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‘Where are the equal rights?’: Far-right women challenging gender equality and human rights in Greece

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Abstract

Across Europe, far-right groups balance between contradictory positions on gender equality, invoking women’s rights in order to claim European cultural superiority over imagined patriarchal Muslim immigrants while rejecting gender rights as threatening the nation. Using discourse analysis of online party media and parliamentary speeches, we explore intersections of gender and race in Greek neo-Nazi women’s public positioning towards gender equality, showing how these seemingly contradictory positions align well with the party’s political vision. At a moment of pervasive racist uses of feminist discourse (Farris 2017; Hark & Villa 2017), Golden Dawn women supported an antifeminist position that re-signifies ‘women’s rights’ as a racial issue, in order to construct political enemies and dismantle equality projects. By representing gender violence – as in debates on the Istanbul Convention – as exclusively committed by the ‘non-white’, ‘Muslim’ male, and by rejecting ‘artificially constructed’ equality rights in favor of ‘natural’ rights, they have claimed Golden Dawn as the only political actor genuinely promoting women’s welfare.

Keywords

far-right, gender, Human rights, Islamophobia, Antifeminism, Femonationalism, Istanbul Convention

Introduction

On March 29, 2018 the Greek parliament held a discussion on ratifying the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention). This convention, which has been signed by 45 countries¹ and the EU, calls on states to implement harmonized legal standards on preventing, prosecuting, and educating about gender-based violence and to take steps to promote gender equality.² Sotiria Vlachou, then one of two women MPs from the neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn, welcomed the intention to legislate on violence against women, only to continue by identifying gender violence with Islam and denouncing gender equality policies overall as moving down a dangerous social path.

Vlachou's speech encapsulates how the party has publicly addressed gender equality and how women activists have promoted the party's positions. The double strategy of excluding Muslims in the name of women's rights (Farris, 2017), while simultaneously denouncing gender equality as damaging to family and nation, is not unique to Golden Dawn. Recent scholarship has commonly identified this contradiction as a 'conundrum' (Towns et al., 2014), an 'ideological dilemma' and 'discursive tension' (Pettersson, 2017), and an 'ambiguous position' (Mulinari & Neergaard, 2014) that contemporary far-right activists face across Europe. In this paper, we examine how Golden Dawn women activists have made use of these two seemingly opposed stances. Analyzing writings and interviews on online party media as well as parliamentary speeches by Golden Dawn MPs, we suggest that what at first glance appears a contradiction actually aligns well with the party's ideology, enabling defensive maneuvers to mitigate the party's public image challenges and simultaneously define and undermine political rivals.

Both stances – invoking and opposing gender equality – have served distinct purposes and enabled different political moves and access for Golden Dawn. As we explore below, it is not merely that gender equality is invoked discursively to construct notions of the 'Islamic threat', a familiar scapegoat in Western far-right politics (Wodak, 2015). Singling out Muslims also enables far-right actors to join in broader rights-focused political debates. Engaging with rights discussions has provided Golden Dawn the opportunity to shift the discussion on violence against women to an attack on human rights and gender equality frameworks and claim an identity as the party that best represents ('Greek') women's interests – thus deflecting criticism for its own conservative gender views. The party's race-based political agenda enables activists to denounce the egalitarian project and its advocates, 'feminists' and 'progressives', as dangerous to the nation's demographic and cultural survival. Rejecting 'artificial' women's rights in favor of 'natural' race rights allows Golden Dawn activists to critique international human rights and feminism as harmful, while simultaneously constructing a rhetoric of how women should seek respect and power beyond gender equality.

At a moment of pervasive racist uses of feminist discourse (Farris, 2017; Hark & Villa, 2017) and a right-wing 'obsession with gender' (Dietze & Roth, 2020, p. 7), in the European – if not global – far-right context, Golden Dawn has localized contemporary far-right rhetorical strategies in its struggle for ideological and political hegemony, which intensified during Greece's economic 'crisis' and the attempted neoliberal transformation of Greek society. This paper shows how far-right women activists contribute to a political project of discursively dismantling 'equality' – i.e. both gender equality and broader human rights doctrines – in order to center a race-based agenda and publicly legitimize social inequality.

¹ Turkey, however, withdrew in 2021, with Erdogan's ruling party arguing that the Convention has been hijacked by groups promoting homosexuality and undermining traditional family values in the country (Cerami, 2021).

² See the Council of Europe's official website on the Istanbul Convention, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention> (accessed 19.09.2021).

Methodological note – who speaks for the party?

Drawing on concepts and methods from discourse theory (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985) and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2015; Reisigl, 2017), from a feminist perspective (Lazar, 2007), we explore Golden Dawn women's discourse on gender equality between 2007 (when Golden Dawn's 'Women Front' initiated its blog activity) and 2019 (when the party was voted out of parliament). Our analysis relies on intersectional feminist approaches and reflects concerns about far-right anti-gender mobilization and the ways Islamophobic discourses and practices interweave with feminist argumentation (Hark & Villa, 2017). From a broader corpus of texts published over thirteen years (2007-2019) we narrowed our focus to approximately eighty articles and other posts (e.g. letters from readers) published on Golden Dawn's official site and on Women's Front blogs, focusing on texts that discuss gender equality, gender relations, gender violence or Islam. This article draws on in-depth analysis of approximately twenty of those texts, as well as analysis of media interviews of party figures and proceedings of four parliamentary discussions from the period 2016-2019 (three on International Women's Day and one on the ratification of the Istanbul Convention).

