that advocate traditional gender roles (Campus, 2020; Geva, 2020; Meret, 2015; Pettersson, 2017).

These studies approach populism as a communication style, observing how far-right populist leaders such as Marine Le Pen in France, Pia Kjaersgaard in Denmark, and Siv Jensen in Finland have resorted to performing the role of 'mother of the nation' as a way of tackling the dual bind of having to espouse hegemonic masculinity (to project

authority and leadership), while simultaneously not appearing too aggressive or ‘not womanly enough’ to their constituency (Campus, 2020; Geva, 2020; Meret, 2015). As these scholars have noted, once they assumed the role of ‘mother of the nation’, Le Pen, Kjærsgaard, and Jensen could freely ‘embody a wider range of acceptable physical attributes’ as well as mixing a ‘feminine’ caring trait with the ‘masculine’ trait of proactive toughness and power (Geva, 2020: 7). More importantly, they could rise in the ranks of populist far-right parties (or start them anew) without threatening far-right understandings of ‘traditional family’ as the cornerstone of national unity (Meret, 2015) and relationships between genders as fundamentally ‘complementary, heterosexual, and hierarchical’ (Geva, 2020: 7). Meloni’s communication style<sup>8</sup> is, therefore, hardly original. Like her counterparts in other countries in Europe, she successfully styled herself as the average Italian woman and mother, just as concerned about the future of her nation as that of her own family.

The strategies she employed to maintain this self-fashioned image have been numerous but always directed to maintain a delicate balance between the toughness that is usually expected from populist right-wing male leaders and the softness that is normally expected of any woman who occupies a position of power. For instance, at rallies and electoral events of her party, Meloni performs a rather ‘neutral’ masculine public persona, while in her autobiography *Io sono Giorgia. Le mie radici le mie idee* [I am Giorgia. My roots, my ideas (Meloni, 2021)], she takes quite an intimate tone. She is not afraid to be open about her upbringing as the daughter of a single mother, her initial lack of experience with the media, and experience of being a mother while leading a national party. Her posts on social media similarly balance her representation both as a politician and as an individual, but also greatly emphasise her ability to almost effortlessly perform the dual roles of caring mother and independent woman with a successful career, achieved without any affirmative action-oriented assistance from the state. Not by chance, Meloni’s most popular post on the social media platform *Facebook* is a picture of her holding her daughter, Ginevra, in her arms as a new-born baby, with a caption celebrating her daughter’s role in providing her with inspiration and orientation in life. By adopting this communication strategy, Meloni has also successfully managed to differentiate herself from her main competitor, the leader of the populist right-wing party *Lega* [League] Matteo Salvini, whose political stances and rhetorical style often overlap with hers. In fact, despite both defending the traditional family as a cornerstone of national unity, only Meloni can use her status as a mother to position herself as the harbinger of a conservative, yet modern, nation – ‘a synthesis of traditional family values and a “modernised” gender equality agenda that matches her gendered and constructed image’ (Meret, 2015: 96).

From this perspective, like her counterparts in the rest of Europe, Meloni inhabits the seeming contradiction of extolling gender equality as her achievement, while upholding the protection of traditional gender roles as one of the main objectives of her party.<sup>9</sup> Studies concerned with this contradiction have examined the discursive strategies that far-right populist female politicians employ to uphold the ‘traditional’ gender values of their parties, while addressing feminist issues such as affirmative action and reproductive rights (Pettersson, 2017: 9–10). These studies have shown how the demonisation of contemporary feminist political demands, especially those concerning gender identity,

represent the most deployed discursive strategy that is used by far-right populist representatives to claim gender equality as one of their main values, while simultaneously emphasising the desirability of traditional gender roles (Pettersson, 2017: 9–10). Meloni has employed the same discursive strategy. For instance, in the winter of 2021, the MP Alessandro Zan proposed the so-called ‘Zan Bill’, a draft law that aimed to extend the definition of crimes of violence, discrimination, and incitement to violence to include gender identity, sexual orientation, and disability-based discrimination. Meloni unequivocally positioned the Bill as unrelated to the protection of LGBTQIA+ subjects, instead publicly characterising transgender citizens’ demands to be identified in accordance with their gender of choice as a matter of unfair competition against women and, therefore, a threat to women’s rights.<sup>10</sup> Typical of her style of responding to adversaries or accusations against her (Delbarba, 2022: 65–70), in a speech she delivered in the city of Turin, she used her transphobic stance as to distinguish between ‘reasonable’ concerns for women’s rights from ‘unreasonable’ demands, such as the implementation of gender quotas. In her words,

