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ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, scholars have extensively examined the rise of anti-gender politics in Europe. In this context, Italy is considered as a prominent battleground in the so-called «anti-gender crusade» against reproductive rights, LGBTQIA+ issues, self-determination, and bodily autonomy. However, few studies have addressed the everyday digital labor that supports the widespread circulation and eventual normalization of anti-gender rhetoric in the country. Against this background, this article looks more in depth at anti-gender rhetoric on social media and examines the specific contributions that actors in the «anti-gender galaxy» bring to its construction. We focus on Facebook and Instagram contents produced by actors from the four sectors of the Italian anti-gender galaxy – i.e., right-wing politicians, anti-gender and ecclesial organizations, and anti-trans groups – and investigate similarities and differences in the ways in which they articulate anti-gender claims and arguments. Our results show that, across all four sectors, the main concerns pivot around three main pillars – i.e., *gender ideology*, traditional family, and trans* rights. At the same time, our results invite further reflection on the progressive internal reorganization of the Italian anti-gender galaxy in a dynamic tension between consolidation and expansion.

Keywords: anti-gender galaxy, anti-gender rhetoric, social media, topic modeling, socio-semantic networks.

Introduction

Since its emergence in the early 2000s and diffusion in 2010s, scholars have increasingly examined the rise of the so-called «anti-gender crusade» (Garbagnoli and Prearo, 2018) in Europe – a transnational project composed by a variety of actors, ranging from far-right groups to Catholic, conservative organizations centering their activities on opposing abortion while supporting a traditionalistic family

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agenda (Caiani and Tranfić, 2024). Despite national specificities, actors involved in anti-gender politics are transversally concerned with the spread of an alleged «gender ideology» – a rhetorical device (Garbagnoli, 2016) formulated by the Vatican in the early 2000s that portrays gender as a threat to the «natural order» of heterosexual nuclear families, conceived of as the foundation of contemporary (Christian) societies (Garbagnoli, 2017: 158). More broadly, the «anti-gender galaxy» (Garbagnoli and Prearo, 2018: 8) opposes the enactment of equality policies and the recognition of legal and civil rights to LGBTQIA+ individuals (Paternotte and Kuhar, 2017: 256) thus contributing to the erosion of democratic values and institutions (Krizsán and Roggeband, 2021; Lombardo, 2024)[1].

In this context, Italy has emerged as a «lighthouse» for the protection of Christian values and the legitimization of anti-gender politics and rhetoric (Garbagnoli, 2017: 164). In the past two decades, not only did anti-gender mobilizations and claims dramatically escalate in the country (Lavizzari, 2020). They also resonated louder in the public sphere due to the specific configuration of the Italian gender regime, which is characterized by intense conservatism (Alonso *et al.*, 2023) and overwhelming influence of the Vatican on the national political agenda (Ozzano and Giorgi, 2015). Importantly, anti-gender actors have increasingly entered Italian institutions (Lavizzari, 2025) thus opening a wider opportunity window for policy initiatives undertaken in collaborations with right-wing populist parties (Colella, 2021; Donà, 2021). Against this background, studies are flourishing that expand our understanding of the Italian anti-gender landscape by shedding light on its actors (Lavizzari, 2020), repertoires (pavan, 2020), (trans)national collaborations (Donà, 2021), campaigns and claims (Prearo, 2024).

Above and beyond the Italian case, growing attention is also paid to how social media feed into the anti-gender crusade. Extant analyses mainly point towards identifying broad topics, arguments, and communication strategies at the core of a transnational discourse that opposes gender-based rights and self-determination (Evolvi, 2023; Tronina, 2024). At the same time, more situated examinations also address how this common core of anti-gender rhetoric is adapted in response to gendered and political opportunity structures that characterize different countries (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017; Reinhardt *et al.*, 2024). However, despite few recent exceptions (e.g., Prearo and Scopelliti, 2024; Righetti *et al.*, 2025; Tronina, 2024), most empirical

[1] In this paper, we use the acronym LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans*, queer, intersexual, asexual/aromatic and other) to indicate every subjectivity whose identity, experiences and practices do not conform with the cis-heterosexual matrix (Butler, 2013). Furthermore, we refer to trans* people or rights to indicate identities, experiences and practices that defy the gender binary (Stryker and Blackstone, 2023).

investigations tend to focus on the offline dimension of the anti-gender crusade, and anti-gender rhetoric on social media is considered mainly in conjunction with major protests and community-building events. Thus, the everyday digital labor behind the widespread circulation and eventual normalization of anti-gender rhetoric remains widely unexplored.