While we focus primarily on women's public positioning on gender equality, we also compare stances of male members. Indeed, the topic of gender relations has never been exclusively a 'women's issue' but is integral to Golden Dawn's political agenda; it is often male members, e.g. Giorgos Mastoras, who adopt the role of 'party intellectuals', developing extensive written argumentation on gender. That said, we do not endorse interpretations framing male members of Golden Dawn as primary actors and political thinkers while women are merely passive supporters or subject to false gender consciousness. We view women as politically agentic in actively promoting political positions to the public, even if they appear self-contradictory. Thus, we ask: what political messages are propagated to the public, through which discursive strategies deployed by female members and spokespersons? Although this approach cannot reveal how far-right discourse is received by audiences (Blee, 2003, p. 5), it is nonetheless necessary for understanding how (far-right) political discourses develop in (trans)national contexts.

The female face of Golden Dawn

Golden Dawn's electoral success in 2012-2019 reflects the recent strengthening of broader far-right political forces, which have a long history in Greece (Psarras, 2012; Georgiadou, 2019). Golden Dawn began in the 1980s as a closed neo-Nazi group but gained significant political strength as a party during the financial and political crisis of the 2010s, entering the Greek parliament in 2012 with 6.97% of the vote in 2012. Although long marginal, it has always had substantial connections to the Greek 'deep state', with connections to far-right circles in the army, justice system and police as well as the Orthodox Christian Church (Christopoulos, 2014). Initially a men's club, it soon included women, mostly partners of male members, and upon developing into a party in the 1990s, sought to recruit women more broadly both to attract votes and to comply with gender quotas in elections (Psarra, 2014). In the 2000s, the party initiated a women's branch, Women's Front, that organized online blogs, local groups, and activities for women, such as ideological lectures and self-defense classes. Women of the party have participated in organizing demonstrations, election campaigns, and street attacks against opponents, as well as writing articles in Golden Dawn print and online media in addition to women's blogs. Although there are no official numbers, women have evidently remained a minority in the party, and voting support for Golden Dawn reflects a clear gender gap (Sakellariou, 2018). Nonetheless, some women were elected to parliament (two women out of sixteen MPs in 2015-19). The 2012 appointment of Eleni Zaroulia, a Golden Dawn MP, as Greece's representative to the Council of Europe Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination sparked widespread opposition given Zaroulia's racist

statements, including describing migrants as ‘subhumans’.³ Other high-ranking women members, like Ourania Michaloliakou and Evgenia Christou, were elected to regional councils or assumed campaign leadership roles when male leaders were placed in custody (Bustnes, 2017). Among sixty-nine members prosecuted in 2015 as part of a criminal organization, five were women; in 2020, ex-MP Eleni Zaroulia, policewoman Venetia Popori and two other female members were among the fifty-nine members convicted.

Research has highlighted women’s marginal role in the party and its conservative gender agenda emphasizing women’s responsibility for reproduction (both biological and cultural) (Psarra, 2014; Anastasiadou et al., 2015a & 2015b; Felix, 2015, Koronaiou & Sakellariou, 2017). Women party members publicly defend these views, raising the question of what narratives they use to position themselves towards gender equality and address the broader public. Our analysis shows that Islamophobic references are interwoven with anti-feminist stances to enable what at first glance appears a contradictory combination of views for and against gender equality. This interweaving of Islamophobia with anti-feminism is not unique to the Greek far-right, nor is it a new phenomenon in Greece.

Islamophobic discourses in Greece and the overlooked gender aspect

While Islamophobia is not exceptional but rather mainstream in Greece (Marantzidis, 2017), the question of how Islam and gender intersect in Greek Islamophobic discourses remains poorly examined. Among the key players promoting Islamophobia – mainstream media, the Greek Orthodox Church, the far-right, and broader conservative and liberal actors – Golden Dawn was documented as the most aggressive actor disseminating anti-Muslim hatred (Huseyinoglu & Sakellariou, 2018). Yet, in the Greek context, both liberal and anti-liberal actors share portrayals of Islam as a ‘threat’ to cultural and social cohesion in Greece and in Europe, undergirding notions of not only a common ‘national’ fate but also supranational identity (Zarikos & Chatzipanagiotou, 2017; Boukala, 2019). Here, cultural and racialized essentialisms converge to portray Muslim alterity, although dichotomies of ‘good’/‘bad’ Muslims may offer limited space for migrants who demonstrate ‘integration’, such as Albanians displaying ‘soft’ Islam (Kirtsoglou & Tsimouris, 2018).

While arguments invoking women’s rights as threatened by Islam reflect discursive overlap between liberal and far-right actors, there is limited scholarship on these gendered discourses. Zarikos and Chatzipanagiotou (2017, p. 20) argue that in the public sphere, ‘no major narrative revolves around the relationship between Islam and women, although sporadic comments exist’ by ‘mostly extreme rightists or conservatives’. However, two points should be noted. First, despite the far-right’s central role in promoting gendered fears of Islam, ‘liberal Islamophobic’ commentators similarly propagate narratives denouncing Islam as a threat to women’s rights and European culture. For example, popular author Soti Triantafyllou consistently invokes gender equality, violence against women, and burkas to warn that Muslims endanger enlightenment values and human rights.⁴ Second, discursive convergence of Islam and gender is not new in Greece, where historically gendered nationalist discourses constructing Greek communal boundaries in opposition to ‘Turks’ intersect with newer transnational Islamophobic discourses. One example of instrumentalization of perceived gender norms to evict Muslims from the national

³ See EURACTIV.com (January 22, 2013). *Council of Europe wants ‘racist and anti-semitic’ members ousted.* <https://www.euractiv.com/section/elections/news/council-of-europe-wants-racist-and-anti-semitic-members-ousted/>.

