

### From Opposition Leader to Prime Minister: Giorgia Meloni and Women's Issues in the Italian Radical Right

De Giorgi, Elisabetta; Cavalieri, Alice; Feo, Francesca

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

De Giorgi, E., Cavalieri, A., & Feo, F. (2023). From Opposition Leader to Prime Minister: Giorgia Meloni and Women's Issues in the Italian Radical Right. *Politics and Governance*, 11(1), 108-118. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v11i1.6042>

#### Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY Lizenz (Namensnennung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.de>

#### Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY Licence (Attribution). For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

Article

## From Opposition Leader to Prime Minister: Giorgia Meloni and Women's Issues in the Italian Radical Right

Elisabetta De Giorgi <sup>1,\*</sup>, Alice Cavalieri <sup>1,2</sup>, and Francesca Feo <sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Political and Social Sciences, University of Trieste, Italy

<sup>2</sup> Department of Cultures, Politics and Society, University of Turin, Italy

<sup>3</sup> Faculty of Political and Social Science, Scuola Normale Superiore, Italy

\* Corresponding author (edegiorgi@units.it)

Submitted: 28 July 2022 | Accepted: 14 December 2022 | Published: 22 February 2023

### Abstract

Under the motto “God, homeland, and family”—but also by stressing one further important marker of social identity, i.e., gender—Italian radical right party leader Giorgia Meloni multiplied her party seats in parliament from 2013 onwards. After the 2022 elections, she became the first woman prime minister in Italy. Starting from an overview of the figure of Giorgia Meloni as a radical right woman leader, we explore her and her party's position on women-related issues and their relevance while exploring, in opposition, two different contexts: representative institutions and social media. To do that, we draw on parliamentary data—bills and parliamentary questions introduced in parliament by Fratelli d'Italia—and on Meloni's public discourse—examined in an analysis of all the tweets posted by her official Twitter account, between 2013 and 2021. As expected, a low saliency of women's issues appears in all the types of data examined, although some of them are more exposed to the shift in attention caused by the rise of related trend topics. Both Meloni and her party are strong supporters of the “natural family” and make use of women's issues in claiming femonationalist arguments, especially on social media. However, Meloni and her party cannot be considered as fully “neo-traditional,” as are other similar parties in Europe, but rather as a combination of “neo-traditional” and “modern-traditional.”

### Keywords

gender; Giorgia Meloni; Italy; opposition; parliament; radical right; Twitter; women

### Issue

This article is part of the issue “Women Opposition Leaders: Pathways, Patterns, and Performance” edited by Sarah C. Dingler (University of Innsbruck), Ludger Helms (University of Innsbruck), and Henriette Müller (New York University Abu Dhabi).

© 2023 by the author(s); licensee Cogitatio (Lisbon, Portugal). This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

### 1. Introduction

On the 19th of October 2019, Giorgia Meloni concluded her speech in front of a crowded San Giovanni Square, in Rome, with the words that would soon go viral on social media: “I am Giorgia, I am a woman, I am a mother, I am Italian, I am Christian” (Meloni, 2021). These words resonate together with the more general slogan—“God, homeland and family” (*Dio, patria e famiglia*)—adopted by Meloni's party, Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d'Italia, or FdI), and other radical right parties in history. But another important marker of social identity finds space

in her speech besides religious faith and national belonging: gender.

The role of gender issues in populist radical right parties' (PRRP) ideology has found renewed interest in literature (Akkerman, 2015; De Lange & Mügge, 2015; Donà, 2020; Erzeel & Rashkova, 2017; Gwiazda, 2021). In fact, despite their reputation as *männerparteien*—parties predominantly supported, represented, and led by men—PRRP are increasingly engaging with women's issues and gender roles in society. Their positions on these issues are extremely heterogeneous though. A certain appropriation of women's politics and gender rights

is often linked to anti-migration frames (Roth, 2020), but some parties, such as the Dutch Party for Freedom and the French National Rally have openly espoused progressive stances towards women's economic emancipation (Mayer, 2015), or even same-sex partnerships (Akkerman, 2015). The increasing presence of women leaders in PRRPs is also a noticeable trend, which may have a connection with the "engendering" of their politics. While they do not necessarily embody the traits of hegemonic femininity that one would expect (e.g., Geva, 2018, 2020; Meret, 2015), women political leaders on the right claim to represent the interests of women (Celis & Childs, 2018). But which interests?

In this article, we seek to provide a first systematic assessment of the role that women's issues play for Giorgia Meloni, the first woman leader in the Italian radical right. We believe that her party, FdI, represents a very interesting case as it is relatively new and understudied (see Campus, 2020; Feo & Lavizzari, 2021; Gaweda et al., 2022) and, although it had always been in opposition since its foundation, it recently gained a leading position in Italian politics. FdI was the only party in parliament that did not support the government led by Mario Draghi from March 2021 to his resignation in July 2022. This role of the one-and-only opposition certainly contributed to the recent rise of popularity of both Meloni and her party. In fact, while opposition leaders, notably in multiparty systems, are usually difficult to identify (see Dingler et al., 2023), Meloni recently represented not only one (opposition) party leader but, unquestionably, the opposition leader in Italy. Furthermore, considering the most recent developments, Meloni is now not just the only woman party leader in Italy—and, considering the major Italian parties, in the country's political history—but, since the 22nd of October 2022, is also the first woman prime minister in the history of Italy.

Thus, the purpose of the present article is to study Giorgia Meloni as a radical right party woman leader to uncover which women's interests she and her party represented while in opposition. First, we aim to provide an overview of the figure of Giorgia Meloni as a radical right woman leader, through the path that brought her to office, and then to understand the relevance and position of women's issues for her and her party in two different contexts: the representative institutions and social media. To do that, we draw, on the one hand, on parliamentary data—bills and parliamentary questions introduced in parliament by FdI—and, on the other, on Meloni's public discourse—studied through the collection and analysis of all the tweets posted by her official Twitter account. The analysis covers the period between the beginning of 2013, the foundation of the party, and December 2021. In both venues, we explore the saliency and position of Meloni and her party on women-related issues divided into different domains.

This article is consequently divided into four sections: The first is dedicated to the theoretical framework within which our analysis is placed; the second

one focuses on Giorgia Meloni's career path and party leadership from a gender perspective; the third and the fourth, respectively, centre on the data and methods employed, and on the analysis of the parliamentary data and tweets' content.