Since the beginning of this year, eighty thousand illegal [sic] immigrants have entered [the country] but refused to be tested for and vaccinated against Covid and nobody says anything. And if you say it is unreasonable, if you say that is unreasonable, they tell you that you are racist, all like that. If you say, I don’t know, let’s say, look, the Zan Bill has nothing to do with homosexual [sic] rights, has nothing to do with the fight against discrimination – which *Brothers of Italy* has always been available to discuss. But, you know, when you say that the principle of self-identification . . . did we understand that this stuff diminishes women’s rights? We understand that this stuff diminishes women’s rights because if I self-identify . . . for example, easy, I am against gender quotas. I have always been against gender quotas. In my opinion, women simply need to be empowered to compete on equal terms. I mean, if the principle of self-identification is adopted . . . when we have the next political election and I cannot fulfil gender quotas, [I say] are you ready Giovanni Donzelli?–MP for the Brothers of Italy, responsible for the organisation. I ask him ‘do you feel [to be] a woman today? Yes, perfect you are on the top of the candidate list, problem solved. Does this seem smart to you? It is not. (23 September 2021)<sup>11</sup>

Far-right populist female leaders have not only used feminist claims to attack and discriminate against transwomen and stall gender equality, but also, for decades now, they have deployed feminism to buttress their anti-immigration demands. Many feminist scholars have already observed this equally complex phenomenon and defined it respectively as: *gendered culturalism*, to highlight how far-right populist parties and movements use alleged respect for gender equality in Western culture(s) to normalise racist anti-immigration policies (Vieta, 2016); *sexualised racism* (or racialised sexism), to emphasise how sexism has been attributed to ‘migrant’<sup>12</sup> men as an inherent characteristic of their socialisation (Sauer et al., 2017; Scrinzi, 2014, 2017); *state feminism*, to emphasise state implementation of integration policies aiming to rescue (emancipate) ‘migrant’ women from their culturally backward families (Scrinzi, 2017; Tissot, 2008); and, more recently, *femonationalism* to unravel the broader anti-male ‘migrant’ (Muslim men *in primis*) consensus that currently exists between right-wing populist politicians, (some) feminists, so-called ‘femocrats’, and neoliberal anti-nationalists (Farris, 2017).

Despite stressing different aspects of the same phenomenon, all these definitions draw attention to how populist anti-immigration stances depend on a set of interrelated narratives that characterise ‘migrant’ men as a threat to the safety and freedom of women (both ‘native’ and ‘migrant’) and, ‘migrant’ women as helpless victims of their ‘culture’. Conversely, and more broadly, these definitions shed light on how, according to the same narratives, we can only consider women (both ‘native’ and ‘migrant’) to be safe from ‘migrant’ men if we reproduce the ‘Western’ ideal of family and nation (Farris, 2017: 22–56; Santos and Roque, 2021: 47–50; Vieten, 2016: 623–625). Since all women are only considered safe when these two interrelated ideals are adhered to, women themselves are called upon to do their part by means of biological procreation if ‘native’ (Scrinzi, 2017: 133–134) and integration-oriented childrearing if ‘migrant’ (Farris, 2017: 78–114).

Meloni has been no exception. It has been quite some time since she joined the anti-male migrant chorus to buttress her broader anti-immigration stances. Accordingly, she regularly uses her social media accounts to relay instances of ‘migrant’ women who have suffered at the hands of their family members, contrasting this with Italian culture and the nation as a safe haven for all women, however, on the condition that it is free from Islam. As she reported in one of her posts on *Facebook*,

Listen to the shocking words of Houda, a Moroccan girl, who was sold by her parents when she was a young woman for 50 million of the old Italian Lira and forced to marry a man against her will. Many Muslim girls, like Houda or the poor Saman, had to endure this shame and I consider the silence of the Islamic communities and a certain Left, which does not have the courage to condemn certain attitudes of Islam, unacceptable. In our country, our culture is respected and our culture includes respect for women. (14 June 2021)<sup>13</sup>