⁴ Triantafyllou dismisses Muslim religious rights claims as ‘Islam is not a religion, it is an ideology, a way of life, a political program’, while wearing the burka is ‘not an individual choice’, but reflects ‘herd mentality’. See: <https://www.tanea.gr/print/2018/12/01/greece/to-dikaioima-stin-mpourka-kai-to-paixnidi-ton-lekseon/> (accessed 10.02.2018) and <https://web.archive.org/web/20170724174315/http://www.athensvoice.gr/politiki/i-diamahi-gia-ta-tzamia-0> (accessed 11.01.2020).

community is lawyer Thrasyvoulos Papastratis' (1994) suggestion to implement universal female military service to prompt the departure of presumed patriarchal Muslim families in Thrace (a northeastern region home to many Muslim Greek citizens) who would supposedly flee Greece rather than comply (Samara, 2018). Meanwhile, the widely available translated 'pulp nonfiction' paperbacks depicting Muslim women victims (Ahmad, 2009; Abu-Lughod, 2013, pp. 87-91) are a backdrop for Greek public discussions on Islam.

The 'equality conundrum' for far-right women in Europe

Research on far-right rhetoric across Europe highlights tensions between embracing women's rights to demonstrate Western superiority to imagined patriarchal Muslim immigrants, while denouncing gender equality as serving 'globalizing' agendas that destabilize 'natural' gender roles. Towns et al. (2014) identify this contradictory positioning for Sweden Democrats who must manage 'conflicting nationalist narratives' for and against gender equality as an 'equality conundrum', a contradiction particularly evident in northern European contexts where gender equality is perceived as an essential element of national identity, not easily contested (Pettersson, 2017; Mulinari & Neergaard, 2014). So, the question arises: how do 'female populist radical right politicians present discursive solutions to [these] seemingly irresolvable ideological dilemmas' (Pettersson, 2017, p. 20)?

Islam plays a key role here. Deployed in ideological projects of the 'new right' as the new threat to imagined national/European communities (Weiss 2017), it interweaves with gender equality arguments in distinctive ways. On the one hand, gender equality discourse is essential to femonationalism, i.e. nationalist Islamophobic racism 'in the name of women's rights' (Farris, 2017) promoted by the far-right but also by feminist organizations and state institutions. Adopting gender equality rhetoric enables far-right women to join others in defining a collective European identity founded upon civilizational superiority to patriarchal Muslim 'Others'. Feminism that reinforces a shared ethnonationalist 'we' and the consequent racist political logic (Villa and Hark, 2017; Sager & Mulinari 2018), or 'pseudo-feminism' – referencing without meaningfully engaging women's rights – enables 'agenda-grabbing' by far-right actors 'seeking to normalize their public image and legitimize their anti-immigration arguments' (Farris & Scrinzi, 2018, pp. 241-42). On the other hand, the narrative of the sexually violent Muslim male is invoked to warn against the risks of feminist liberalism and multicultural tolerance and is also said to endanger the national/racial community; for example, Horsti's (2017) analysis of racist discourses in the Swedish blogosphere emphasizes the unifying power of the image of the 'violent Muslim male' in assembling racism with anti-feminism as 'fear of Muslims converges with [...] fears of feminism and multiculturalism' (p. 1453).

However, literature exploring how radical right activists navigate contradictions between these femonationalist uses of gender equality and their own critical positioning on gender equality reveals varying constraints and adaptations across national and regional contexts. In the Nordic context, where far-right activists operate in a political context placing 'exceptionally high value' on gender equality norms that are deeply accepted culturally and institutionally, activists may strongly endorse human rights and women's legal rights (Towns et al., 2014, pp. 237-38) while affirming 'natural' gender roles or invoking notions of 'safety' for femonationalist purposes (Sager & Mulinari 2018). Nonetheless, some variation reflects differing relative power of Nordic feminist actors – e.g. Pettersson (2017) notes that far-right groups have more scope to challenge gender equality in Finland than in Sweden with its more established feminism.

At the same time, oppositional dynamics on feminist politics have intensified across Europe at both structural/institutional and political/ideological levels (Verloo, 2018). A new anti-gender movement — incorporating conservative scientists, Christian church circles and actors from the broader right spectrum — has mobilized transnationally (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2017), enabling more open anti-feminist and anti-gender stances. Moreover, in Eastern Europe, right-wing actors opposing Western or EU hegemony, depict gender equality as a

‘foreign’ colonizing imposition, ‘interpellat[ing] subjects as victims of a global conspiracy [by] neoliberal elites’ (Korolczuk and Graff, 2018, p. 813), and anti-genderism serves as a ‘language of resistance against existing material and symbolic East-West inequalities’ (Kovats, 2021, p. 76). More recently, anti-gender activists, capitalizing on ideas of traditional values and a nation under threat, have successfully mobilized rejection of the Istanbul Convention, e.g. in Bulgaria (Darakchi, 2019). In such contexts, the ‘equality conundrum’ may be elided through a ‘gender exceptionalism’ in which ‘patriarchy at home is bracketed and the lens instead focussed on the Other (the Muslim) as always more oppressive’, as Narkowicz & Pedziwiatr (2017, p. 296) observe in Poland.

Against this backdrop, Greece shows a combination of elements in tension. On the one hand, along with longstanding state commitments to EU gender equality standards, public opinion surveys reflect high support for gender equality (Pew Research Center, 2019). At the same time, Greeks score disproportionately high in believing that gender equality has been achieved (Special Eurobarometer 465, 2017), although official data warn that Greece lags significantly, ranking last on the EU Gender Equality Index (EIGE, 2020). This tension could relate to popular perceptions that since Greece has ‘achieved’ gender equality, feminism is no longer relevant. Such skepticism of gender equality advocacy may align with public criticism of EU institutional hegemony, which particularly after the 2008 Eurozone crisis and painful austerity measures, provided additional traction to ‘colonization’ frames among public audiences (Tziouvas, 2017, p. 2) – frames that, as we show, Golden Dawn has used to critique international rights frameworks. In Greece, as elsewhere in Europe, the far-right contributes significantly to propagating internationally circulated anti-gender, anti-feminist and anti-LGBTIQ+ positions (Anastasiadou, 2020a). The Greek case thus allows us to explore how far-right groups on the European periphery construct anti-gender equality critiques, but also how transnational discourses are shaped by local contexts.