In this paper, we take a step forward in this direction by digging deeper into anti-gender rhetoric and examining how it develops online through activities of digital content production performed by the actors converging into the Italian anti-gender galaxy. Following recent investigations on the progressive enlargement of this collective project to include anti-trans organizations and anti-trans stances (Gusmeroli, 2024; Prearo, 2023), we consider the Instagram and Facebook contents published by four sectors of actors – i.e., right-wing politicians, anti-gender and ecclesial organizations, and anti-trans groups – to shed light on their specific contributions to the construction of a broader anti-gender rhetoric and, ultimately, to the anti-gender crusade.

To this aim, we first employ topic modeling to unveil the main «pillars» of the anti-gender rhetoric – i.e., the gender-related concerns that the four sectors have been addressing in their posts between 2021 and 2023, a period in which they gained increased legitimization in the country (Lavizzari, 2025; Prearo, 2024). Second, we computationally adapt the «frame semantic grammar» approach (Vicari, 2010) and lean on socio-semantic network analysis (Basov *et al.*, 2020) in order to explore the «micro-foundations» of these pillars and to identify how the four sectors similarly or differently contribute to their articulation.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 sets the background to our investigation by providing an overview of the four sectors that compose the Italian anti-gender galaxy, the claims they raised and the role they played in the anti-gender crusade since the early 2010s. Section 3 builds on extant literature about the use of social media by Italian anti-gender actors to advance our proposal to dig deeper into anti-gender rhetoric. Section 4 explains our research design, while Section 5 delves into the discussion of our results. We then conclude by discussing our findings and outlining possible lines of inquiry to further develop research in this area.

1. The four sectors in the Italian anti-gender galaxy

In what follows, we sketch the main traits of the four sectors of actors whose everyday digital labor we examine in this article. The first sector refers to the heterogeneous set of ecclesial actors spanning from the Vatican State to ultra-conservative ecclesiastical organizations (Prearo, 2024). The second one gathers anti-gender

organizations (Lavizzari, 2020); while the third comprises far-right organizations and right-wing populist parties (Bellè and Donà, 2022; Trappolin, 2022; Scrinzi, 2024). The fourth sector is instead made by anti-trans groups which, as pointed out by recent contributions (Gusmeroli, 2024; Prearo, 2023), have recently started to gravitate closer to the other three, thus enriching broader and more long-lasting antigenderism with a tailored opposition to trans* rights (Prearo and Scopelliti, 2024).

Given their peculiar position *vis-à-vis* Italian politics (Ozzano and Giorgi, 2015), the Vatican State and ecclesiastical organizations crucially contributed to forging the «discursive apparatus» underneath the emergence, development, and mainstreaming of anti-gender rhetoric in the Italian public arena (Garbagnoli, 2017; Prearo, 2024). In the early 2000s, the Vatican State framed gender as an «ideology» that invalidates Catholic values and the «traditional (heteronormative) family» (Garbagnoli, 2017: 160). Subsequently, between 2011 and 2013, Vatican institutions and ecclesiastical organizations supported the implementation of «pro-life» mobilizations[2] (Prearo, 2020) and conferences (Garbagnoli, 2016) fueling a first cycle of mobilizations in the country (Prearo, 2024). Furthermore, they lobbied Italian political institutions and individual actors with an eye to «eroding the content of legal reforms rather than opposing them» (Garbagnoli, 2017: 156). In this context, ecclesiastical organizations, which are considered the «primary subjects of Catholic activism» (Lavizzari, 2020: 21), gradually embraced a more secular discourse and positioned their actions «outside the direct influence of the Church while maintaining a symbolic connection with it» (Prearo, 2024: 56). In spite of this internal differentiation, the ecclesial sector is held together by sustained mutual recognition, trust, and deep collaboration between its two branches: while the Vatican State endorsed ecclesiastical organizations, the latter «vowed absolute loyalty to Rome and the Pope, functioning not only as the guardians and as strongholds of Christianity but also as the voices in the streets and squares during demonstrations and campaigns called for by the Vatican leadership» (Lavizzari, 2020: 22).

The second sector of the Italian anti-gender galaxy gathers two categories of distinct but complementary «mainstream and satellite» anti-gender organizations (Prearo and Scopelliti, 2023: 255). Mainstream organizations are «ad-hoc» anti-gender organizations, created with the precise aim of contrasting increasing demands for LGBTQIA+ rights and gender equality (Lavizzari, 2020: 5). Between 2014 and 2016,

[2] In this article, we use the expression «pro-life» in double quotation marks to indicate that it is a label employed by the actors we are analyzing. We interpret this label in a way similar to Prearo (2020) in his analysis of the trajectory of the anti-gender crusade in Italy, to refer to collective demands that emerged particularly between 2011 and 2013, bringing together anti-abortion and anti-euthanasia positions. Similarly, we write in italics the expression *gender ideology* to signal that it should be read and understood ad part of the discourse of the anti-gender galaxy.

