

Next Steps for Scholarship on Gender and the Far-Right

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Scholarship on the far-right has become critically important with the alarming resurgence of rightist politics across the globe. As scholars, we have an unusual opportunity to have our work matter in global politics, as well as the profound responsibility to ensure that the scholarship we produce is robust and enlightening. And activists should, and do, hold us to this responsibility.

This working paper considers the state of scholarship on gender and the far-right and suggests some next steps. I argue that scholars are ready – and obliged – to make bigger claims about gender and the far-right that can matter to the future of democratic societies. But making such claims requires us to do two things. We need to discard lines of scholarly inquiry that are becoming exhausted and focus on more promising directions. And we need to confront the conceptual and methodological dilemmas that plague many studies of gender and the far-right.

Let me stress several caveats about this working paper. It is a lightly revised version of two talks, not a paper being prepared for publication. As such, it reflects on, but does not review, the immensely varied topics and approaches in a scholarship that stretches across a plethora of different types of far-right movements, scenes, and political parties. I cite only a few studies, those whose findings or concepts I specifically mention; these are not necessarily the most significant studies in the field. Additionally, I am commenting on a research literature published in English and largely focused on North America and Europe, which hinders the generalizability of these arguments.

This working paper draws from ideas I have published elsewhere (e.g., Blee 2018), but it pushes these ideas in different, and often quite preliminary and contestable, directions. My goal is to provoke dialogue among scholars, so I welcome counter-arguments, critiques, and disagreements. I also want to be clear that when I discuss the blinders and problems of research, I am including my own errors and missteps. Indeed, I view this working paper as an opportunity to reflect on what I could have done better, as well as to signal what I hope the next generation of scholars will accomplish.

I begin with thoughts about what we know – and what we don't know – about gender and the far right, then suggest what we need to do next.

WHAT WE KNOW

Scholars are studying gender and the far-right across the globe, examining a variety of locales, historical times, and organizational forms. This is a dramatic change from a few decades ago when scholars generally considered gender to be an incidental, rather unimportant, feature of fascist, xenophobic, racist, and far-right politics.

The past several decades of research have produced three fairly robust findings about gender and the far-right.

Finding #1: We know *that* gender matters in the far right.

Studies of many places and times have conclusively established that gender is important in the far-right. Both women and men are members and supporters of most far-right parties and movements, although, reflecting the patriarchal nature of these politics, men tend to dominate numerically.

Gender matters too in the roles that women and men play in far-right politics. Men hold most official positions as leaders and spokesmen, and the women who assume these positions are often related to or sponsored by male leaders. But whether the *practice* of leadership is as gendered as the *positions* of leadership is less clear. Distanced studies – based on examining its propaganda in the form of speeches, media interviews, public documents, internet sites, and social media postings – generally conclude that leadership is exercised by the men who produce this propaganda. The more rare close-up studies – based on examining internal dynamics through interviews with members and observations of groups – find that women often function as leaders by recruiting members, promoting solidarity, forming networks to the outside, and fostering a sense of normalcy in even quite extreme far-right groups (Blee 2002).

Gender also matters critically in the far-right on a rhetorical level through messages of aggressive, powerful masculinity and vulnerable, maternal femininity. Such rhetoric positions the far-right as necessary and urgent to protect vulnerable and endangered women (generally women who are white, citizens, and Christian) whose childbearing and childrearing is essential to the future of the race, nation, or religion. The rhetoric of gendered masculinity is also key to the far-right, making appeals to men to support its bellicose, extreme, and destructive agendas seem nature and possible.

In sum, scholars should no longer assume that women's activity on the far-right is auxiliary to men's, nor ignore the strategic place of gender in far-right movements and parties.

Finding #2: We know *how* gender matters, at least in some areas.

Scholars not only find that gender matters, but are identifying the mechanisms through which it does. We have considerable evidence that gendered ideologies, practices, assumptions, and structures shape how men and women participate in far-right movements and parties. Indeed, it is now clear that the core processes of far-right extremism, such as affiliation/disaffiliation, radicalization/deradicalization, and identity-formation, are highly gendered. For example, we know that rhetorics and practices of violence tend to secure the allegiances of far-right men but

can be disaffecting for far-right women. And that far-right claims to support women's rights and empowerment tend to attract women but also to foment hostile reactions men that can destabilize groups and parties.

In sum, it is now misleading to study how people join, leave, identify with, and adopt the ideas of far-right parties and movements in gender-neutral terms.

Finding #3: We are close to knowing how *context affects how gender matters* in the far-right.

This is especially true in three contexts: organizational form, ideology, and location.

Gender seems to matter differently depending on how far-right politics is organized, whether to influence electoral politics (such as today's Front National in France or the 1920s Ku Klux Klan in the United States) or to promote and engage in street violence (such as white power skinheads). Electoral-focused efforts that require a broad base of supporters, studies suggest, provide more openings for women's participation than do informal and non-electoral groups.