Below, we show how Golden Dawn women have at times embraced women’s rights, from a racial perspective; but once gender equality achieves its femonationalist purposes of exclusion, it is lambasted as a failed political project.

Redefining violence against women as a racial issue: uses of the male Muslim perpetrator

One key way Golden Dawn women have navigated the ‘equality conundrum’ is by reframing gender violence as a racial issue: violence overwhelmingly perpetrated by immigrant, Muslim or non-white men.⁵ Such strategic discourse interweaving anti-Muslim with (anti)-rights positions aims to achieve several goals. First, the party seeks strategies to ‘normalize’ (Vieten, 2016) its policy agenda and defend its public image against accusations of misogyny. Through public commitment to women’s welfare, e.g. by invoking women’s security, the need for policies to support motherhood, and recognition of women’s social contribution, Golden Dawn has attempted to mobilize Greek women into the party. Second, by invoking women’s vulnerability to violence – one unmitigated by hollow and ineffectual gender equality frameworks – Golden Dawn activists distinguish their own gender ideals as superior to those of two imagined enemies, Muslims and feminists/‘progressives’, who here, as in other far-right narratives (Sager & Mulinari, 2018, p. 151), threaten the nation from within (feminists) and outside (Muslims).

Although gender violence remains a thorny issue in Greece, it has become increasingly visible in recent years, including through feminist activism – 2021 was the year of the Greek #MeToo – as well as state institutions, such as the General Secretariat for Gender Equality (renamed to the more conservative General Secretariat for Demography and Family Policy and Gender Equality in 2019) which coordinates and reports on support services.

⁵ Non-white is a flexible category including ‘Muslims’; while notions of descent and blood are invoked, whiteness is contingent, referring also to religion and culture. As Blee (2003, p. 15) suggests, whiteness may be shaped by ‘commitment to white power politics rather than genetics’.

Moreover, the Istanbul Convention was ratified in 2018 without much public opposition, providing new legal tools for combating gender violence. In public discourse, the stereotype of the violent immigrant man prevails – media coverage of the 2012 case of assault and sexual violence against a young Greek woman, ‘Myrto’, by a Pakistani immigrant crystallized an image of immigrant men as dangerous for women.

Longstanding racialized portrayals, globally and within Greece, of sexual violence by ‘non-white’/Muslim men towards ‘white’/Greek women, undergird the move to represent gender violence as exclusively attributable to immigrants and to be ‘tackled [...] in the public sphere by penalizing non-white, non-native, non-Christian men’ (Vieten, 2016, p. 624). Tropes of the ‘violent Muslim man’ appear routinely in Greek far-right media, and linking gender violence to anti-Muslim stances has become increasingly mainstream in public discourse on migration. Golden Dawn emerged as a pioneer in this field, (re)producing such arguments since the 2000s in media and parliament. Indeed, despite the party’s disdain for gender equality, Golden Dawn activists have consistently made anti-Islamic appeals to gender equality to warn of dangers Muslim immigrants pose for white civilization and especially for women.

When Golden Dawn writers cite sex-segregated swimming and handshake controversies⁶ to warn that Muslims’ cultural inability to accept gender equality renders their assimilation in Europe futile, there is little acknowledgement of Golden Dawn’s own stance against gender equality. Rather, an ‘alien’ Islam is said to threaten ‘Greek’/‘European’ society, constructed as a racial-cultural entity with shared moral values, including homogeneous gender norms. In fact, while Golden Dawn itself fails to satisfy these imagined uniform European gender norms, its rhetoric in the femonationalist mode positions it squarely within ‘European’ gender traditions. For example, the statement⁷ that ‘our culture, our history, our civilization, has ABSOLUTELY NO relationship with the Islam-sickness that ... holds women to be a reproductive object, with no value, no rights’⁸ elides any comparison with the party’s own focus on Greece’s ‘demographic crisis’ and the urgent need to promote (Greek) birth rates, both through instilling a sense of childbearing obligation in women⁹ and economic incentives for childbearing.¹⁰

In this narrative, women’s insecurity is exacerbated by immigrants’ incommensurable values and the breakdown of control over urban space as state authorities appear unwilling or unable to maintain order. Beyond zones of ‘chaos’ and ‘*avates periohes*’ [inaccessible areas], i.e. ‘ghettos of Muslim illegal immigrants’¹¹ where immigrants maintain their own civilization in Greek urban spaces, we read dystopian scenes from Europe: England, for example, is experiencing an “‘epidemic” of rapes of underage English women by Muslims’¹² in a post portraying families as abandoned by the police in cases of rape and femicide which ostensibly only find justice through far-right groups. Furthermore, statistics from other national(ist) contexts are invoked to identify immigrants as a sexual threat (e.g. UK data purporting to show that 92% of ‘gang rapes’ are committed by ‘non-whites’¹³).

⁶ See e.g.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20190603071856/http://www.xryshaygh.com/enimerosi/view/theloun-na-tous-enswmatwsoun-me-to-zori-alla-islamikos-fanatismos-den-krube> (accessed 15.05.2020).

Referencing Swiss naturalization applicants rejected for declining handshakes with the opposite sex, the post notes ‘Islamists... cannot accept’ ‘equality between men and women’.

⁷ Quotations of Golden Dawn texts are translated by the authors from Greek.

⁸ See <https://web.archive.org/web/20190603033336/www.xryshaygh.com/enimerosi/view/to-thhluko-genos> (accessed 28.09.2020).