Studies conducted so far have well illustrated how leaders such as Meloni have weaponised both motherhood – to assert the ‘traditional’ family as the cornerstone of national unity – and women’s rights – to assert ‘Western’ culture as a marker of national belonging. However, insightful as these observations may be, they are overly focused on the tensions that scholars perceive to exist between being a female leader and upholding ‘traditional’ gender roles: on one hand, upholding women’s rights as a marker of cultural superiority, while valuing women exclusively for their reproductive capacities on the other hand. As this article argues, the contradictions that far-right populist female leaders seem to embody are not conflictual; rather, they are integral to colonial understandings of sexual reproduction and gender norms. In this regard, as the next section of this article demonstrates, analysis of conceptualisations of sexual and gender minority rights is necessary to understand why populist far-right female leaders see women, families, and nations as inextricably linked with each other.

### **‘Reproductive racism’: Meloni’s exclusion of ‘migrant’ women from the family of the nation**

As Massimo Prearo (2019, 2020) has observed, we are witnessing the emergence of a new alliance between the anti-gender ideology agenda of the Catholic Church and far-right populist parties (see also Donà, 2020b). Defined as ‘neo-Catholicism’ (Prearo,



2019, 2020), populist leaders in Italy have been at the forefront of this phenomenon. For example, Salvini easily adopted the Vatican's agenda of saving the 'traditional' family, children, and the nation from 'gender ideology'<sup>14</sup> to uphold heteronormative masculinity as hegemonic in the country (Cossutta, 2021; see also Donà, 2020a and Giorgi, 2022). At the same time, Meloni gained popularity by vehemently opposing any political demand advanced by the LGBTQIA+ movement in Italy. However, as Daria Colella has observed, the alliance between the Catholic Church and far-right populist leaders is far broader. It extends to include the anti-male 'migrant' consensus discussed above. Indeed, so long as 'migrant' men are depicted as if they were the only perpetrators of gender-based and domestic violence, 'native' men can continue to be upheld as the 'natural' protectors of 'native' women (as well as, albeit more indirectly, rescuers of 'migrant' women) (Colella, 2021: 278–280). Similarly, highly publicised instances of gender-based and/or domestic violence committed by 'migrant' men have often been used to compare so-called 'gender imperialism'<sup>15</sup> to Islamism. Such a comparison assumes that they both constitute a threat to the 'traditional family'; the former for wanting to eliminate sexual differences, the latter for dismissing women's rights (Garbagnoli, 2017: 164; see also Giuliani et al., 2020). As this short review shows, despite highlighting how much ultra-conservative Vatican positions currently overlap with those held by Salvini and Meloni, they too struggle with understanding why, exactly, 'gender ideology' and 'islamisation' are currently regarded as 'two analogous enemies of the national/"natural" order' (Garbagnoli, 2017: 152). That is, beyond observing that gender has acted as a 'symbolic glue' that allows actors with diverging goals and strategies to work together against a common enemy, they have not yet provided an adequate explanation (Colella, 2021: 284; Kováts and Põim, 2015; Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017: 13).

Far-right populist leaders, whether or not they are advocates of LGBTQIA+ rights, are heteronormative in their views. This stance becomes further evident once we unpack the concepts of gender and sexuality, as referred to explicitly and implicitly in current public debates. At the explicit level, public debates concerning women and LGBTQIA+ rights are dominated by a split among feminists who maintain that only gender is socially constructed and those who argue that sex is as well. Marked by Judith Butler's (2002 [1990]: 23) theorisation of gender as an artificial identity binary that is imposed upon us under the pretension that gender and sexuality constitute a reflection of our 'biological' sex, this split paved the way to a proliferation of sexual and gender nonconforming identities (particularly in the global north), based on the reconfiguration of sex, gender, and sexuality, beyond the imperative for linear alignment and/or the need to abide by binary understandings or categorisations.