## 2. Framing Women's Issues in Radical Right Parties

According to the classic theory of substantive representation, women's conservative representatives, given their gender, should represent the best interests of other women as well as their progressive colleagues. But, as Celis and Erzeel (2015) point out, the substantive representation of gender is based on the assumption that there is a set of women's interests circumscribed within a precise perimeter, that is, the one designed by feminist theory. Thus, women representatives should address specific issues—such as reproductive rights, gender equality, gender-based violence, etc.—only by following a certain direction. The reality, of course, is very different. If some studies confirm that the action of conservative female MPs is, in some cases, in line with the action of progressive representatives of the same kind, both in terms of issues addressed and political choices, other studies show that women MPs belonging to centre-right or radical right parties tend to address different issues and to adopt very different points of view (Arfini et al., 2019; Celis & Erzeel, 2015), frequently unveiling contradictions and ambivalences (Scrinzi, 2017). At the same time, the gender ideologies of radical right parties as expressed in their manifestos differ significantly, notably as regards gender equality and how it could/should be achieved. In this, Scandinavian radical right parties are a prime example. An important distinction could be made between "neo-traditional" and "modern-traditional" ideologies: "For neo-traditionalists, the goal is to provide a favourable climate for women to become mothers and housewives," while "modern-traditionalists combine traditional views with modern elements such as promoting a combination of work and raising children, and advocating equal pay for equal work" (De Lange & Mügge, 2015, p. 71; see also Mudde, 2007).

With the rise of attention to migration issues, radical right parties have often deployed gender issues also with instrumental anti-Islam and anti-immigration aims (De Lange & Mügge, 2015; Donà, 2020; Farris, 2017; Scrinzi, 2014), to such an extent that they have been defined as "Janus-faced" (Akkerman, 2015), as they employ and emphasise gender equality when speaking of immigration and integration, turning conservative "when they address issues related to the family, such as opportunities of women on the labour market, childcare, abortion, or the status of marriage" (Akkerman, 2015, p. 56). Femonationalism (Farris, 2017) presents women's rights as key values of the Western world and contrasts those with other non-Western cultures which, instead, discriminate against women and increase their (physical) insecurity.

Partially connected with the acknowledgement of the variety of positions and concerns expressed in relation to women-related issues by radical right parties is the discussion on the actual relevance of such issues for these actors. It is clear that gender plays a role in the current political battles of the radical right (Abou-Chadi et al., 2021; Verloo, 2018). This does not necessarily mean that gender and women's issues are at the core of radical right ideology though, as the lack of coherent positions may hint. As argued by Spierings (2020, p. 42), such issues may be "trivotal" for these parties, i.e., a combination of trivial and pivotal.

An aspect worth considering is the role played by these parties in parliament over time. Being in government or in opposition, in fact, generally affects the behaviour of parties, with those without government responsibilities freer to address their preferred topics either for ideological or strategic reasons, through their parliamentary activity (De Giorgi, 2016). In this respect, we rest on the well-acknowledged salience and issue-ownership theory (Petrocik, 1996) that prescribe that parties strategically emphasise those issues where they expect to have or gain an advantage over their opponents (Budge, 2015). On the other hand, as one of the major activities for opposition parties in parliament has to do with the government's oversight (Norton, 2008), we should consider that some issues—and, in our case, women's issues—might appear on the opposition's agenda as a consequence of the government's policy choices. Even in that case, the party and the leader would select which specific aspect(s) to draw attention to, thus choosing to represent some women's interests instead of others.

Extant research has recently focused not only on radical right parties' ideas on gender but also on which role their women leaders play in this context, with relevant works on the Danish Pia Kjaersgaard, the French Marine Le Pen, the Israeli Ayelet Shaked, among others (Ben-Shitrit et al., 2022; Campus, 2017; Geva, 2020; Meret, 2015). Thus, in this article, we aim to understand the relevance and position of Giorgia Meloni and her party on women's issues by combining the analysis of their parliamentary activity and political discourse. To guide our analysis, we draw some general expectations from the literature. In line with the idea that gender and women's issues are pivotal, though trivial for the radical right nonetheless (Spierings, 2020), we expect to find a low saliency of women-related issues in both the parliamentary and the social media venues. We also expect these issues to be mostly associated with (modern-)traditionalist positions. We also expect to find femonationalist arguments, that is, the instrumental defence of women's rights, always in connection to anti-immigration, and especially anti-Islam stances. Consequently, while we expect support for gender equality and women's rights to emerge in relation to migration, we expect a very low non-instrumental engagement with these issues otherwise.

### 3. Giorgia: Woman, Mother, Italian, Christian

More than 70% of the parliamentary parties in the EU member states in 2022 are led by men (Openpolis, 2022). Except for a few Scandinavian or Baltic socialist prime ministers, the vast majority of European women who have had real power in Europe in recent years come from the right wing: Angela Merkel, Roberta Metsola, Ursula von der Leyen, just to list the most prominent ones. When looking at the opposition, the figure does not differ so much: Pia Kjaersgaard, Marine Le Pen, Frauke Petry, and Alice Weidel have been the face of some of the most important radical right parties in Europe in the last years. In Italy, no party belonging to either the mainstream or the radical right party family had been led by a woman until 2013.

Giorgia Meloni is the founder and leader of the party Fdi, created shortly ahead of the 2013 political elections and defined as a (populist) radical right party (Puleo & Piccolino, 2022). Fdi emerged as a splinter parliamentary group from the centre-right People of Freedom (Il Popolo della Libertà, or PDL), which was in turn the result of the fusion between Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia and National Alliance (Alleanza Nazionale, or AN), which had allied with each other from 1994 to 2009, before merging into the PDL. There are many elements of continuity between AN and its successor Fdi, in terms of both personnel (21 out of 24 members of the National Executive came from the ranks of the AN) and symbolic components (among others, Fdi integrated the name "National Alliance" in its own party statute and, until 2019, also included the AN party symbol in its own logo). Nonetheless, since the very beginning, Fdi has been very much identified with her young leader, Giorgia Meloni.