⁹ See e.g. http://whitewomenfront.blogspot.gr/2012/04/blog-post_29.html (accessed 10.09.2020).

¹⁰ See e.g. http://whitewomenfront.blogspot.gr/2011/04/blog-post_25.html (accessed 10.09.2020).

¹¹ <https://web.archive.org/web/20190603073531/http://www.xryshaygh.com/enimerosi/view/h-lathrometanasteush-odhgei-thn-ellada-olotachws-pros-to-chaos-kai-thn-apos> (accessed 15.10.2020).

¹² http://whitewomenfront.blogspot.com/2011/05/blog-post_24.html (accessed 07.03.2020).

¹³ <http://whitewomenfront.blogspot.com/2010/05/92.html> (accessed 07.03.2020).

For Golden Dawn, such violence places the very premise of rights in question, revealing the women's rights framework to be fundamentally flawed. Since immigrants disrespect European cultural norms, and progressive activists – dismissively labeled '*dhikeomatakidhes*' ['rights-ers'] – fail to grasp the real dangers women face, together they endanger women. Women's Front leader Evgenia Christou, citing immigrant violence, has scornfully questioned whether 'equal rights' meaningfully contribute to women's welfare:

Where are the equal rights our accusers have managed to establish? [The right] for a woman not to be able to travel freely on the street? Where is equality when you are forced to ask a man to help escort you home, when they rob or even rape you in your own house? Where is my right to take walks with my child in the park and public squares? But in what squares? In those full of third-worlders, full of women who sell themselves, or those where the drug trade rages?¹⁴

These questions emphasize that abstract rights language offers no meaningful protection against physical danger. The ensuing need for women to take initiative for their own self-protection is underscored by the free self-defense classes¹⁵ Golden Dawn offered 'exclusively for Greek women' to defend themselves against 'immigrant hordes'¹⁶ – highlighting how 'the discursive politics of women's self-defense [...] becomes a source of public incitement' (Sen, 2019, p. 745).

Beyond constructing the dangerous Muslim man and exposing the emptiness of equal rights, invoking violence against women serves further far-right goals: to undermine narratives of solidarity with refugees grounded in Greek historical experiences. While Greek representations of the 'Asia Minor refugee' have historically oscillated between negative and positive (Papailias, 2005), contemporary antiracist narratives highlight shared historical experiences of Greek refugees expelled from Asia Minor in the 1920s – parallels that Golden Dawn works to rebut. For example, a frustrated reader's letter to Golden Dawn rejects comparisons of past (authentic) refugees to today's 'illegal immigrants', emphasizing that 'my grandfathers [...] didn't rape women.'¹⁷ Challenging Greek antiracist movements, Golden Dawn suggests Greeks' own refugee histories cannot translate to empathy for migrants, who — undeserving even of the name 'refugees' — carry fundamentally different and dangerous moral sensibilities. Similarly, while 'population exchange' in the Greek context commonly evokes the mass expulsion of Muslim and Orthodox Christian communities between Greece and Turkey in 1923, Golden Dawn redefines this term, warning that 'multicultural society [...] aims to achieve a large "politically correct" population exchange'.¹⁸ Portraying refugees as displacers, rather than displaced, aligns with broader far-right warnings of a 'great replacement' (Weiss, 2017), but here requires recasting the term 'population exchange' to pre-empt solidarity. As presumed rights violators, Muslim men 'whose sense of belonging must rest on violence and the abuse of women' forfeit claims to their own rights (Ewing, 2008, p. 3). Indeed, male refugees' mere presence in Greece is cited as proof of failures of both morality and masculinity: for example, one Women's Front post reprints a letter supposedly distributed to immigrants, urging them to return to their home countries where they have abandoned their families to military violence.¹⁹ While this recalls Sager and Mulinari's (2018, p. 153) observation that refugee men are portrayed as gender-

¹⁴ http://whitewomenfront.blogspot.com/2012/04/blog-post_29.html (accessed 16.03.2020).

¹⁵ http://whitewomenfront.blogspot.com/2012/10/blog-post_9.html (accessed 23.05.2020).

¹⁶ http://whitewomenfront.blogspot.com/2012/06/blog-post_09.html (accessed 17.06.2020).

¹⁷ <https://web.archive.org/web/20190602224302/http://www.xryshaygh.com/enimerosi/view/h-fwnh-tou-laou-mhnumata-epistoles-kuriakh-20-maiou-2018> (accessed 11.01.2020).

¹⁸ <https://web.archive.org/web/20190603071840/http://www.xryshaygh.com/enimerosi/view/pros-ekainous-pou-echoun-jechasei-na-skeptontai> (accessed 20.06.2020).

¹⁹ <http://whitewomenfront.blogspot.com/2010/11/25112010.html> (accessed 20.06.2020).

discriminatory for leaving their countries – ‘uncaring [...] men who prioritize their own lives’ but ‘abandon their daughters and sisters’ – contravening gender equality, this letter could also be read as chastising immigrant men for failing at a ‘traditional’ masculine duty to protect vulnerable women and children.

Golden Dawn’s presence in parliament, we show below, provided a unique opportunity for the party to showcase racialized tropes on violence by Muslim men against ‘white’/ ‘Greek’ and Muslim women in order to expose the broader failures of equality rights frameworks.

A parliamentary speech on violence against women: invoking racialized gender violence to highlight the failures of equality

Golden Dawn MPs have repeatedly seized the opportunity to connect women’s security to migration and to a perceived Muslim threat in parliamentary debates.²⁰ The speech MP Sophia Vlachou delivered in March 2018 during the parliamentary discussion on ratifying the Istanbul Convention provides a characteristic example. While Greece, in contrast with other European countries (Warat, 2016; Darakchi, 2019; Sekowska-Kozłowska, 2020), did not witness widespread right-wing mobilization against the convention, this speech offers a stark example of how Greek Neo-Nazi women transformed discussions of gender violence into an invitation not only to spotlight theories of Muslim male violence, but also to present a counter-discourse to liberal feminist positions.