As indicated above, when far-right populist female leaders claim gender equality as a mark of Western civilisation, while upholding traditional gender roles as desirable, they do so in opposition to Butler's critique of gender and, accordingly, use such critique to demonise feminism in general. It is also to this critique of gender that anti-gender movements refer to when they describe LGBTQIA+ populations' demands for marriage and child adoption rights as a direct threat to the nation. Since feminist scholars have already demonstrated that the naturalisation of sexual and gender binary is 'inextricable from the state's interest in . . . instituting the hetero-patriarchal family/household as the basic socio-economic unit' (Peterson, 1999: 61), it is easy to see why far-right party leaders generally resist any reconfiguration of the 'traditional' family unit based on LGBTQIA+

populations' political demands. However, it is not clear why, putatively, heteropatriarchal migrant families are publicly characterised as 'sexually deviant' as LGBTQIA+ subjects demanding equal sexual citizenship rights. To address this gap, the remainder of this section examines what kind of understandings of gender are implicitly referred to in public debates regarding 'migrant' women.

In her study of reproductive racism in Europe, Sophia Siddiqui (2021) foregrounds how, amid an increasing panic concerning plunging national birth rates, 'migrant' women have been bitterly cast as 'breeders' of 'future threats' (p. 11).<sup>16</sup> As the author notes, since the 'Great Replacement' conspiracy theory has become mainstream in Europe,<sup>17</sup> 'migrant' women – Muslim 'migrant women' especially – have been publicly accused for being actively complicit in the alleged takeover of Europe (Siddiqui, 2021: 10–11). For Siddiqui, acknowledging the growing hostility against 'migrant' women is the only way to fully grasp why far-right policies, which, on one hand, aim to boost 'native' women's 'birth rate' and, on the other hand, aim to diminish 'migrant' women's rights and capacity to take care of their own children and families, have concurrently been legitimised (Siddiqui, 2021: 13–14). Unsurprisingly, as various news outlets have already denounced, Meloni has openly supported the 'Great Replacement' conspiracy theory for quite some time. Taken together, her anti-immigration and anti-LGBTQIA+ rhetoric, opposition to abortion and citizenship rights for second-generation 'migrants', and, above all, support for a higher 'native' birth rate, effectively normalised the idea that Italians are 'ethnically' at risk of being replaced by 'migrants'. As she posted on her *Facebook* page soon after the publication of a 2017 annual report concerning national demographic trends in Italy,

Shocking demographic data released by Istat [Italian National Institute of Statistics]: for the second time in a row, fewer than 500,000 children were born in Italy. To make things worse, more than 76,000 Italians no longer live in Italy because they went to live abroad. Faced by this disastrous reality, left wing governments have only proposed to fund the invasion to replace Italians with immigrants and give away citizenship with a new law. (13 June 2017)

Siddiqui's analysis of reproductive racism allows us to see how something as seemingly innocuous as Meloni's preoccupation with the falling birth rate of Italians can create the conditions through which 'anti-immigrant, demographic and ideologically anti-feminist agendas can converge and be whitewashed as legitimate concerns' (Siddiqui, 2021: 11). More importantly, her analysis draws attention to the major shortcomings of analytical frames so far employed to examine anti-immigration discourses' co-opting of feminist principles, that is, *gendered culturalism*; *sexualised racism* (or racialised sexism); *state feminism*; and *femonationalism*. According to each of these frames, 'migrant' women are not seen as a threat, but rather, conceived of as helpless 'victims' requiring state assistance for them and their children to be integrated in mainstream society. Siddiqui's focus on 'migrant' women alone thus allows us to see that, when addressed separately from their male counterparts, 'migrant' women are usually defined as deviant or otherwise deficient mothers.

Meloni's brand of femonationalism is not an exception. First, as the passage quoted above demonstrates, whenever Meloni has relayed instances of violence or abuse committed against young Muslim women, she does not exclude their mothers as perpetrators.