Ideological context also seems to matter in the gendering of the far-right. Political efforts with internally integrated ideas such as pro-corporatism – what Cas Mudde (2004) terms “thick” ideologies – may provide different openings for women's participation and pro-women ideas than political efforts whose ideas ramble across social cleavages such as populism – Mudde's “thin” ideologies. For example, the 1920s U.S. Ku Klux Klan's thin ideology of nationalist-populism allowed an embrace of female suffrage and women's membership that contrasts with the thick ideology of white supremacy in earlier and later Klans which was accompanied by overt misogyny and exclusion of women. Similarly, some current European far-right populist (thin ideology) movements fuse intense xenophobia and Islamophobia with support for the rights of some (Christian, native, white) women.

Location may be important as well, since there is evidence that how gender matters in the far-right is shaped by how gender matters in the broader society. The alignment between the gender ideologies of many (but not all) European nations and their far-right parties is an example: far-right politics in countries whose populations support gender equity, such as Finland, the Netherlands, and Denmark, tend to have a more expansive sense of gender. However, this finding is quite preliminary: Sweden may be an exception, and there is considerable variation in ideologies even over short time periods (e.g., Mulinari and Neergaard 2017; Ylä-Anttila and Luhtakallio 2017).

In sum, it is crucial to consider contextual factors in the gendering of the far-right.

WHAT WE DON'T KNOW

Despite a vast scholarship, considerable gaps in our knowledge of gender and the far-right limit our ability to formulate strategies to curb its appeal and power. New research is critically needed in three areas.

First, we need to know more about the global transmission of gendered far-right practices, representations, and discourses. Although commentators and scholars frequently describe the far-right as transnational, this is more often based on finding similar ideas and actions in different places than on identifying how ideas and actions flow across national borders. Indeed, we are just beginning to identify the networks that propel hostility toward Muslims, minority group migrants, sexual minorities, feminists, and others across state regimes, languages, and national/regional cultures. It is urgent that we expand our knowledge of these global links, which likely will require a reconceptualization of the concept of the far-right whose definition, as Kathleen Fallon and Julie Moreau (2012) argue, is deeply embedded in political categories of the Global North.

A second area in which additional research is needed is the question of whether the gendered nature of the far-right is a product of its rightist politics or other factors, such as its structure, agenda, or tactics. Are women sidelined from power in far-right efforts by an ideological preference for male leadership, or because the insular structure of these politics restricts power to those approved by (generally male) leaders? Is its valorization of brutal white masculinity an effect of the far-right's gender ideologies or of its violent tactics? At present, we often assume that the gendered nature of the far-right is a product of its ideologies. Going forward, we also need to examine other possibilities, perhaps by carefully comparing aspects of the far-right with similarly-structured extremist gangs, religious sects, and far-left groups.

A third area needing additional scholarly attention is whether gender operates as a significant cleavage in far-right politics, an issue that has two parts. One, there is a long-standing assumption that gender has characteristics that make it very salient in politics. It is a major social divide, as men and women overall have significantly different access to resources and power in virtually all societies. And gender is a master status, as identities of femininity and masculinity are strongly attributed and generally embraced. Thus, we presume that gender shapes political blocs, such that women are less likely to support – and more repelled by – far-right politics than are men across categories of age, social class, race, and region, and that women are more likely to support progressive, leftist, or moderate politics than they are to support rightist politics. Yet, recent electoral contests in the U.S. and Europe show a more complicated pattern. In the 2016 U.S. presidential election, most women supported the Democratic (liberal) candidate Hillary

Clinton and most men supported the Republican (nationalist but with far-right supporters) candidate Donald Trump, creating the largest voting gender gap in modern U.S. history. But among whites, most women supported Trump over Clinton, less so that did white men, but surprising given Trump's open misogyny. Trump appealed to less educated white women in declining economic regions who saw their interests in terms of race, social class, and region more than gender. Put another way, in the Trump election, white men and nonwhite women and men functioned as voting blocs, but white women did not. Thus, a highly gendered political campaign like Trump's had the effect of causing gender to matter less for women. Similarly, Nonna Mayer (2013) finds that the gender gap in voting for and against the French Front National (FN) was lower in the 2012 presidential election (in which Marine Le Pen was the FN candidate) than in earlier elections, especially when taking into account factors such as economic insecurity and education. In 2012, French women were little different in their voting than men who shared their economic and social conditions.