these groups played a crucial role in bridging anti-abortion claims with claims against *gender ideology* during a second cycle of anti-gender protests (Prearo, 2024), successfully managing to block legislative initiatives on homophobia and stepchild adoption. Since 2017, they have become increasingly prominent at the national level, succeeding in articulating anti-gender claims in more secular terms to appeal to broader sectors of civil society (Prearo, 2024). By doing so, not only did they manage to be publicly perceived as «legitimate» political actors (Prearo, 2024): they also developed efficient strategies to lobby and collaborate with right-wing politicians (Lavizzari and Prearo, 2019). Mainstream organizations are therefore «entrepreneurs» of the anti-gender crusade and assume functions of leadership, institutional participation, and political representation (Prearo and Scopelliti, 2023: 255). Satellite anti-gender organizations are instead closer to ultra-conservative Christian claims and extreme right positions. They are considered «rank-and-file anti-gender protestors» (pavan, 2020: 8) that adopt more grassroots and radical repertoires (like protests in front of abortion clinics) and whose range of action is more localized (Prearo and Scopelliti, 2023). By joining efforts at different levels, mainstream and satellite organizations have entwined anti-abortion and anti-gender claims within a broader call to protect children and «natural» families, thus initiating a third cycle of protest that since 2017 has pivoted around the opposition against gender education programs and the recognition of homolesbobitransphobia as a crime (Prearo, 2024).

The third sector of actors encompasses right-wing populist parties and far-right groups. The former have played a key, although until recently rather concealed, role in the Italian anti-gender crusade by encapsulating anti-gender discourses as part of their political strategies (Bellè and Donà, 2022; Scrinzi, 2024). Right-wing populist parties have endorsed anti-gender claims to qualify themselves as the new political representatives of Italian Catholics (Bellè and Donà, 2022) but also to forge transnational ties with similar parties (Trappolin, 2022) and consolidate their grip at the local administrative level (Donà, 2021). Since 2018, the ideological and political links between anti-gender organizations and right-wing populist parties have grown stronger through the inclusion within electoral lists of prominent anti-gender activists (Bellè and Donà, 2022), some of which were elected as members of the Parliament or appointed as Ministers in 2018 and 2022. These connections have thus developed into «symbiotic relationships» (Lavizzari, 2025: 210) nurtured by multiple forms of collaboration – from resource exchange to grassroots mobilizations and common electoral campaigns – that led to the increased institutionalization of anti-gender politics (*ibidem*: 226). Conversely, connections with far-right groups have often been denied by Catholic institutions due to the Pope's refusal to be associated with neo-fascist constituencies (Trappolin, 2022). Nonetheless, far-right groups

remain the most extremist fringes of the anti-gender field: with their resources and structures, they multiply street protests (Lavizzari, 2020) and, while triggering the progressive distancing of Vatican institutions and moderate Catholics (Prearo, 2024), they contribute to intertwining anti-gender claims with Islamophobic, anti-immigration, and anti-globalization ones (Garbagnoli and Prearo, 2018; Indelicato and Magalhães Lopes, 2024; Trappolin, 2022).

Recent inquiries identify a fourth sector of actors who may not explicitly declare themselves as part of the anti-gender galaxy but nonetheless endorse (to varying degrees) its stances and campaigns – i.e., anti-trans groups, amongst which so-called «gender-critical» feminist organizations (Gusmeroli, 2024: 383) and «anti-trans parent activists» (Prearo, 2023: 116). These actors are part of an «anti-trans coalition» that aims at contesting an alleged «trans lobby» (*ibidem*) and gender affirmation healthcare for trans* children and youth in diverse but interrelated ways. Anti-trans parent activists, amongst which organizations supported by scientists and other professionals, have contributed to creating scientific claims according to which gender affirmation paths are dangerous for children and adolescents' health (Prearo, 2023). Furthermore, since the last decade, gender-critical feminists have fed into the anti-gender rhetoric mobilizing against surrogacy and gender affirmation paths by arguing that (cis) women would be harmed by such provisions (Gusmeroli, 2024: 388-389). Both gender-critical feminists and anti-trans parent activists hold a binary and biological conceptualization of sex and, on this ground, oppose the concept of gender identity while bolstering the ranks of the anti-gender galaxy with their attempts to obstruct trans* rights (Gusmeroli, 2024; Prearo, 2023).

2. Digging deep into anti-gender rhetoric

Far from being a source of internal conflict or disorganization, the multifaceted composition of the Italian anti-gender galaxy is one of the main reasons behind its successes within and beyond institutional spaces. Indeed, as Prearo and Scopelliti (2023: 255) argue, «on the one hand, a secularized, non-religious positioning with respect to the Catholic Church and, on the other, a movementist positioning with respect to the political parties» made anti-gender claims appealing in both religious and political realms, while enhancing the legitimacy and resonance of the anti-gender array in the Italian civil society.