Rather, by association, she has characterised 'migrant' mothers as co-creators of the extreme vulnerability imposed upon their daughters. Similarly, Meloni exploited the case of a child who had reported his mother to the police,<sup>18</sup> to indiscriminately characterise all Roma women as violent and parasitic mothers, incapable of taking care of their children. As Meloni stated in one of her speeches delivered during a rally in Rome,

But how is it possible that in Italy . . . one pretends not to see the exploitation of Roma children forced to go and report their mothers because they send them to beg . . . This is racism, dear friends of the left. This is racism. (18 September 2021)<sup>19</sup>

As this case illustrates, Meloni does not necessarily view 'migrant' women as helpless victims of their culture (or men). Rather, she often appraises them as the root cause of highly dysfunctional families. Similarly, whereas Meloni has publicly displayed a great deal of sympathy for trafficked Nigerian women,<sup>20</sup> she has used their suffering not so much to advocate for their integration, but instead, to support her hard-line position against immigration. Via various iterations of the same narrative, Meloni has made it clear that Nigerian women can only be saved by persecuting their traffickers and, therefore, stamping out their 'illegal' arrivals in the country. As she commented on the arrest of 11 Nigerian traffickers on her *Facebook* page,

Congratulations to the police officers of the investigative team of Turin, who have dismantled the network of traffickers dedicated to smuggling young Nigerian women. Brothers of Italy, as it has always done, reports on the proliferation of criminal associations such as the Nigerian mafia. The fight against illegal immigration involves saving trafficked women from the hands of their traffickers. But, please, do not say this to the feminists . . . (19 April 2019)<sup>21</sup>

Meloni's contradictory stance towards 'migrant' women is not surprising. Rather, it illuminates how she understands sexual and gender normativity more broadly, less so the imperative to be straight and/or binary, but more so the imperative to adopt and reproduce, in the words of Mark Rifkin (2011), white 'conceptions of family, home, desire, and personal identity' (p. 8). When sexual and gender normativity are more accurately understood as nation-state projects seeking to secure the biological and social reproduction of whiteness, it becomes possible to see how Meloni can simultaneously regard 'migrant' women as both pitiful victims *and* dysfunctional mothers.

Black feminist critiques of western understandings of family and the female gender (Spillers, 1987) are equally crucial to understanding why and how, more broadly, for far-right populist female leaders like Meloni, 'migrant' women are a priori, precluded from being praised as 'playing the role of 'mothers' of the nation. Cathy J. Cohen (1997: 447–448) has pertinently distinguished heterosexuality from heteronormativity to show that the former cannot be conflated with the latter but also emphasise that Black national subjects can never be straight enough to be deemed normative. Mark Rifkin has likewise observed how anthropological understandings of sexual reproduction and relations of consanguinity have imposed an 'artificial unity' not only upon sex, gender, and sexuality, as Butler (2002 [1990]: 23) has taught us, but also among 'marital heteroromantic pairing, bourgeois homemaking, private property holding and dynamics of inheritance, legal determinations of familial relatedness, and a specific

gendered division of labour' (Rifkin, 2011: 14). Finally, Hortense Spillers (1987: 72) has highlighted how the appraisal of the 'procreation patterns and family structures' of Black subjects in the United States as problematic or pathological harks back to slavery, when, among the enslaved, gender differentiation was dispensed of, leaving Black women congruently, stripped off from the protection the symbolics of 'patriarchalized' female gender otherwise afforded to White women.<sup>22</sup> As Spillers notes, deprived of such protection, Black women's reproductive capacities became dissociated from the values and qualities normally attributed to motherhood, namely the capacity of (re) producing a domestic sphere as well as the social bonds of affection within it. This explains why, as Spillers (1987: 74) acutely observes, Black women are still depicted as inherently incapable of properly raising children and/or forming functional family units that live up to the socio-biological norms overseeing the reproduction of civilisation<sup>23</sup> within western nations.

Taken together, these critiques enable us to see what understanding of gender is truly at play when the rights of 'migrants', sexual and gender minorities are publicly debated. Since these critiques prioritise whiteness as a *prerequisite* for 'migrant' subjects to count as gender and sexually normative (or to be included in sexual order of Western nations), they effectively explain exactly why 'migrant' and queer people are regarded as equal threats to the sexual order of Europe. Furthermore, Spillers' critique highlights how sexual and gender normativity affords White women a form of patriarchal protection that does not extend to 'migrant' women. In this regard, the prospective of them becoming mothers is conceived as either a risk that must be minimised (e.g. integration policies) or as a threat that must be eliminated (e.g. reproductive racism).

