



FIERCE

Feminist movements revitalizing Democracy in Europe.

Gender Equality Under Attack: The Normalisation of Anti-Gender Movements in Europe

Based on the FIERCE Research (2010-2023)

What is FIERCE?

The FIERCE Research project - Feminist Movements Revitalising Democracy in Europe – analysed anti-feminist and anti-gender movements **between 2010 and 2023 in eight European countries** (see Figure 1), with the aim of mapping actors, and understanding how they organise, what narratives they mobilise, and how they contribute to de-democratisation of Europe and thereby threaten our democracies.

Methodology



Figure 2

conservative or right-wing political parties, religious organisations and churches, conservative family-oriented or anti-abortion civil society organisations (CSOs), transnational networks, masculinist, anti-gender “feminists” (TERFs, alter-feminists) and femonationalist groups. Despite their different statuses, ideologies, modes of action and degrees of influence, these actors share a **common opposition to what they refer to as “gender ideology”** - a deliberately vague concept mobilised against all equality politics and attacking specifically the rights of women, LGBTQIA+ and trans people. In most cases, **right-wing political parties were identified as the main advocates of anti-feminist and anti-gender positions**, closely followed by CSOs and advocacy groups.

An ideological offensive structured around six strategic areas

Our data shows **six** priority **areas**, identified as strategic by anti-gender groups in all the countries in the study. These are not marginal opinions, but **deliberate areas of political intervention**, supported by campaigns, alliances and legislative proposals (See Figure 3). While these issues manifest themselves at a structural level, anti-gender actors attribute their emergence to broader superstructural factors, including liberalism, globalisation, individualism, secularisation and what they perceive to be a distorted interpretation of gender equality.



Figure 1

The research is based on a **methodological triangulation** combining a qualitative and quantitative approaches, including literature reviews, discourse analysis, social network analysis and mapping media and political anti-gender mobilisations (see Figure 2).

A heterogeneous coalition with converging objectives

The research highlights a series of actors opposed to gender equality, brought together in a strategically coordinated coalition. These alliances include conser-

These underlying factors are presented as the root causes of their specific actions in the six areas identified:

Figure 3



A coordinated strategy of institutional and media influence

FIERCE identifies a **coherent set of tactics** that enable anti-gender actors to extend their influence within political institutions, media spaces and public opinion:

1. Alliance with conservative parties and legislative lobbying

Anti-gender coalitions rely on **strategic alliances with right-wing populist or religious parties**, aiming either to restrict existing laws or propose new ones. In Poland, the **Ordo Iuris** organisation has directly contributed to the drafting of legislation challenging women's rights, while in Slovenia anti-gender actors have successfully used referenda to oppose same-sex partnerships. In Turkey, they attempted to sway public opinion to support the presidential decree withdrawing the country from the Istanbul Convention. In Greece, there has been a regress in child custody legislation, achieved through intense lobbying by Men's Rights Activists.

2. Strategic use of media and language

One of the main strategies is to involve the public and the media in shaping the narrative. Using social media, messaging apps and so-called “alternative” platforms, particularly the manosphere and “alter-feminists” are seeking to bypass the “mainstream media”, in order to amplify their visibility and often organise events to stir up controversy and secure media coverage. In France and Slovenia, stories about schools “contaminated” by gender are circulating massively on social networks.



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Our findings show that anti-gender movements deliberately adapt and formulate their narratives so that they have a specific contextual resonance. These groups develop messages that align with local cultural and political concerns, often positioning themselves as protectors of tradition, national identity, biological norms or even 'true' gender equality.

3. Tactical imitation of the feminist and LGBTQIA+ movements

Another major finding is that contemporary anti-gender movements frequently adopt and imitate the tactics used by feminist and LGBTQIA+ activists, a phenomenon termed "mirror strategies". Some pro-family groups in Italy present themselves as "defenders of women's rights" against surrogacy or abortion. In Slovenia, collectives are mobilising human rights slogans to challenge gender equality. In Greece, Men's Rights Groups often reverse feminist discourse, by claiming that it's actually men that are suffering from gender-based violence and oppression. By borrowing feminist and LGBTQIA+ symbols and language, they blur the lines between their ideologies and progressive movements, complicating public perception and undermining the real feminist and LGBTQIA+ objectives.