Admittedly, the bulk of empirical investigations that look at the anti-gender crusade remains centered on its offline dimension, focusing mainly on major protest or community building events that, over time, have made evident its fluid but

incessant growth. In the few cases in which research on the Italian anti-gender galaxy has turned towards exploring digital dynamics, it underlined that social media are used to increase media coverage of crucial events such as Family Days or the 2019 World Congress of Families (Evolvi, 2023); to spread anti-gender contents; but also to mobilize individuals, for example through signature collections and petitions (Righetti, 2021). Furthermore, extant studies stress that social media allow actors mobilizing around anti-gender claims to strengthen their networks and mobilization capacities by establishing connections with a wide range of religious and political allies both nationally and, albeit to a minor extent, also transnationally (Righetti, 2021; Tronina, 2024). Importantly, these analyses emphasize how right-wing populist parties in particular have consistently used social media to align with and diffuse broad anti-gender rhetoric (Righetti, 2021) as well as a more focused anti-LGBTQIA+ discourse (Prearo and Scopelliti, 2024).

Research also finds that actors in the Italian anti-gender galaxy tactically employ digital platforms to develop affective media communication strategies (Evolvi, 2023) and diffuse misinformation on issues such as abortion, *gender ideology*, LGBTQIA+ and trans* rights (Prearo and Scopelliti, 2024; Righetti, 2021). Remarkably, different actors do use social media in various ways, adopting different communication strategies (Righetti, 2021) and diverse framing strategies (Prearo and Scopelliti, 2024). However, these strategies are not in conflict with each other. Rather, they speak to the variety of modes in which the anti-crusade is morally justified, underpinning both its institutional legitimization (Evolvi, 2022) and its resonance in the public sphere (Evolvi, 2023).

Nonetheless, evidence on the digital activities performed by the anti-gender galaxy remains scant and, overall, largely oriented towards finding traces of convergence in a common opposition to *gender* and *gender ideology*. Less attention has been paid, instead, to examine the variety of thematic and substantive contributions that the different sectors of the anti-gender galaxy deliver towards the construction of a broader anti-gender rhetoric through their everyday digital labor. In this paper, we orient our gaze precisely in this direction. Building on concepts rooted in «micro-discourse analysis» (Johnston, 1995), we understand anti-gender rhetoric as resulting from «micro aspects of text and their relationship to macro structures» (Franzosi and Vicari, 2018: 410). Consistently, our goal is to dig deep into anti-gender rhetoric and understand how various sectors contribute to it by paralleling an exploration of the broader gender-related thematic concerns they address in their social media posts with a closer examination of the micro-textual elements that structure them. While broader thematic concerns can be seen as the «pillars» of anti-gender rhetoric, the micro-textual elements – especially the objects these sectors focus on

– serve as the «micro-foundations» upon which these pillars, and thus anti-gender rhetoric, are built.

Our analysis configures as mainly exploratory and is driven by a set of research questions:

- *RQ1*: How prominent are gender-related issues amidst the various topics addressed by ecclesial, anti-gender, right-wing, and anti-trans actors in their everyday digital labor?
- *RQ2*: What is the contribution that the four different sectors make through their everyday digital labor to the development of a broader anti-gender rhetoric?
- *RQ3*: What are the similarities and the differences between the contributions set by the four sectors?

3. Data and methods

Our research leans on a corpus of Facebook (FB) and Instagram (IG) posts published between January 1st, 2021 and June 30th, 2023 by a pool of twenty-two prominent actors of the Italian anti-gender galaxy (Table 1A in Appendix): ecclesiastical and ecclesial organizations (N = 3), right-wing politicians (N = 5), anti-gender organizations and activists (N = 9), anti-trans organizations (N = 5)[3].

We defined our observation period so to be able to examine both the routine social media activities of the four sectors as well as their digital content production activities around two crucial moments in which evident signs of convergence emerged between a broader antigenderism and more specific anti-LGBTQIA+ claims (Prearo and Scopelliti, 2024). First, the final phase of the parliamentary discussion on the so-called Zan bill, which started in the Senate in October 2021 and provided a crucial moment for the political and public ramping of anti-LGBTQIA+ claims and stances (De Blasio *et al*., 2022; Feo, 2022; Prearo and Scopelliti, 2024). Second, the appointment of the country's first far-right government led by Giorgia Meloni in September 2022, which accelerated and strengthened the institutionalization of anti-gender actors and politics (Lavizzari, 2025)[4].