In her speech, Vlachou questioned international feminist concerns about gender inequality as well as the inclusion of Romani, refugee, trans and lesbian women in the discussion, emphasizing the need to prioritize state benefits for ‘Greek mothers’, especially those of many children. Invoking violence against women, she links the issue first and foremost to Muslim male perpetrators. Her speech attributes the problem of gender violence to culture-based Muslim male violence, both inside the home/community (against Muslim women) and outside the home/community (against ‘white’ Greek women), but also to the inadequacy of rights frameworks to protect women from this violence. Vlachou uses this moment to position Golden Dawn as a pioneer challenging the political status quo/consensus endorsing ‘rights’; the only party that even sees – let alone challenges – the injustice that hegemonic human rights norms (Normand & Zaidi, 2008) inflict against native Greeks, since other parties are muzzled by ‘political correctness’. Reproducing a common Golden Dawn argument, Vlachou emphasizes that no other politicians supporting legislation on violence against women:

[...] have dared to address fundamentally and condemn the basic cause of these specific forms of violence [...] none other than the relocation of hundreds of Muslims into Western Christian European societies and their attempt to impose their culture and their mentality on our way of life.²¹

By transforming Muslim men into the sole representatives of male violence, far-right women can enter rights-based policy discussions under the umbrella of gender violence in ways that satisfy party goals, even as Golden Dawn vigorously contests the underlying premises and value of ‘rights’. This move also deflects discussion away from topics increasingly raised by feminists in public debate that may prove dangerous in questioning Greek male privilege.

²⁰ This applies to men MPs too: in 2017 male MP Ioannis Aivatidis challenged European feminists for not denouncing ‘misogynist Islam’ and the E.U. for discussing Turkey’s EU entry despite high femicide rates. <https://web.archive.org/web/20190603020858/http://www.xryshaygh.com/enimerosi/view/o-ivannhs-aibatidhs-gia-to-islam-kai-thn-bia-kata-twn-gunaikwn-binteo> (accessed 26.6.2021).

²¹ Protocol of parliamentary debate (March 29, 2018). Hellenic Parliament. <https://www.hellenicparliament.gr/UserFiles/a08fc2dd-61a9-4a83-b09a-09f4c564609d/es20180329.pdf> (accessed 08.09.2020).

Golden Dawn challenges feminist notions of ‘rape culture’ as rooted in patriarchal power relations by proposing a different ‘cultural’ source of the problem – a problem rights advocates, in turn, are blamed for concealing. For example, a Golden Dawn post on alleged immigrant violence criticizes ‘rights-ers’ who would invoke a familiar formula, their ‘cassette tape of “racism”, “xenophobia” and “rape culture”’ that ‘doesn’t fit here’ since, ‘unfortunately for them, the perpetrators are not Greek and Christian [...] but rather Muslim “refugees”’.²²

Vlachou seized the occasion of International Women’s Day to attack a further target: international feminism. Her speech denounces not only the very premise of such holidays but also the attempt to implement legislation relating to international agreements, like the Istanbul Convention, which Vlachou rejects as unnecessary, offensive, and patronizing towards women. This narrative converges with theories depicting ‘progressives’ and ‘feminists’ as insidious tools of globalizing projects enacted through international human rights and Women’s Day; these forces, allegedly funded by wealthy Soros-type elites and enabled by rights advocates, displace Greek cultural roots and ‘natural’ family norms. Vlachou’s speech aligns with Golden Dawn writings declaring that Greek women neither need nor want the false honor offered by ‘globalizers’ artificial holidays like International Women’s Day, since they already receive equal honor every day of the year.²³ In parliamentary discussions, Golden Dawn female MPs repeatedly used March 8th, International Women’s Day, as an opportunity to attack feminism and gender equality as deceptive, ineffective and disorienting women away from commitment to motherhood, family life and the growth of the national community. For example, in parliamentary speeches on Women’s Day from 2016 to 2019, MPs Eleni Zaroulia and Sotiria Vlachou accused feminism of degrading women’s position and value in society, criticizing feminism as a ‘new order’ tool of hegemonic international forces aiming to dismantle national communities.²⁴ As in other parliamentary speeches by Golden Dawn women, Vlachou’s speech during the discussion on the Istanbul Convention on March 2018 situates Golden Dawn as defiantly refusing complicity with international women’s rights activism, instead counter-proposing a vision of women’s welfare outside of legally established equality, as we explore below.

Abandoning failing gender equality, seeking ‘equal honor’

Although Golden Dawn at times embraces women’s rights logic, as shown above, this primarily serves exclusionary claims to European superiority. When it comes to gender equality itself, the party is explicitly hostile. In Golden Dawn narratives, existing equality rights frameworks, as we have seen, fail to protect women. Invoking a world in which Greek women ‘are honored every day’²⁵ reflects the party’s framing of their own rejection of liberal gender norms as an asset, not a liability: they propose a model of gender complementarity, rather than equality, as originating in Greece’s ancient past yet more cognizant of contemporary women’s ‘real’ needs. This move is not unique to Golden Dawn. For example, Mattheis’ (2018) analysis of prominent USA alt-right figure Lana Lokteff shows how contemporary far-right women assert a ‘post-feminist’ stance by presenting themselves as ‘modern’ women who have overcome feminism and equality and deliberately invoke ancient

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<https://web.archive.org/web/20190602234414/http://www.xryshaygh.com/enimerosi/view/prosfuges-mousoulmanoi-kakopoioun-mousoulmanes-gunaiques-se-hot-spot.-mougga> (accessed 27.08.2020).