4. Production of alternative knowledge and pseudo-scientific legitimization

Anti-gender movements are also investing in the educational **field** to produce "alternative" facts and "alternative" knowledge presented as expertise, using legal or quasi-scientific language to **cloak reactionary claims in neutrality**. In France, Greece, and Turkey, reports purporting to be "independent studies" denounce the negative impact of equality policies or construct evidence for gender-based violence predominantly against men pseudo-scientific claims like "Parental Alienation Syndrome" are used to maintain authority over abused children and former partners. Misguided approaches to biology are often used by TERFs to alienate and suppress trans individuals.

5. Transnational cooperation and pooling of tactics

Structured platforms such as **Vision Network (formerly Agenda Europe)** enable the **circulation of discourse, financial resources and tools** from one country to another. Campaigns on "gender ideology" are taken up and adapted from Rome to Warsaw, from Ljubljana to Madrid.

Essentialist, emotional and performative rhetoric

Anti-gender activists mobilise a **range of powerful emotions** - fear, anger, moral panic - used to construct an **image of a society under threat** from feminism, gender equality and the rights of LGBTQIA+ people. They establish a permanent crisis narrative, justifying authoritarian interventions in the name of common sense, nature or morality. The research found that parliamentary debates tend to be more emotionally charged, particularly in discussions about abortion, while social movement documents often display a wider range of deceptively empathetic or protective emotions, particularly in a religious context, where moral duty and responsibility are invoked. Several dominant frameworks run through all the countries studied:

- **Protection of the child** - is a recurring term, a moral imperative used in every country to justify the control of knowledge, the rejection of diversity and the surveillance of non-normative families. Sex education is denounced as an intrusion into the parental sphere.
- **Natural law** - in which gender roles are described as **fixed, immutable and ordered by God or biology**, justifying social hierarchisation and exclusion. In Poland and Turkey, this law is explicitly religious. In Italy, Slovenia and Denmark, it takes a "rationalist" form, based on biological arguments.
- **Reversing stigma and strategic victimization** - anti-gender actors often present themselves as oppressed minorities of opinion, muzzled by the feminist, LGBTQIA+ or cosmopolitan 'lobby'. They present their perspectives as minority voices in need of protection in a diverse society, while defending exclusionary beliefs. In France, the rhetoric of "cancel culture" is used to criticise feminist and anti-racist movements. In Denmark, "political correctness" is denounced as an ideological dogma to be deconstructed.
- **The fusion of religious and nationalist registers** - Moral rhetoric draws on religious traditions while at the same time taking on a nationalist register. The role of religion varies considerably from country to country. In Poland, Greece, Spain, and Turkey,

religion is deeply rooted in the family, morality and nationalism, reinforcing the argument that progressive change undermines national and cultural and political critiques rather than religious imperatives.

- **Usurpation of the language of human rights** - Anti-gender actors **hijack the key concepts of liberal democracy** - freedom, pluralism, human rights - to legitimise exclusionary positions under the guise of rationality and neutrality, it is a process of **de-democratisation**, the extend of which our research contributes to demonstrate.

A structured ideological project with an authoritarian vision of democracy

Anti-gender mobilisations are not simply one-off reactions: they are part of a coherent ideological project that naturalizes social hierarchies, redefines democracy in an authoritarian key and uses pseudo-democratic language to defend traditional norms.

Supported by national and transnational networks, this movement aims to restructure the democratic space in a reactionary direction. This is not a simple disagreement of opinions, but a confrontation between two visions of society: one egalitarian, plural and democratic; the other hierarchical, authoritarian and exclusive. The institutions and defenders of equality must take the measure of this: this requires increased vigilance, rigorous documentation and lasting transnational solidarity.



Our Recommendations

Political recommendations were elaborated by feminist collectives from throughout Europe in a collaborative research-action framework happening within the transnational feminist labs and network:

Monitoring and countering anti-gender movements

- Identify and map European funding that directly or indirectly benefits anti-gender actors. Put an end to this funding by ensuring that it complies with EU values.
- Publicly sanction hate speech and attacks on the rights of women, LGBTQIA+ people and human rights defenders.
- Strengthening digital safety: reporting procedures, rapid removal of sexist, homophobia, transphobic etc. content, media codes of conduct.

Strengthening feminist movements in Europe

- Ensure sustainable and structural core funding for feminist organisations, beyond one-off projects.
- Actively support transnational feminist networks: networking, alliances, political visibility in European institutions.
- Accurately monitor financial flows: introduce transparent monitoring of the actual funding allocated to women's and gender minorities' rights.

Protecting democracy in the face of digital attacks

- Regulate digital platforms to counter sexist and anti-feminist misinformation.
- Promoting algorithmic justice: auditing gender bias in technologies and guaranteeing the transparency of moderation criteria.