The accounts we monitored were selected based on expert interviews and a systematic literature review, aiming to capture the diversity of actors and instances

[3] Due to their progressively lower relevance in the Italian anti-gender galaxy, especially after 2017 (Lavizzari, 2020; Prearo, 2024), far-right groups were not included in this analysis.

[4] We conventionally defined ordinary moments of content production as periods of approximately nine months before the beginning of the discussion in the Italian Senate of the Zan bill and after the appointment of the Meloni government.

Table 1. Number of posts collected for each anti-gender sector (N = 39.864)

	FB	IG	TOT
Anti-gender	7.316	3.286	10.602
Anti-trans	4.990	96	5.086
Ecclesial	7.923	512	8.435
Right-wing	9.236	6.505	15.741
TOT	29.465	10.399	39.864

that have fueled – and continue to fuel – the anti-gender collective project across past and present mobilization cycles. While this sampling strategy does not lead to a complete mapping of the Italian anti-gender galaxy, it nonetheless offers an entry point to reason about old and new convergences within it while keeping into account its overall complexity and internal heterogeneity.

Finally, focusing on both Facebook and Instagram allows us to investigate the everyday digital labor of selected anti-gender actors with respect to different audiences: an older generation in the case of FB, and a younger one in the case of IG (Caren *et al.*, 2020). Through CrowdTangle (CrowdTangle Team, 2020) we collected 29.465 Facebook posts and 10.399 Instagram posts (Table 1), which we processed through a sequential mixed-method approach (Creswell and Plano-Clark, 2007) that combines topic modeling and socio-semantic network analysis.

Topic modeling. First, we processed the combined FB and IG datasets through a topic modeling algorithm to obtain a semantic overview of the posts under consideration and select a rich-in-information analytic sample (Patton, 2015) to be passed on to the next research step. After a pre-processing phase where URLs, emojis and other non-alphanumeric characters were removed, we applied a vectorization process, together with a variation of the TF-IDF function, to then operate the proper topic modeling algorithm via BERTopic Python package (Grootendorst, 2022). We first performed this step on the overall corpus and then repeated it on a subsample of posts that were initially gathered in a null topic. Of the 131 topics generated through this nested procedure, we discarded inconsistent ones, merged those which appeared to be similar, and ultimately selected 33 relevant topics (Table 2A in Appendix) for a total of 8.883 posts. We employed this corpus to address our RQ1 on the prominence of gender-related issues amongst all topics touched upon by the four sectors in their posts. To this end, we evaluated the percentage of posts classified as contributing to topics that we qualitatively assessed as pertaining to gender-related issues over the total number of posts of a specific sector.

Table 2. Example of verb-object dyad extraction and further simplification

Original text	Extracted verb-object dyads	Simplified verb-object dyads
I diritti sono stati ridotti negli anni. Vorremmo ottenere libertà maggiori per tutti, loro non possono decidere tutto. Domandiamo tutele maggiori	1. sono stati ridotti - diritti 2. vorremmo ottenere - libertà 3. possono decidere - tutto 4. domandiamo - tutele	1. sono ridotti - diritto 2. vogliamo ottenere - libertà 3. possono decidere - tutto 4. domandiamo - tutela

Frame semantic grammar and socio-semantic network analysis. Second, we performed a socio-semantic network analysis (Basov *et al.*, 2020) to unveil the overall structure of the discourse revolving around gender-related issues and assessed the specific contribution of each of the four sectors to it. Following a «frame semantic grammar» approach (Vicari, 2010: 510), we reproduced the clause semantic structure – understood in terms of subject, verb, and object (Franzosi, 2010) – of the posts contributing to gender-related topics (N = 4.751). We first tokenized the selected posts through the *nltk* Python package to then detect all verbs (whether in active or passive form) which we joined, whenever necessary, with their auxiliaries[5]. We subsequently identified all direct objects associated with active transitive verbs to then link every verb and its object in a dyad[6]. In a final step, we simplified each dyad by conjugating verbs in the present tense and lemmatizing the objects (for an example, see Table 2).

After this process, we arranged all the selected dyads (Table 3) in a bipartite network containing 7.227 verb nodes (average degree: 2,86; SD: 9,32), 2.942 object nodes (average degree: 7,28; SD: 24,26) and 21.411 edges. To examine the micro-foundations of anti-gender rhetoric (RQ2), we calculated the distribution of each verb-object dyad across the gender-related topics identified through topic modeling to then associate it with any of the four sectors employing it in its posts. We assessed specific contributions through a socio-semantic approach (Basov *et al.*, 2020) for which sectors and gender-related issues are connected based on the proportion of dyads that each sector employs to discuss them – i.e., the higher the proportion of dyads associated with each gender-related issue, the higher the contribution of a specific sector towards developing that specific component of anti-gender rhetoric.