## Conclusion

Drawing on critical race and queer studies is central to examining the current alignment between far-right populism, anti-gender movements, and White supremacist conspiracy theories in Europe. This article first examined the anti-immigration and anti-gender politics of the first populist far-right female prime minister of Italy, Meloni, to reflect on the limitations inherent in existing frames for understanding either set of politics. Second, reflecting on the current mainstreaming of White supremacist views on migration and the related demographic threat allegedly posed by 'migrant' women, the article examined the contemporary European political landscape to demonstrate the importance of looking at gender from a race-informed perspective. So long as scholars of far-right populism, migration, religion, and their intersections with gender in Europe continue to discount race as the 'glue' that makes disparate political actors 'stick' together against the common enemy – 'gender' – it will be difficult to establish wider, yet necessary, coalition politics among anti-racist, transfeminist, and LGBTQIA+ movements.

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### Notes

1. Meloni started her political career in 1992, when she was only 15 years old and joined the *Fronte della Gioventù* [Youth Front], which was the youth-wing of the self-identified national neo-fascist then conservative *Movimento Sociale Italiano – MSI* [Italian Social Movement].
2. The acronym LGBTQIA+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer questioning, intersex, asexual and the symbol + works as a signpost for the ever-expanding spectrum of gender and sexual identities.
3. By early May 2022, her party *Brothers of Italy* appeared first in national polls (Ipsos, 2022; LA7, 2022). Accordingly, Meloni scored the highest approval rating (37%), making her Italy's most popular politician.
4. Between 2008 and 2011, Meloni served as Minister of Youth in Silvio Berlusconi's fourth government. She was 29 years old when appointed by Berlusconi, making her the youngest person ever in Italy to hold a Cabinet position. Since 2014, she has acted as president of the far-right party FdI – the first Italian woman to lead a major political party. She has often been in political alliances with Silvio Berlusconi and Matteo Salvini.
5. The video remixed an excerpt of a Meloni speech, in which she stated: 'I am Giorgia, I am a woman, I am a mother, I am Christian'. The parody-remix became a popular hit on dance floors around the country in late 2019 and the video had almost 12 million views by mid-2020.
6. Meloni's political stance towards reproductive and sexual minority rights has been rather clear since announcing her pregnancy in 2016 at the anti-LGBTQIA+ rights rally known as the 'family day'. <https://www.facebook.com/giorgiameloni.paginaufficiale/posts/10153849793787645/>.
7. The rallies were held at several cities throughout the country in the month of September and most of the speeches Meloni delivered during this time are available online.
8. Since populism is regarded as a matter of communication style, most of the studies conducted on Meloni are focused on her communication strategies. However, two studies have examined her ascendance to power and popularity in relation to the history of far-right parties in Italy. See Vassallo and Vignati (2023) and Macry (2023).