Studies focusing on women's leadership often stress how women manage to achieve leadership positions when they enjoy a "legacy advantage": that is, as wife, widow, daughter, or other close relatives of a key male political actor (Baker & Palmieri, 2021). This trajectory is common in radical right parties as well, probably the most prominent case being that of Marine Le Pen, who "inherited" the leadership of the Front National (today Rassemblement National, or National Rally) from her father. In Italy, we also find right-wing women politicians with strong family ties with former leaders and prominent political figures. For example, Alessandra Mussolini, granddaughter of the former dictator, was elected in parliament multiple times in the ranks of AN; Isabella Rauti, today among the leading figures of Fdi, is the daughter of Pino Rauti, former leader of the Italian Social Movement (Movimento Sociale Italiano, or MSI).

Giorgia Meloni stands out from this path. Her political commitment began in 1992 when she joined the youth organisation of the MSI—the main Italian extreme right party at the time (Ignazi, 1998). In 1996, she became the national head of Student Action (Azione Studentesca), the student movement of the newly formed AN, while in 1998 she was elected to the Council

of the Province of Rome. In 2004, she took the lead of Youth Action (Azione Giovani), the youth organisation of AN (Piccolino, 2012). In 2006, Meloni was then elected to the Chamber of Deputies for the first time and became one of the two vice presidents of the Chamber of Deputies. In 2008, after early elections had seen the victory of the centre-right coalition, she was appointed by Silvio Berlusconi as youth minister, at the age of 31. After leaving the PDL in 2012 due to differences of opinion about Berlusconi's leadership, among other reasons, she founded the new party FdI, together with other former members of AN (and MSI). Elected again to the Chamber of Deputies in 2013, she became the parliamentary party group leader and, in 2014, was appointed as party president.

Meloni multiplied her party's seats in parliament from nine to 50 from 2013 to 2018 and brought a huge increase in voting intentions from then to 2022. FdI, which, as we said since its entry into parliament has always been seated in the opposition benches, was the most voted party at the 2022 elections and Meloni became the first Italian woman prime minister. Her popularity has steadily risen over the years, and she is now the most appreciated among Italian party leaders. Contrary to other opposition leaders, which tend to emphasise their political outsidership, Meloni often stresses her professional path and political capital, relating that to the idea of "competence." Furthermore, as we said, no other major political party in Italy is led by a woman, and this has undoubtedly provided Meloni with significant media visibility in this regard (Feo & Lavizzari, 2021).

For what concerns her stances on women-related issues, Meloni never disguised her anti-abortion positions, which she traces back to her Catholic faith and her personal experience—as explained in her biography, her mother considered terminating her pregnancy (Meloni, 2021)—though the official party line is more oriented to fostering prevention measures rather than abrogating the existing abortion law (Feo & Lavizzari, 2021). She has publicly supported initiatives connected to the "pro-life" transnational network (Pavan, 2020), and opposed within and outside parliament progressive policy-making efforts around sexual orientation and gender identity rights (Feo, 2022). Meloni has also frequently blamed the European Union for having disregarded fundamental issues such as family, natality, and children's education, while arguing that Western civilisation is under attack and its pillars, from the traditional family to motherhood, would be the target of the "gender ideology" (Cesari, 2022). Lastly, she is generally very critical of feminism, which she considers "an ideological tool against right-wing politics rather than a pro-women discourse" (Arfini et al., 2019, p. 702).

After this brief contextualisation of our case study, we now move to the discussion of the data and methods employed in our research, before proceeding to the analysis.

#### 4. Data Overview and Methods

Political parties and leaders have multiple venues to express their worldviews, both inside and outside representative institutions. The major aim of this work is to understand the relevance of women's issues for Giorgia Meloni and FdI, and which women's interests they emphasise. In order to do that, we combine an analysis of parliamentary data—bills and parliamentary questions introduced by FdI from January 2013 to December 2021—with a collection of tweets published by Meloni's official account in the same period.

When in opposition, parties usually have two main goals: exercising control over the government and providing an alternative to the government in political and policy terms. Besides voting on the government legislative proposals, they can do that by undertaking two main activities: scrutinising the government and initiating their own legislation, despite the scarce prospects of approval (Ilonszki & De Giorgi, 2018). These are the parliamentary activities we focus on in our analysis. For governmental scrutiny, we use data about weekly parliamentary questions introduced at the Chamber of Deputies from 2013 to 2021, which are an occasion for parties in parliament to directly ask the government (or a specific minister) for explanations or action on specific issues (Russo & Cavalieri, 2016), or to raise the attention of the executive on such issues. Regarding legislative initiative, we examine all the bills sponsored by FdI MPs in the lower house in the same period (see the Supplementary File). Among different social media platforms, political actors extensively use Twitter to communicate their desired messages to the public just like in a press release (De Sio et al., 2018, p. 11). We collected all the original tweets posted on Meloni's Twitter timeline during the period under analysis and examined their content. The choice of focusing on the leader's account rather than the party's is linked to the increased centrality of leaders and individual politicians in political communication (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013), especially in the case of populist parties (Bos et al., 2013). Giorgia Meloni runs a very vertical and personalised leadership, with the consequence that her persona is very much identified with FdI. The importance of the leader vis-à-vis the party organisation in political communication is also reflected in the much higher number of followers for Meloni's account—1,6 million vs. 237.956—that is de facto the privileged source of information on social media for party supporters.

All the mentioned activities represent useful instruments to investigate the relevance and position of Meloni and her party on women's issues in different arenas with different levels of timeliness/dynamism: bills = not timely/dynamic; parliamentary questions = semi-timely/dynamic; tweets = very timely/dynamic. For the whole period, we compiled three datasets (see the Supplementary File for additional information) containing: bills ( $N = 640$ ); parliamentary questions ( $N = 302$ );

tweets ( $N = 12729$ ). We purposefully chose to focus on these three different data sources as they cover a variety of activities, the analysis of which allows us to shed light on FdI and Meloni's attention strategies and behaviour inside and outside parliament. In this respect, we adopt an attention-based perspective typical of salience theory, to check through a quantitative analysis how much emphasis the party and its leader grant to women's issues compared to others, which signals the overall importance of the topic for them.

As issue attention is a dynamic process, the different data sources we use are especially important as we can understand how the party and leader match their interests with the media and the party system's agenda. Political parties are not only agenda-setters but also agenda-takers (Borghetto & Russo, 2018) and they may be "forced" to shift their attention towards certain issues because of public concerns or other parties' actions in parliament (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010; Jones & Baumgartner, 2005). Even in that case, political actors choose the perspective to adopt in order to represent specific interest(s) among many. With our sets of data, we have the chance to uncover how this dynamic process unfolded for an opposition party, usually freer to set its own agenda (as FdI was) and whether its strategy changed over time. Studying the issues emphasised by Meloni and FdI signals potential policy paths and future actions, as attention is considered a precondition for policy-making. This becomes crucial as Meloni and her party are now leading a government with a strong parliamentary majority, with the chance of transforming "the words" pronounced while in opposition into deeds.