[5] In the Italian language the verbal form already contains an indication with respect to the subject of the action. This allowed us to translate the tripartite structure of the semantic structure indicated by Franzosi (2010) leaning simply on a combination of verbs and objects.

[6] The presence of a direct object in a sentence depends on the transitivity/intransitivity of the verb. For the purpose of this research, we only considered transitive verbs to focus on the objects that receive direct attention from the subject of the actions. In the case of passive verb forms, subjects were considered as the object of attention.

Table 3. Number of dyads considered for each of the four sectors

Sector	Number of dyads
Anti-gender	13.583
Anti-trans	2.591
Ecclesial	292
Right-wing	4.945

Similarities and differences between the four sector. Finally, we examined the similarities and the differences between the four sectors' contributions to anti-gender rhetoric (RQ3) through an ad-hoc similarity measure that grasps the extent to which any two sectors direct their attention towards common objects. Our proposed measure is calculated as follows:

$$S_{A,B} = \left(\frac{|A \cap B|}{|A|} + \frac{|A \cap B|}{|B|} \right) \cdot \frac{1}{2}$$

Being A and B the sets of objects appearing in posts of two different sectors, A∩B is the set of objects belonging to both sectors. By dividing this intersection for the numerosity of each single set, the raw overall similarity between two sectors is weighted against the overall number of objects addressed by each of them. Ultimately, the higher this proportion, the more one sector directs attention to the same objects addressed by another one[7].

4. Findings

RQ1 – Relevance of gender-related issues in the four sectors' everyday digital labor. Our first question examines the relevance of gender-related issues amongst all the topics covered by the four sectors in their posts. Of the 33 topics identified through topic modeling, 14 center on gender-related matters: gender and *gender ideology*; surrogacy; pornography and pedophilia; cancel culture and gender in pop culture; lesbianism and critiques to transfeminism; trans* issues and gender identities; anti-abortion and «pro-life» claims; DDL Zan; pro-family claims; the use of schwa; children's protection; difference feminism; womanhood and motherhood; femicide[8].

[7] The multiplication factor 1/2 allows to score this similarity measure in the 0-1 range.

[8] For a detailed illustration of the contributions given by each sector to the 33 topics included in the analytic sample, please refer to Table 3A in Appendix.

Figure 1. Overall relevance of gender-related topics in the four sectors' everyday social media production

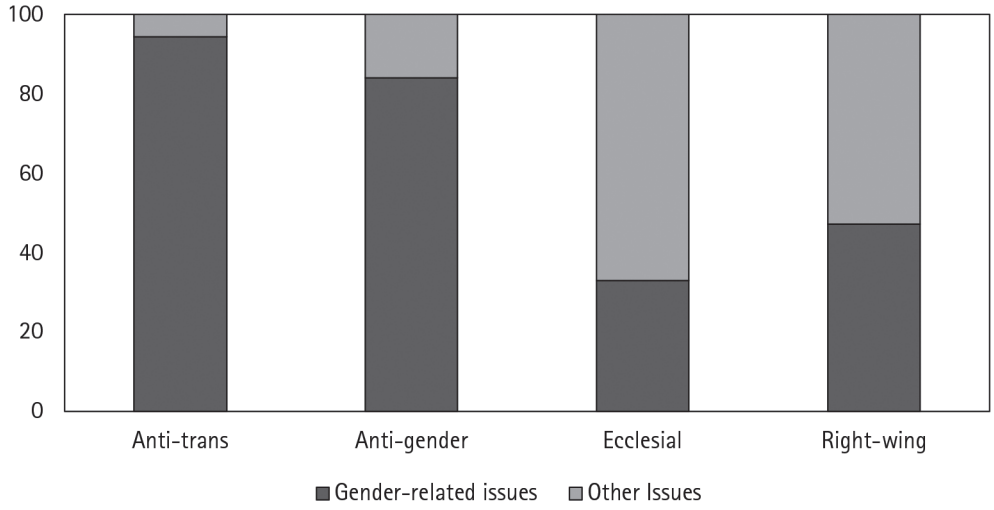


Figure 1 illustrates the percentage of posts that each sector dedicates to discuss these matters. As it shows, gender-related issues are a cross-cutting concern across the anti-gender galaxy, but they are not equally prominent. More specifically, the four sectors seem to employ their social media accounts in two rather distinct ways. On the one hand, the ecclesial sector and, to a lesser extent, the right-wing sector adopt a more generalist approach, posting about a wider range of topics beyond gender-related ones, which account for 33% and 47,2%, respectively. On the other hand, anti-trans and anti-gender actors perform a targeted use of social media, insofar as they produce posts in which they discuss almost exclusively gender-related issues (94,4% and 84% respectively).