Such fluctuations in gendered political alignment may indicate that the far-right is now less aligned by existing social cleavages, including gender, than in the past. When misogynistic and pro-women's rights ideas appear and disappear across the far-right, it may not be ideological vacillation as much as varying reliance on gender as a social cleavage that can be wielded to gain supporters. Indeed, it may be that modern far-right politics is drifting away from simply mobilizing existing social groups – whites, citizens, native-born persons, older persons, men, and Christians – and toward constructing new blocs of supporters that combine, for example, whites with long-time resident Muslims or Latinos.

We also commonly assume that political issues bundle together in coherent ideologies (right/left; antiegalitarian/egalitarian; nationalist/globalist), such that women's interests are espoused by leftist-egalitarian-globalist political efforts and bundled with support for "soft" social programs like arts and culture while men's interests are espoused by rightist-antiegalitarian-nationalist political efforts and bundled with support for "hard" social programs like militarism, border control, and strong policing. However, the assumption of ideological bundles needs reexamination. Not only do current far-right efforts not always promote antifeminism, but consistent ideologies may now be less important to these movements and parties than are the exercise of power and the ability to act opportunistically.

In sum, there is a substantial mismatch between the assumptions of gendered social cleavages and ideological bundles and the state of far-right politics today. In Europe, the U.S., and elsewhere, the far-right – what Hilary Pilkington (2016) describes as a 'slippery object' – is transforming itself, with new combinations of issues and groupings of supporters that challenge some of our basic ideas about these politics.

WHAT WE NEED TO DO NEXT

Despite the flowering of research on gender in the far-right, there are important gaps. One relatively easy but essential avenue for future research is to examine more closely the social institutions and networks that intersect with the far-right and may carry gendered ideas and dynamics into these politics. Doing so will help us know whether there is an inherent gender logic of rightist politics, or whether gendered dynamics are transported into the far-right from affiliated institutions and social groups. Especially critical for a broad understanding of gender and the far-right are studies of the schools, prisons, religious/quasi-religious sects, networks of drug addicts and criminals, law enforcement units, military bases, and internet-based groups in which far-right organizing or sentiments are found.

Other needed directions are more fundamental, and more difficult. One next step is to consider critically the problems, as well as the advantages, of gender as a prime theoretical framework to study the far-right (see also Blee 2017). Of course, the conceptual framework of gender – also known as the lens of gender – has been remarkably productive in illuminating gendered aspects of the far-right that had been in shadow. To take one example, the existence of thousands of women in the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s was long noted by historians, but they generally dismissed women’s Klan groups as simply “auxiliaries” to the male Klan. It was only through a gendered lens that it was possible to examine women’s Klan groups directly and uncover their importance to this era of the U.S. far-right (Blee 1991). More broadly, the framework of gender has been essential to move scholars away from an earlier framework that assumed that gender didn’t fundamentally matter in the far right – that it was a secondary concern or an epiphenomenon in a politics fundamentally about nationalism, economics, and race and to focus on the many ways in which women matters across the landscape of far-right politics.

So, what’s the problem? Even as the framework of gender productively pushed us to identify the dynamics and effects of gender across the far-right, we may have fallen into problems of confirmation bias. Moving away from the earlier assumption that gender didn’t matter in the far-right, we may have implicitly assumed that it always matters. Of course, gender is structured into our societies and cultures, and thus always an issue. But gender doesn’t always matter to the same degree or in the same way. To assume that it does is a classic error of evidence. Searching for an example of something, like gender, we tend to find it. But we don’t always have a way to assess how significant or frequent it is.

In the case of gender and the far-right, at least four problems can be traced to confirmation bias. The first is that assuming that gender matters makes it impossible to know *how much* it matters and whether how much it matters varies over time, place, or political form. Second, assuming that gender matters suggests that gender structures and dynamics are *inherent* across the far right, which recent events show to be problematic. Third, searching for and finding that gender matters in the far-right makes it likely that we will *overlook* the failures, limitations, and even some of

the complexities of gender in these politics. Assuming that gender matters makes it difficult, for example, to see the cracks in the masculinizing project of the far-right, such as its stereotypically feminine practices of artifice, bodily adornment, intrigue, gossip, and drama and to overemphasize its hyper-masculinity. And, finally, assuming the importance of gender can *obscure* the different ways that gender is organized differently for and among the supporters, issues, and styles of the far-right. For example, it blurs the ways that gender can matter in some aspects of the far-right and not matter in others, how, for example, gender gap in voters or supporters can decline even as a far-right party or movement intensifies its gendered rhetoric or masculinist style.

The search for instances of gender salience in the far-right may prevent us from asking more complicated and pressing questions, such as when gender is more or less salient, or when it is more or less present or absent. Rather than adopting gender as a framework, we might be better off to use gender as a question that can elicit its fluctuating presence and importance. The recent work by Weronika Grzebalska and Andrea Peto (2018), for example, finds that the illiberal transformation of post-2015 Poland and post-2010 Hungary was made possible when gender issues, especially women's rights, were presented as a dangerous, urgent threat, an emergency that summarized what is wrong in the nation. Could they have made this critical discovery if they had assumed that gender issues always mattered?