Given our interest in texts related to women's issues across venues, we compiled a dictionary of women-related keywords (see Supplementary File) to select relevant units of analysis from the general datasets and skim the considerable number of observations we initially had. We searched the datasets by applying the keywords list, which identified 71 bills (out of 640), 187 parliamentary questions (out of 302), and 1460 tweets (out of 12729). In the second step, we excluded all the "false positives" (i.e., the texts captured by the keywords search, but not truly relevant to our study) through a qualitative assessment of each unit of analysis. This operation left us with 24 bills, 14 questions, and 341 gender-related tweets in the period 2013–2021 (the procedure is illustrated in the Supplementary File).

We measured the salience of women's issues across the three data types as the percentage of women's issues over the total number of observations (Section 5.1). Then, we moved to the qualitative analysis of the content of the different data sources (bills, parliamentary questions, and tweets) to explore how FdI and Giorgia Meloni thematise women's issues, that is, to assess their position on such issues. To do so, we relied on a qualitative coding procedure inspired by thematic analysis (Section 5.2; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## 5. Women's Issues in and for Meloni's Party

### 5.1. The Salience of Women's Issues in Meloni's FdI

The analysis of the salience of women's issues confirms how these are marginal topics for FdI and Meloni. The percentage of women's issues accounts for a remarkably small part of total observations, both in parliamentary activities and social media (Table 1).

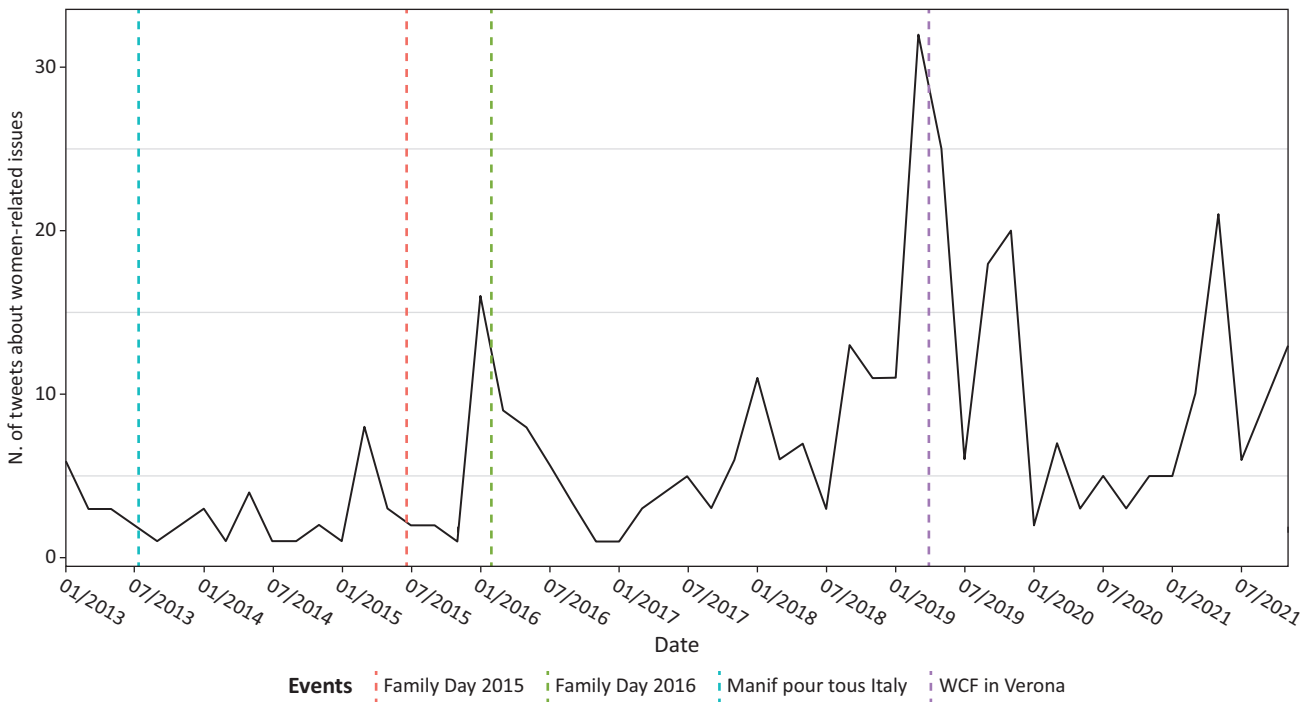
In all the three activities examined (although with a lower emphasis among the bills), we record a slight growth during the XVIII legislature (2018–2021), signalling increasing attention towards the topic in the most dynamic activities (i.e., questions and tweets)—likely in reaction to the discussion of "thorny" policy proposals in parliament and the respective mobilisations outside—and the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic that generated social emergencies that directly affected women. As said, parliamentary questions are a dynamic parliamentary instrument, and they can be easily exploited especially by opposition parties to strategically emphasise specific issues (see, among others, Cavalieri & Froio, 2022), while it is much more difficult to propose new bills dealing with a trending topic that may suddenly emerge. Likewise, social media communication is very timely and dynamic by definition, as it can immediately "react" to trends and discussions appearing in the media sphere (Silva & Proksch, 2022). This seems to be the case for Meloni's engagement on women's issues. As shown in Figure 1, peaks of attention in an otherwise very low and stable trend coincide with specific events, as public demonstrations are often organised in connection to special occasions in the parliamentary agenda.

The public events highlighted in Figure 1 are all big rallies that received the open support of FdI, organised by national and transnational networks defending pro-life

**Table 1.** Frequency of women's issues across venues and over time.

Legislative term	Bills	PQs	Tweets
XVII (2013–2018)	3,69% ( $N = 8/217$ )	2,98% ( $N = 5/168$ )	1,73% ( $N = 111/6412$ )
XVIII (2018–2021)	3,78% ( $N = 16/423$ )	6,72% ( $N = 9/134$ )	3,64% ( $N = 230/6317$ )
Total (2013–2021)	3,75% ( $N = 24/640$ )	4,64% ( $N = 14/302$ )	2,68% ( $N = 341/12729$ )

Note: Numbers in parentheses indicate the observation of women's issues during the legislative term over the total number of bills and questions introduced and sponsored by FdI and tweets published by Giorgia Meloni in the same period.