9. For a critical review of Meloni's stance towards women's issues and feminism before the administrative election campaign 'L'Italia del Riscatto' of 2021, see Arfini et al. (2019).
10. For a critical review of the history of the transphobic characterisation of transwomen as a threat to women's safety and rights as well as alliances between reactionary feminist organisations and far-right anti-gender and anti-abortion religious movements, see Phipps (2020: 133–159).
11. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cojZSb-pSFQ>.
12. Where literature on the topic has critically examined the phenomenon in question and narratives used to mainstream racist views on migration, integration and citizenship, use of the term 'migrant' to define the subjects have not properly been interrogated. As a matter of fact, the label 'migrant' is indiscriminately used to refer to any subject who is racialised as non-White, including citizens born of a given nationality (e.g. French subjects born outside France), migrant descendants up to several generations (e.g. Turks in the Netherlands and Germany) and endogenous minority populations (e.g. Roma people everywhere in Europe). By putting the term in quotation marks, the authors are deliberately drawing the readers' attention to the fact that by using the term, we are at risk of replicating far-right attempts to racially discriminate against various minority groups. More precisely, we want to highlight that the 'migrant' versus 'native' dichotomy represents a 'colour-blind' code to talk about non-White and White people, respectively.
13. <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=156158626558426>.
14. Doris Buss (1998, 2004), Mary Anne Case (2011, 2016) and Krzysztof Charamsa (Paternotte et al., 2016) have traced the origin of the concept of 'gender ideology' to the strategy that the Vatican developed in response to the recognition of sexual and reproductive rights by the United Nations in the mid-1990s. On the Vatican's revision of their position on women and sexuality, see also Garbagnoli and Prearo (2018).
15. As various scholars have highlighted, 'gender ideology' constitutes the rearticulation of anti-abortion and anti-homosexuality stances (which are still held among ultra-conservative movements endorsed by the Vatican) into the idea that sexual and reproductive rights, same-sex marriage and adoption, new reproductive technologies, sex education, gender mainstreaming and protection against gender-based violence will lead humanity to an 'anthropological revolution', caused by the elimination of the sex differences upon which the 'natural' family is based (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017: 5). The term 'gender ideology' has thus been used to demonise any of the above listed rights as a 'covert political strategy, as a sort of conspiracy aimed at seizing power and imposing deviant and minority values on average people' (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017: 6; see also Garbagnoli, 2017: 162–163).
16. Siddiqui's conceptualisation of reproductive racism resonates with studies that report how migration and border control policies adversely impact migrant mothers, thus leading to the consolidation of what some authors define as 'reproductive injustice' (see Bhatia, 2022).
17. In a nutshell, the 'Great Replacement' conspiracy theory is the idea that White European populations have been intentionally replaced and/or wiped out through migration and/or 'miscegenation'. As Siddiqui (2021: 11) has noted, the idea that European civilisations are threatened by immigration, and particularly Muslim migrants, has become a part of mainstream European political thought, having been 'made respectable' by New Right writers, propelled by politicians who talk of a 'migrant invasion' and, pushed to its most extreme ends, by mass killers apparently motivated by a belief in the imminent genocide of White people. For more details on the origin and propagation of the 'Great Replacement' conspiracy theory in Europe, see Goetz (2021).
18. On 1 September 2021, Meloni reported the case on her Facebook page as follows: 'They violently beat me. It has been 4 years. Now, it is enough, arrest them!' This is what an 11-year-old

kid said when going to the police station of Saint Basilio, in Rome, to report the violence he suffers daily at the hands of his mother and brothers. Treated the same as a slave: obliged to steal iron and copper and beg on the streets. If he fell asleep, he was beaten. This is a horrible story, which concerns too many innocent children exploited by their families to bring some dirty money home. I hope this woman gets to pay a high price for the abuse she inflicted upon her son and that kid can have a better future. On 18 September, she would use this individual case to typecast all Roma mothers as inherently dysfunctional. [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=10159423724092645&id=38919827644](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=10159423724092645&id=38919827644).

19. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=73hbtRJxrws>.
20. This sympathy, however, has never been devoid of exoticism. Tellingly, when an annual report concerned with abortion numbers and their distribution among different population groups was released at the beginning of 2021, Meloni interpreted the finding that 25% of women who have had multiple abortions are 'migrant' as evidence of her personal belief that, as she stated at an interview for the TV Chanel La7, Nigerian women are obliged to have abortions because of 'voodoo rituals' done on their children. See the interview here: <https://www.secoloditalia.it/2020/02/meloni-laborto-e-una-sconfitta-ma-in-italia-anche-dire-questo-e-diventato-un-problema-video/>.
21. [https://www.facebook.com/giorgiameloni.paginaufficiale/posts/10157072610272645/?comment\\_id=10157073457107645&comment\\_tracking=%7B%22tn%22%3A%22R%22%27-D&paipv=0&eav=AfYQl8fxG6Jn51EvMM1VdBkqt0keARFMq7eUDkIlg-4dGnj4nL5QEb4oOk2fp1tR5Eg&\\_rd](https://www.facebook.com/giorgiameloni.paginaufficiale/posts/10157072610272645/?comment_id=10157073457107645&comment_tracking=%7B%22tn%22%3A%22R%22%27-D&paipv=0&eav=AfYQl8fxG6Jn51EvMM1VdBkqt0keARFMq7eUDkIlg-4dGnj4nL5QEb4oOk2fp1tR5Eg&_rd).
22. On this point, see also Lugones (2007).
23. For a critical account of the genealogy of this assumption in scientific discourses of the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries, see Weinbaum (2004).

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