This first set of results confirms the increasingly eccentric position taken by ecclesial organizations with respect to the rest of the anti-gender galaxy (Prearo, 2024) while also providing evidence of the substantive, but not unilateral, interest that the right-wing sector continues to have for gender-related matters. At the same time, our results also suggest that, as anti-trans groups started to gravitate towards the anti-gender galaxy, the construction of a broader anti-gender rhetoric has benefited from a contribution almost exclusively tailored on issues that relate to gender and its politics. Above and beyond gender-related topics, indeed, anti-trans groups do not show any systematic thematic interest and, in fact, do not even touch some issues that are instead particularly relevant for other sectors, such as national politics or immigration (see Table 3A in Appendix).

RQ2 – The specific contributions of the four sectors. Our second research question focuses on the specific contributions of the four sectors to shaping a broader anti-gender rhetoric. To address this, we first identified the gender-related issues that attract the most attention across all sectors (Figure 2). Subsequently, we examined and compared in detail how much each sector invested in developing each of these issues (Figure 3). A joint reading of Figure 2 and 3 suggests that the four sectors collectively contribute their attention and content production to three key pillars of anti-gender rhetoric: *gender ideology*, the traditional family model, and trans* rights.

In this sense, our results further confirm that *gender ideology* remains a constant concern for the entire anti-gender galaxy even in this phase of expansion and regardless of whether the actors have a more or less specific interest in gender issues. This element shows particularly well in Figure 3. In this socio-semantic network, each of the four sectors (represented by a black disk) is connected to the gender-oriented topics it contributes to (represented by white squares). The thickness of the arrows representing these contributions varies based on the proportion of verb-object dyads used by a given sector in posts on a specific topic, relative to the total verb-object dyads found in its posts addressing gender-related issues. Hence, the greater this proportion, the thicker the arrow in the figure and the higher the investment of a sector in relation to a specific topic. As it shows, all the four sectors are linked to the *T1-Gender and Gender Ideology* node by the thickest and boldest arrows in the network.

Figure 2. Relevance of specific gender-related topics in the anti-gender galaxy everyday social media production (normalized values)

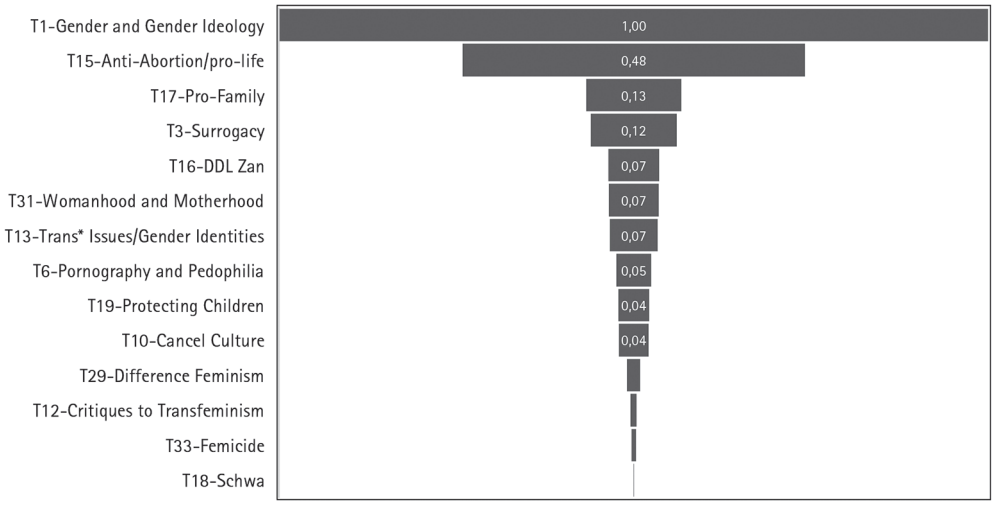
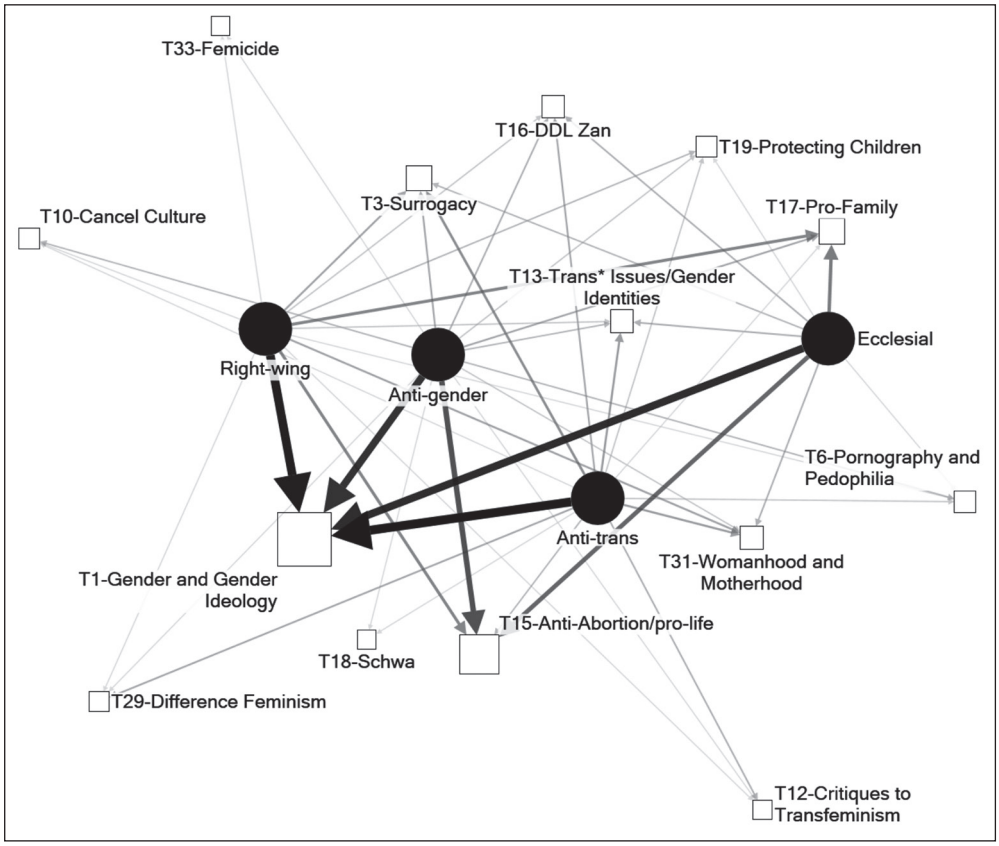