**Figure 1.** Giorgia Meloni gender-related tweets (2013–2021).

positions, the “natural family” and traditional gender roles, which took place after 2013 as a response to parliamentary discussions concerning the recognition of LGBT+ rights. Not by chance, the highest frequency of women-related tweets occurs during the XIII World Congress of Families in Verona, 29–31 March 2019 (see Pavan, 2020).

*5.2. Which Interests? Assessing the Position of Giorgia Meloni and Fdl on Women-Related Issues*

To analyse how Fdl and Meloni thematise women’s issues, we relied on thematic analysis, a method for qualitative data inquiry that aims at capturing “something [that is] important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). We developed a descriptive coding scheme that could account for the heterogeneity of our data, which includes all relevant issues mentioned in our observations in relation to women, and then identified three general dimensions: (a) an economic dimen-

sion, which captures references to women as economic subjects involved in productive and reproductive work; (b) a family dimension, which includes any (symbolic) mention of women as members of the “traditional” family; (c) a gender equality dimension, which collects references to gender equality and women’s rights. Their distribution is reported in Table 2, while a detailed account of each dimension and sub-dimensions is provided in the Supplementary File, Table A2.

In the economic dimension, we included all bills, questions, and tweets addressing women’s material conditions and their position in the economy—e.g., references to women’s employment, work–family balance, maternity or parental leave, (non) working mothers, and relative welfare provisions. From the analysis, it emerges that the issue of female labour is primarily addressed as a problem of “work–family balance,” homogeneously across the three types of data investigated. The main focus of the proposals in the institutional venue is on the recognition of the rights of working mothers, and welfare mechanisms for their protection. We found mentions

**Table 2.** Relevance of the three dimensions across venues.

Dimension	Bills	PQ	Tweets
Economic	33,33%	28,57%	11,73%
Family	45,83%	57,14%	29,32%
Gender equality	20,84%	14,29%	58,65%
Total	100% (N = 24)	100% (N = 14)	100% (N = 341)

Note: Numbers in parentheses indicate the observation for each dimension over the total number of women’s related bills and questions introduced and sponsored by Fdl and tweets published by Giorgia Meloni.

of welfare incentives that would help women reconcile motherhood and care work with a professional career, especially after the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic (see Supplementary File, Table A3, Bill\_1, PQ\_1). Fdl also supports welfare incentives to cover outsourced “domestic work,” including the care of the elderly and housework (see Supplementary File, Table A3, Tweet\_1).

Meloni also reiterates her support for reconciliation policies when these come in the shape of private initiatives presented by firms and businesses to support working mothers (see Supplementary File, Table A3, Tweet\_2). At the same time, she publicly shamed malpractices—such as cases of women fired as they got pregnant, and working spaces hostile to motherhood, or women who are not allowed to breastfeed at the workplace (see Supplementary File, Table A3, Tweet\_3). These positions in favour of women’s integration into the labour market are complementary to more conservative stances proposed by the party, more prone to safeguard women’s primary role as caregivers. Among these initiatives, for instance, we found the pension reforms allowing early retirement for women.

All in all, we find that Fdl’s vision of women as economic subjects, and their interests thereof, are primarily shaped by the equation between women and mothers, consistent with other recent studies (Feo & Lavizzari, 2021; Saccà & Massidda, 2018). The main focus of the party is on how to guarantee and reward women with childcare responsibilities in the workforce. No mention is made of the interests of women as workers beyond this equation, for example to the persistence of other inequalities such as the gender pay gap. Equally, no reference is found to other measures that would facilitate women’s labour by lessening the double burden of productive and reproductive work, such as paternity leave. What prevails is a conservative understanding of women’s issues in the labour market, consistent with a familistic view of women as primary caregivers for children and grandchildren in the household.

The second dimension pertains to the role of women within the family, and the symbolic value of the family as the primary site for values and culture transmission, and the reproduction of society. Notably in parliamentary questions and bills, primary attention is given to women in their (traditional) social role as mothers in heterosexual families (Table 2). Likewise, the public prize of maternity and the experience of motherhood on Meloni’s social media evokes the idea of “maternity as destiny” (Ottaviano, 2015) for women. This traditional gender role for women is contextualised in the symbolic evocation of the traditional family. Interestingly, space in this evocation is also devoted to men as fathers and husbands, as a complementary component to mothers in the “traditional family.” In other words, for Fdl, caring responsibilities do not fall completely outside the sphere of male responsibility (cf. Arfini et al., 2019). The symbolic recognition given to the family and traditional gender roles within it, very evident in social

media communication (see Supplementary File, Table A3, Tweet\_4 and Tweet\_4), is mirrored in the parliamentary activity of the party. For instance, Fdl introduced a bill (N. 2593, 31 July 2014) proposing a modification of articles 29 and 30 of the Italian Constitution to clearly specify that family rights are recognised only within marriages—unions between two persons of different sex—and adoption is possible only for married couples (see Supplementary File, Table A, Bill\_2). In one parliamentary question, the party condemned some initiatives held at the local level to adopt gender-neutral forms for parental statements in schools. The adoption of gender-neutral formulas for parents, according to Fdl, “diminish the foundations of the family” (see Supplementary File, Table A3, PQ\_2). The symbolic promotion of the traditional family is coupled with concrete initiatives for its sponsorship. In fact, proposals envisaged the institution of various forms of benefits and incentives for heterosexual couples who decide to form a family. The overall approach, however, is very much centred on motherhood—rather than parenthood—and mainly aimed at protecting women’s nurturing “nature.” All in all, in this dimension some elements of the “symbolic horizon” of the radical right clearly emerge. The idea of the complementarity between sexes, which has replaced the idea of women’s submission in conservatism (Garbagnoli & Prearo, 2018), serves to guarantee “equity” and equal dignity to men and women, without challenging traditional gender roles.