²³ <https://web.archive.org/web/20190429170314/http://www.xryshaygh.com/enimerosi/view/oi-ellhnides-den-chreiazontai-pagkosmies-hmeres> (accessed 31.10.2020).

²⁴ See protocols of parliamentary debates (March 8, 2016; March 8, 2017; March 28, 2018 (discussion on Istanbul Convention); March 8, 2019). Hellenic Parliament. <https://www.hellenicparliament.gr/>.

²⁵ <https://web.archive.org/web/20190429170314/http://www.xryshaygh.com/enimerosi/view/oi-ellhnides-den-chreiazontai-pagkosmies-hmeres> (accessed 31.10.2020).

complementary gender models as an original feminine ideal – an ideal that amplifies white motherhood within a patriarchal framework. Eschewing gender equality in favor of gender segregation, in separate roles said to be inspired by heroic female archetypes, is presented not as a sign of weakness but as a source of women’s power within far-right movements.

Golden Dawn women’s role in promoting this position is critical. Women of the party have often recognized its public image challenges; Vlachou’s parliamentary speech openly acknowledges accusations that Golden Dawn is ‘conservative, reactionary, and extremist’.²⁶ Indeed, the ‘gender issue’ has long risked undermining Golden Dawn’s ability to attract women, and women activists have had to defend women’s role in the party and its gender agenda. For example, in a 2018 interview with MP Eleni Zaroulia, the nationalist publication *Embros* (run by another prominent female member, Irini Dimopoulou-Pappa) confronted this in their first question:

Ms. Zaroulia, you are one of two women Golden Dawn MPs. Tell us, does Golden Dawn hold a prejudice against women in power? Is it a Movement that oppresses or respects women?

Zaroulia responded:

Golden Dawn is the only party that respects the woman in the full meaning of the term. It respects her as a vanguard and a standard-bearer in the struggle for a new Greece, it respects her first and foremost as the foundation of Family, recognizing her Sacred role as mother!²⁷

In response to accusations of ‘extremism’, Golden Dawn frames this distinctiveness as positive. Instead of gender equality, advocated by women who do not genuinely experience their womanhood but rather try to compete with men, or ‘hermaphrodite fake macho women’²⁸, as Eleni Zarouli characterized feminists in her March 2019 parliamentary speech, Golden Dawn invokes ‘equal honor’ (*isotimia*) between men and women: a model of differentiated, complementary gender roles invested with equal dignity. This gender model is said to respect natural imperatives as well as Greece’s cultural heritage and traditions, and to be rooted in an alleged biological and national-historical order, rather than the so-called arbitrary ideologies of equality and of social construction encouraged by hegemonic globalizing progressive forces.

‘Equality’, in particular, does not pass muster under Golden Dawn standards; their writings contrast laws of nature – as observed in the animal world – with equality, distinguishing the ‘biologically correct’ with the ‘politically correct’. Pointedly, one post argues: ‘It is amazing that equality ... continues to be revered by the socially sick and idiots as a law of nature, even though nature doesn’t show any such thing.’²⁹ The ideological foundations of human rights are thus revealed as false – contrary to the observed principles of the natural world – revealing human rights’ claims to universal moral authority to be arbitrary and unfounded. Equality supporters are ridiculed as incapable of comprehending supposed naturally driven rules of social organization.

²⁶ March 29, 2018 parliamentary debate protocol (see above).

²⁷ <https://emprosnews.wordpress.com/2018/10/24/11-ερωτήσεις-στην-ελενη-ζαρουλια/> (accessed 29.10.2020).

²⁸ Protocol of parliamentary debate (March 8, 2019). Hellenic Parliament. <https://www.hellenicparliament.gr/UserFiles/a08fc2dd-61a9-4a83-b09a-09f4c564609d/es20190308.pdf> (accessed 20.09.2021).

²⁹ <https://web.archive.org/web/20190324050618/http://www.xryshaygh.com/enimerosi/view/pros-ekeinous-pou-echoun-jechasei-na-skeptontai> (accessed 11.01.2020).

Like equality, the social construction of gender is depicted as contravening nature. While Muslim women's perceived victimization represents a 'true' gender equality problem for far-right groups, this is distinct from the 'nonsense' of gender studies (Pettersson, 2015, p. 14). Golden Dawn expresses alarm at 'the invasion of corrupting theories on "gender identity" in primary schools'³⁰, here referring to the introduction of the topic of 'gender identities' at (actually secondary) schools by the center-left Syriza party during 2015-2019, which provoked aggressive responses by the political right and Orthodox Church actors (Anastasiadou, 2020a). At the core of Golden Dawn ideology lies the rejection of an individual's right to determine their gender identity and sexuality, and generally to self-determination. Interestingly, it is primarily male party intellectuals who elaborate on these arguments – although women of the party also express and defend the same arguments without ever publicly questioning them. For example, an article by party intellectual Giorgos Mastoras, 'The 69-year-old who 'feels' 49: the onslaught of "rights-ism"'³¹, reports on a Dutch man seeking to revise his birthdate by 20 years to match the age he 'truly' felt: if identity is constructed regardless of biology – and arbitrary individual desires prioritized over 'natural laws' of racial and gender order – the post suggests, indeed, why should age be limited by biology?