Perhaps a gender lens is too blunt an instrument for this stage of studies of the far-right. Might it be better to approach gender less directly, with a sensitivity to gender among other possible factors or to employ what Cynthia Enloe (2004) terms 'a feminist curiosity?' It may also be useful to push away from gender by searching for non- or less-gendered spaces, practices, and identities within the far right, like Renate Bitzan's (2017) call to understand both "gender-specific and gender-unspecific" aspects of the far-right.

SKEPTICISM

We also need to be more reflective about the role of skepticism in research on gender in the far-right, to become both more and less skeptical.

On the one hand, we may need to be more skeptical – better at differentiating between what is real and what is presented in the far-right. Movements and parties of the far-right often have a strong separation between what happens in front stage (in public and in scholars' view) and what happens back stage (where only insiders are permitted). Because the back stage (what is really going on) can be very difficult for scholars to access, it is tempting to assume that it is represented accurately by what is front stage and fairly accessible to outsiders in the form of

propaganda, speeches, and interviews through which far-rightists depict themselves (Blee 2018). But there is no reason to assume that this is true. Indeed, given the extreme duplicity that is characteristic of the far-right, there is every reason to assume that it is false. Scholars need to be highly skeptical of far-right representations of reality and vigilant about contextualizing its messages in terms of the audiences (members, outside media, target groups, police) to which these are directed.

On the other hand, scholars of gender in the far-right may need to be less skeptical. Although scholars of politics (I include myself) have sometimes erred in not being sufficiently skeptical in our studies of progressive, feminist, and anti-colonial activism, we may be overly skeptical toward activism on the far-right. To be clear: I'm not saying that we don't want to be skeptical toward far-right agendas, ideas, and actions – of course we do, as moral people. But we may need to be better about parsing necessary skepticism from a broad skepticism that leads us to dismiss much about what far-rightists say about what motivates them and how they see the world. Otherwise, we risk losing valuable insight about the far-right by being too quick to conclude that, for example, its antipathy toward global governance is necessarily – or entirely – a code for anti-Semitism or that its opposition to feminism is rooted in a fear of women's increased social, economic, or political power rather than other factors.

OUR CLAIMS

My last thought is a plea for a collaboration among university scholars, activists, citizen-scholars, readers, citizens, and residents to take the next steps in claims-making about gender and the far-right. There are two steps. Both are risky.

The first step is to identify the next bold claim about gender and the far-right. Twenty years ago, that gender matters was a bold and risky claim, and it generated a rich vein of studies, findings, and new concepts. But it has run its course. We need the next bold claim. I can only speculate what such a claim might be, but I suggest that we can get there by reconsidering fundamental questions. For example, do we need to move away from concepts such as far-right, right-wing, and radical right (at least in Europe and North America) since such terms assume ideological bundles that are fraying? Do we need to move away from describing parties and movements as ethno-nationalist or racist, thus implying that the core elements of the far-right are race and nationalism and that other elements (such as gender) are derivative or peripheral? How would it change our research agendas if we thought about what's happening today in Hungary, Poland, Italy, Brazil, the U.S., and other places as gender/sexual-fundamentalist, thus implying that the core elements of these far-right politics are gender and sexuality and that other elements (such as race and nationalism) are derivative or peripheral?

The second step, for which we are now poised – and which we are politically and ethically obliged to undertake – is to clarify the claims that our studies allow us to make. We need to assert publicly the implications of what we know, not wait for others to discern the lessons of our studies. That may seem obvious and not particularly risky. After all, many of us became interested in studying the far-right to understand how to prevent or undermine its influence. However, in this difficult political time when knowledge about the far-right has become ever more crucial for the future of democratic societies, we may need to make risky claims from our research about the causes and consequences of far-right politics, and to make these claims firmly and overtly. Doing so puts us in fraught territory as scholarly communities properly value caution, hesitation, and qualification. But scholarly guardrails can be politically debilitating, draining the political impact of our work. At this point in history, scholars of the far-right need to push back on caution and use our studies to state explicitly what will curb the far-right. We need to say, for example, if and how far-right websites are dangerous, and for whom. Whether misogynist attitudes predispose people to the far-right, or the far-right teaches people to be misogynist. And whether displays of thuggery attract more people to the far-right than they repel.

Formulating next-generation claims about gender and the far right (or, next-generation claims about nationalism in gender/sexuality-fundamentalist movements) will not be easy. But it is politically and ethically urgent. We need to engage now in a vast collaborative dialogue across borders of space, discipline, and situation, among scholars in academic institutions, independent and citizen scholars, political activists, readers, and voters, to define and pursue what needs to be known to curtail far-right extremism.

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