The last dimension concerns gender equality, and Fdl and Meloni’s framing of women’s rights. The majority of Meloni’s tweets fall into this dimension, which is instead only marginally addressed in parliament (see Table 2). One of the main issues addressed within this category is the problem of violence against women, which is framed as a violation of women’s rights. Contrary to Saccà and Massidda (2018), who found no reference to the topic in the Fdl 2018 electoral manifesto, violence against women is a very recurring theme in the political communication of Giorgia Meloni (this sub-dimension alone accounting for 35% of all tweets) and in the parliamentary activities of Fdl (see also Giorgi & Loner 2022). Also in parliament, Fdl stresses the necessity to grant protection and equal rights to women (bills about prevention and punishment of violence against women are 20% of all observations about women’s issues; e.g., Supplementary File, Table A3, Bill\_3), although the issue is often used instrumentally with a femonationalist frame (Supplementary File, Table A3, Bill\_4). This happens especially in more dynamic data types, such as questions and tweets. Both Meloni and Fdl exploit the issue to emphasise anti-immigration stances (Supplementary File, Table A3, Tweet\_6). Basically, women’s interest to be free from violence is mostly used in an instrumental way or, more precisely, as a cultural marker between the Italians/Europeans and the “racialized others,” who do not conform to Western values. Moreover, the issue of violence against women is mostly framed as a “security”



problem to be addressed with harsher penalties for offenders, whereas no mention is made of the structural inequalities and the nature of gender relations that make women more vulnerable to violence (Supplementary File, Table A3, Tweet\_7, PQ\_3).

Other issues pertain to reproductive rights and women's equality in the public sphere. The former is not really discussed in relation to abortion, but only concerning filiation for same-sex couples, an issue that FdI firmly opposes. Concerning gender equality in the public sphere, we notice that the party and its leader hold a liberal approach to the issue (cf. Arfini et al., 2019). Women's emancipation and affirmation are connected to individual qualities and actions, in line with the idea of merit. The existence of structural conditions that make it harder for women to emerge is not completely denied (Supplementary File, Table A3, Tweet\_8) but their overcoming is connected to individual entrepreneurship and by no means to the adoption of antidiscrimination policies (Supplementary File, Table A3, Tweet\_9).

In the social media communication, we could also observe how the direct identification of Meloni and her party as the "true defenders" of women's interests is used to draw a demarcation with the "false defenders," primarily left-wing parties and feminist groups, which are usually depicted as pursuing political struggles that do not coincide with those of real women, such as gender-inclusive language (Supplementary File, Table A3, Tweet\_10).

Overall, we can notice that the three themes are present across all of the three data sources examined, but with remarkable differences. Table 2 above illustrates that each venue is particularly suitable for emphasising one particular theme. Parliamentary activities are mostly devoted to the family and economic dimension, while tweets focus mostly on the gender dimension. This is intuitive, as these instruments are very different and are exploited for different purposes. Bills and questions are employed to reaffirm FdI traditional views regarding the family as a social structure and to propose legislation emphasising the "traditional" role of women in society and the economy. Tweets, instead, predominantly address the gender equality dimension, and in particular the issue of violence against women. The different distribution across the venues has some implications: we can expect that issues on social media are addressed in a more symbolic or strategic way than those in parliament.

## 6. Conclusions

In this work, we sought to provide a first systematic assessment of the role that women's issues play for Giorgia Meloni, the first woman leader in the Italian radical right, and her party, FdI. We sketched the political career path that brought her from leading a marginal opposition party in 2013 to being the very first Italian woman prime minister in 2022 and, then, we uncovered her and her party's relevance and position on women's

issues, in two different contexts, i.e., representative institutions and social media.

A low saliency of such issues was observed in both the venues considered, although some activities—those timelier and more dynamic, as less constrained by institutional rules, such as parliamentary questions and tweets—are more exposed to the shift in attention caused by the rise of trend topics and the opening of new public debates. As we saw, there have been a few occasions in the Italian public and institutional debate for an opposition party as FdI to shift the attention towards women's issues. In this respect, the behaviour of the party in less constrained contexts such as parliamentary questions and tweets is likely to be driven by the whole party system's agenda (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010), with women-related issues used as a component of its opposition strategy. On the other hand, bills better mirror the party policy agenda and actual purposes, allowing us to infer how and to what extent FdI and Meloni deal with women's issues. As expected, both the party and Meloni's position strongly support the so-called natural family that must carry the "traditional values" forward. Furthermore, Meloni engages very much in the defence of women's rights with anti-immigration purposes: clear evidence was found of how women's rights and gender equality are employed for claiming femonationalist arguments.

However, Meloni and her party cannot be considered as fully "neo-traditional," but rather as a combination of "neo-traditional" and "modern-traditional" (Mudde, 2007). As modern-traditionalists do, Meloni tries to combine traditional views with modern elements such as promoting the integration of women in the labour market, advocating measures that allow a combination of work and raising children; though, other relevant aspects of women's guarantees as workers—such as the support for equal pay for equal work—are missing. At the same time, as shown in the analysis, these modern traditionalist positions are accompanied by other, more neo-traditionalist ones, that are more consistent with a familistic view of women as primary caregivers. These rather conservative positions are also widely shared by the other Italian radical right party, i.e., Salvini's Lega (Mearidi & Guardiancich, 2022).

Particularly on the issue of violence against women, our analysis shows that this is quite central for Meloni and FdI stances, albeit mostly in a strategic way. We also know that FdI voted in favour of the ratification of the Istanbul Convention Action against violence against women and domestic violence in the Italian parliament in 2013, contrary to what many other radical right parties in Europe did (Feo & Lavizzari, 2021). Further research would be needed to provide a valid explanation for FdI and Meloni's mixed positions, but we can try to list some potential reasons. First, they may be part of a strategy of party competition with FdI's closest competitors in the Italian right wing. Second, they may be connected to the crisis of the male bread-winner model in Italy,

though inequality in household activities remains high (Meraviglia & Dudka, 2020), and the need to take into account the reality of dual-income families.

All things considered, gender is surely a “trivotal” issue for Giorgia Meloni and her party: it is not at the core of their agenda, but it is pivotal as a core social relation that they try to exploit to articulate their nativist, conservative, and populist ideology, as come out from all the data analysed in this work. Since our analysis refers to the period in which Giorgia Meloni was a radical right opposition leader, it remains to be seen what will happen now that she has become the first female prime minister, leading a right-wing government that will certainly address gender issues, and indeed could make it a flag, considering that on many other issues, given the several crises Italy is facing, its hands will be tied.