Gender equality frameworks, in particular, are seen as destabilizing harmonious natural gender relations within society and the family – the cell of the national community. For Golden Dawn candidate Rika Thomakou, feminist calls for gender equality produce relationships marred by 'antagonism':

Women who view men competitively live in unhappiness [...] True [...] happiness can exist only between a woman and a man who live together with an honest relationship of love without competition.³²

Here, feminism, in failing to recognize the nature and capacities of the different sexes, promotes the 'alienation' of genders from each other, and of each sex from its true role. 'Antagonistic' rights models are thus rejected in favor of alternative values of 'love' and 'honesty' implied to be incompatible with rights frameworks. Moreover, in a critique of the systemic undervaluing of women's labor, Golden Dawn depicts its gender model as securing for women the 'respect' due to them for fulfilling the vital role of motherhood, contrasting this with invisible, underrated domestic labor or aimless consumption for women ultimately exploited by marketers, sexualized and disrespected by men and media.³³ Golden Dawn policy agendas, accordingly, urge active state support of motherhood, through stipends for large (Greek) families and policies discouraging abortion.

In short, for Golden Dawn, equality rights offer no solutions for women's most urgent problems. In contrast to legislation – of the type Vlachou derided – resulting from feminist activism and aligned with international standards, Golden Dawn invokes another feminine model: a woman whose strength derives not from feminism but an uncorrupted past, originating in Ancient Greece and epitomized in the Spartan society idealized by Nazis – 'Do it like in Ancient Sparta!'³⁴ Women's Front urges. Strong and capable, a potential warrior, this ideal Greek woman is above all conscious of her 'debt' to reproduce her privileged racial community and finds ultimate fulfilment only in the role of mother. In the contemporary far-

³⁰ <https://web.archive.org/web/20190602225828/http://www.xryshaygh.com/enimerosi/view/h-pammakedonikh-ekrhjh-deichnei-ton-dromo-gia-thn-nikh-tou-ethnikistikou-ki> (accessed 11.01.2020).

³¹ <https://web.archive.org/web/20190603063359/http://www.xryshaygh.com/enimerosi/view/o-69chronos-pou-niwthei-49chronos-kai-h-epelash-tou-dikaiwmatismou> (accessed 11.01.2020).

³² <https://web.archive.org/web/20190429170314/http://www.xryshaygh.com/enimerosi/view/oi-ellhnides-den-chreiazontai-pagkosmies-hmeres> (accessed 31.10.2020).

³³ http://whitewomenfront.blogspot.com/2012/04/blog-post_29.html (accessed 16.03.2020).

³⁴ http://whitewomenfront.blogspot.com/2010/06/blog-post_7037.html (accessed 11.04.2020).

right context, this idealization of the model of the ‘strong mother’ may evoke the rhetoric of ‘fierce mothering’ in North American alt-right contexts (Mattheis 2018) or Czech far-right ‘angry mothers’ (Svatonova 2020); these are presented as political projects of women’s empowerment, while they simultaneously reinforce patriarchal, race and class relations of inequality. Drawing on female figures of nationalist mythology, Golden Dawn constructs a model of how today’s women can move beyond ineffective equal rights in favor of claimed ancient traditional values of ‘equal honor’, strength, and family that supposedly offer a more secure, meaningful life.

Conclusion

In Golden Dawn narratives, Greek whiteness and Europeanness – both precarious in other contexts (Tziovas, 2017; Mylonas, 2019) – become unquestionable. Yet, the party has struggled to manage criticism of its gender views, given its male-dominated public profile and ideal of women as mothers and caregivers, which – although persistent in Greek society (see e.g. Pew Research Center, 2019) – is often critiqued as anachronistic. The low support from women voters suggests that Greek women have not found the party’s outreach efforts entirely persuasive. Women members play a critical role here in defending a program that seeks to politically mobilize women, but away from feminist demands. What could be more convincing than women themselves highlighting the problem of gender violence – if now as a ‘racial’ issue – and the failure of equality to secure their (and the community’s) wellbeing?

Although Golden Dawn was unseated from parliament in 2019 and convicted as a criminal organization in 2020, the femonationalist and antifeminist arguments it pioneered have emerged as increasingly widespread in Greek right-wing politics. Even as the party declined, major right-wing actors – like the governing central-right party New Democracy – shifted towards a more conservative and authoritarian direction, while new far-right organizations emerged, some initiated by former Golden Dawn members. Far-right activism and women’s participation within it – as experienced practitioners of politics, public speakers, and political operators – are far from over. Apart from helping construct a more friendly face for the far-right, women also cultivate a racist anti-feminist identity that not only abandons but denounces gender equality and human rights. The examples of women disseminating anti-feminist argumentation on new alt-right social media in Greece and others undertaking front-line roles during political mobilization contesting the name of North Macedonia in 2018-2019 reflect (some) right-wing women’s shift toward increasingly conservative and militant positions (Anastasiadou, 2020b).

Moreover, as anti-gender mobilization continues across Europe, this Greek case study reflects a strategy of deploying anti-gender discourses that has parallels to other national contexts but is also distinct. For example, instead of directly rejecting the Istanbul Convention as a proxy for the entry of ‘gender ideology’, as in Poland (Warat, 2016) or Bulgaria (Darakchi, 2019), Greek Neo-Nazi activists adopted a different tactic, seizing the opportunity to weave racialized depictions of gender violence into anti-immigrant discourses, and thus to reject gender equality and international conventions as strategies to secure women’s welfare. But while the Greek case reaffirms scholars’ observation that gender equality discourse constitutes a powerful tool marking boundaries of cultural and political belonging, it also reveals particular uses and constraints on such discourses within local contexts. Although Greek far-right women have at times staked out a middle ground on gender equality, they overtly reject it as a political project – a move more complicated in North-European contexts where gender equality is central to national narratives (Mulinari & Neergaard, 2014). Golden Dawn women’s strategies referenced women’s rights but re-constructed the term to persuade women to understand these rights through a racial lens, and to reject gender equality for their own wellbeing. We showed here how this rejection is discursively formulated and defended by far-right women themselves, in a way that attempts to be persuasive to the broader public, not only group members. While Golden Dawn appears

to have collapsed as a party, we must ask how its presence remains through its enduring impact on Greek public discourse.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

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