### Acknowledgments

The authors are grateful to the academic editors of this issue and the anonymous reviewers for their precious comments and suggestions on the first version of the manuscript. A draft of the article was presented at the panel Gender and Party Politics at the annual conference of the Italian Political Science Society (Rome, 10–12 September 2022). The authors wish to thank the panel’s organizers and participants for their feedback.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

### Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

### References

- Abou-Chadi, T., Breyer, M., & Gessler, T. (2021). The (re)politicisation of gender in Western Europe. *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, 4(2), 311–314. <https://doi.org/10.1332/251510821X16177312096679>
- Akkerman, T. (2015). Gender and the radical right in Western Europe: A comparative analysis of policy agendas. *Patterns of Prejudice*, 49(1/2), 37–60. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2015.1023655>
- Arfini, E., Ghigi, R., & Magaraggia, S. (2019). Can feminism be right? A content analysis of discourses about women by female Italian right-wing politicians. *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia*, 60(4), 693–719.
- Baker, K., & Palmieri, S. (2021). Can women dynasty politicians disrupt social norms of political leadership? A proposed typology of normative change. *International Political Science Review*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F01925121211048298>
- Ben-Shitrit, L., Elad-Strenger, J., & Hirsch-Hoefler, S. (2022). “Pinkwashing” the radical-right: Gender and the mainstreaming of radical-right policies and actions. *European Journal of Political Research*, 61(1), 86–110. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12442>
- Borghetto, E., & Russo, F. (2018). From agenda setters to agenda takers? The determinants of party issue attention in times of crisis. *Party Politics*, 24(1), 65–77. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068817740757>
- Bos, L., van der Brug, W., & de Vreese, C. H. (2013). An experimental test of the impact of style and rhetoric on the perception of right-wing populist and mainstream party leaders. *Acta Politica*, 48(2), 192–208. <https://doi.org/10.1057/ap.2012.27>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Budge, I. (2015). Issue emphases, saliency theory and issue ownership: A historical and conceptual analysis. *West European Politics*, 38(4), 761–777. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2015.1039374>
- Campus, D. (2017). Marine Le Pen’s peopolisation: An asset for leadership image-building? *French Politics*, 15(2), 147–165. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41253-017-0026-9>
- Campus, D. (2020). Female populist leaders and communication: Does gender make a difference? In B. Krämer & C. Holtz-Bacha (Eds.), *Perspectives on populism and the media* (pp. 235–254). Nomos. <https://doi.org/10.5771/9783845297392>
- Cavaliere, A., & Froio, C. (2022). The behaviour of populist parties in parliament. The policy agendas of populist and other political parties in the Italian question time. *Italian Political Science Review/Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica*, 52(3), 283–296. <https://doi.org/10.1017/ipo.2021.25>
- Celis, K., & Childs, S. (2018). Conservatism and women’s political representation. *Politics and Gender*, 14(1), 5–26. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X17000575>
- Celis, K., & Erzeel, S. (2015). Beyond the usual suspects: Non-left, male and non-feminist MPs and the substantive representation of women. *Government and Opposition*, 50(1), 45–64. <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2013.42>
- Cesari, A. (2022, April 29). Meloni: “L’ideologia gender mira alla scomparsa delle madri. Noi difenderemo l’identità femminile” [Gender ideology aims at mothers’ disappearance. We will defend women’s identity]. *Il Secolo d’Italia*. <https://www.secoloditalia.it/2022/04/meloni-lideologia-gender-mira-alla-scomparsa-delle-madri-noi-difenderemo-lidentita-femminile>
- De Giorgi, E. (2016). *L’opposizione parlamentare in Italia. Dall’antiberlusconismo all’antipolitica* [Parliamentary opposition in Italy. From antiberlusconism to antipolitics]. Carocci.
- De Lange, S. L., & Mügge, L. M. (2015). Gender and

- right-wing populism in the Low Countries: Ideological variations across parties and time. *Patterns of Prejudice*, 49(1/2), 61–80. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2015.1014199>
- De Sio, L., De Angelis, A., & Emanuele, V. (2018). Issue yield and party strategy in multiparty competition. *Comparative Political Studies*, 51(9), 1208–1238. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414017730082>
- Dingler, S. C., Helms, L., & Müller, H. (2023). Women opposition leaders: Conceptual issues and empirical agendas. *Politics and Governance*, 11(1), 80–84.
- Donà, A. (2020). What's gender got to do with populism? *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 27(3), 285–292. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506820929222>
- Enli, G. A., & Skogerbø, E. (2013). Personalized campaigns in party-centred politics. *Information, Communication & Society*, 16(5), 757–774. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2013.782330>
- Erzeel, S., & Rashkova, E. R. (2017). Still men's parties? Gender and the radical right in comparative perspective. *West European Politics*, 40(4), 812–820. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2017.1286181>
- Farris, S. R. (2017). *In the name of women's rights: The rise of femonationalism*. Duke University Press.
- Feo, F. (2022). Legislative reforms to fight discrimination and violence against LGBTQ+: The failure of the Zan Bill in Italy. *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, 5(1), 149–151. <https://doi.org/10.1332/251510821X16377638483577>
- Feo, F., & Lavizzari, A. (2021). *Triumph of the women? The female face of right-wing populism and extremism. Case Study Italy*. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/dialog/17877.pdf>
- Garbagnoli, S., & Prearo, M. (2018). *La crociata anti-gender: dal Vaticano alle Manif pour Tous* [The anti-gender crusade: From the Vatican to Manif pour Tous]. Kaplan.
- Gaweda, B., Siddi, M., & Miller, C. (2022). What's in a name? Gender equality and the European Conservatives and Reformists' group in the European Parliament. *Party Politics*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F13540688221116247>
- Geva, D. (2018). Daughter, mother, captain: Marine Le Pen, gender, and populism in the French National Front. *Social Politics*, 27(1), 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxy039>
- Geva, D. (2020). A double-headed hydra: Marine Le Pen's charisma, between political masculinity and political femininity. *Norma*, 15(1), 26–42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/18902138.2019.1701787>
- Giorgi, A., & Loner, E. (2022). Populist female MPs and the discourse around gender and gender-based violence in the Italian twittersphere during the pandemic. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxac043>
- Green-Pedersen, C., & Mortensen, P. B. (2010). Who sets the agenda and who responds to it in the Danish parliament? A new model of issue competition and agenda-setting. *European Journal of Political Research*, 49(2), 257–281. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.2009.01897.x>
- Gwiazda, A. (2021). Right-wing populism and feminist politics: The case of law and justice in Poland. *International Political Science Review*, 42(5), 580–595. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0192512120948917>
- Ignazi, P. (1998). *Il polo escluso: Profilo storico del Movimento sociale italiano* [The pole left out: Historical profile of the Italian Social Movement]. Il Mulino.
- Ilonszki, G., & De Giorgi, E. (2018). Introduction. In E. De Giorgi & G. Ilonszki (Eds.), *Opposition parties in European legislatures. Conflict or consensus?* (pp. 1–16). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315561011>
- Jones, B. D., & Baumgartner, F. R. (2005). *The politics of attention: How government prioritizes problems*. University of Chicago Press.
- Mayer, N. (2015). The closing of the radical right gender gap in France? *French Politics*, 13(4), 391–414. <https://doi.org/10.1057/fp.2015.18>
- Meardi, G., & Guardiancich, I. (2022). Back to the familialist future: The rise of social policy for ruling populist radical right parties in Italy and Poland. *West European Politics*, 45(1), 129–153. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2021.1916720>
- Meloni, G. (2021). *Io sono Giorgia. Le mie radici, le mie idee* [I am Giorgia. My origins, my ideas]. Rizzoli.
- Meraviglia, C., & Dudka, A. (2020). The gendered division of unpaid labor during the Covid-19 crisis: Did anything change? Evidence from Italy. *International Journal of Sociology*, 51(1), 64–75. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00207659.2020.1832346>
- Meret, S. (2015). Charismatic female leadership and gender: Pia Kjærsgaard and the Danish People's Party. *Patterns of Prejudice*, 49(1/2), 81–102. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2015.1023657>
- Mudde, C. (2007). *Populist radical right parties in Europe*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511492037>
- Norton, P. (2008). Making sense of opposition. *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 14(1/2), 236–250. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13572330801921257>
- Openpolis. (2022, March 16). *Scarseggiano le donne alla guida di partiti in Europa* [There is a shortage of women leaders in European political parties]. <https://www.openpolis.it/scarseggiano-le-donne-alla-guida-di-partiti-in-europa>
- Ottaviano, C. (2015). Motherhood and care:(Still) women's destiny? *AG: AboutGender International Journal of Gender Studies*, 4(8), 240–261. <https://doi.org/10.15167/2279-5057/ag.2015.4.8.279>
- Pavan, E. (2020). We are family. The conflict between conservative movements and feminists. *Contemporary Italian Politics*, 12(2), 243–257. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23248823.2020.1744892>

- Petrocik, J. R. (1996). Issue ownership in presidential elections, with a 1980 case study. *American Journal of Political Science*, 40(3), 825–850. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2111797>
- Piccolino, G. (2012). Giovani postfascisti. Fronte della gioventù, Azione giovani, Giovane Italia: l'evoluzione di una cultura politica [Young postfascists. Youth front, Youth action, Young Italy: The evolution of a political culture]. *Trasgressioni: Rivista quadrimestrale di cultura politica*, 54, 3–74.
- Puleo, L., & Piccolino, G. (2022). Back to the post-fascist past or landing in the populist radical right? The Brothers of Italy between continuity and change. *South European Society and Politics*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2022.2126247>
- Roth, J. (2020). Intersectionality strikes back: Feminist struggles against right-wing populism in the Americas. In J. Roth & G. Dietze (Eds.), *Right-wing populism and gender. European perspectives and beyond* (pp. 285–308). transcript.
- Russo, F., & Cavalieri, A. (2016). The policy content of the Italian question time. A new dataset to study party competition. *Rivista Italiana di Politiche Pubbliche*, 11(2), 197–222. <https://www.rivisteweb.it/doi/10.1483/83926>
- Saccà, F., & Massidda, L. (2018). Gender discourse in a populist election campaign. In F. Saccà (Ed.), *Democracy, power and territories* (pp. 30–46). Francoangeli.
- Scrinzi, F. (2014). *Caring for the nation. Men and women activists in radical right populist parties*. European Research Council. [http://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media\\_383799\\_en.pdf](http://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_383799_en.pdf)
- Scrinzi, F. (2017). A “new” National Front? Gender, religion, secularism and the French populist radical right. In M. Köttig, R. Bitzan, & A. Petö (Eds.), *Gender and far right politics in Europe* (pp. 127–140). Springer.
- Silva, B. C., & Proksch, S. O. (2022). Politicians unleashed? Political communication on Twitter and in parliament in Western Europe. *Political Science Research and Methods*, 10(4), 776–792. <https://doi.org/10.1017/psrm.2021.36>
- Spierings, N. (2020). Why gender and sexuality are both trivial and pivotal in populist radical right politics. In G. Dietze & J. Roth (Eds.), *Right-wing populism and gender* (pp. 41–58). transcript.
- Verloo, M. (Ed.). (2018). *Varieties of opposition to gender equality in Europe*. Routledge.

#### About the Authors



**Elisabetta De Giorgi** is an associate professor of political science at the University of Trieste (Italy). Her main research interests are representative institutions and the behaviour of the various institutional actors in the parliamentary arena, notably parliamentary opposition. On these issues, she has published several articles in national and international journals and the volume *L'Opposizione parlamentare in Italia* (2016). She co-edited a number of special issues of international journals and the volume *Opposition Parties in European Legislatures* (2018).



**Alice Cavalieri** is a research fellow at the University of Turin (Italy) where she works on a project about the policy analysis capacity of high public servants. She is the country lead for Italy of the OxCGRT led by the Blavatnik School of Government (University of Oxford) and a member of the Italian team of the Comparative Agendas Project. Her main research interests concern public budgeting and policy changes in European countries. Her first book, *Italian Budgeting Policy*, is forthcoming in 2023 for Springer Nature (Palgrave Macmillan).



**Francesca Feo** is a PhD candidate and research fellow at Scuola Normale Superiore (Italy). Her thesis focuses on the varieties of resistance faced by gender and equality policies in comparative perspective. Her main research interests include gender and LGBT+ policy-making and the gender politics of populist and radical right parties in Europe. Her work appears, among others, in *Politics & Gender*, the *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, and the *International Political Science Review*. She is co-convenor of the standing group on gender and politics of the Italian Political Science Association (SISP).