Figure 3. Contribution of the four sectors to specific gender-related topics



Note: Black disks represent the sectors of actors and white squares represent the thematic concerns, sized by in-degree. The strength of the ties is represented by the thickness of the arrows.

Furthermore, all sectors contribute to a second pillar centered on the traditional family model by publishing posts on specific gender-related issues such as abortion, pro-traditional family claims, and surrogacy. However, our results show that the four sectors address these issues to varying degrees, revealing an additional internal distinction amongst them. On the one side, the longer-term protagonists of the anti-gender galaxy – i.e., anti-gender, right-wing, and ecclesial actors – insist particularly on the issue of abortion as well as on claims supporting a traditionalist family agenda. This finding is in line with previous studies that show how a common terrain for alliances within the Italian anti-gender galaxy is carved by framing concerns around gender and *gender ideology* in terms of risks of corrupting childhood (Bellè and Donà, 2022) and children's rights to be raised in heterosexual families (Donà,

2020). On the other side, anti-trans organizations make a peculiar contribution to this solid and long-standing core of anti-gender rhetoric. Interestingly, while these groups pay limited attention to abortion and traditional family models, they are mostly active in terms of articulating claims against surrogate motherhood, a long-lasting debate within Italian feminism (Ammaturo, 2020; Cossutta, 2018). To be sure, as displayed in Figure 3, all sectors show interest in the topic of surrogacy. This notwithstanding, the contribution of anti-trans organizations in this sense is twice as big as that of anti-gender and right-wing actors, and more than three times larger than that set by ecclesial organizations.

Importantly, the anti-trans sector is progressively enriching the overall anti-gender rhetoric also by intervening more than all other sectors to debating the issues of womanhood and motherhood as well as by raising claims against the enactment of the Zan bill and against trans* individuals' rights more broadly. While their concerns over womanhood are mainly shared by right-wing and ecclesial actors, trans* rights catalyze the attention of all four sectors, thus constituting a third, albeit minor, strand at the heart of anti-gender rhetoric. This finding corroborates recent evidence on the progressive emergence of an «anti-trans coalition» (Prearo, 2023: 116) within the anti-gender galaxy – a nascent terrain on which ideologically different actors are converging with the common aim of opposing trans* individuals' rights (Gusmeroli, 2024).

RQ3 – Similarities and differences between the sectors. Our third research question examines the similarities and differences in how the four sectors contribute to anti-gender rhetoric on social media. In order to answer this question, we switched our attention towards the single objects towards which they direct their attention.

As illustrated in Table 4, all four sectors show rather high levels of similarity (> 0,7) amongst themselves. Hence, not only do they tend to converge on the same pillars: they do so by focusing their attention on the same objects and discussing the same aspects. Importantly, amongst the most objects common to all the four sectors we find *right* (which is indeed the most prominent object for anti-gender and far-right actors), *life* (the main object discussed by ecclesial organizations), *child, son, woman* (the main object addressed by anti-trans organizations), and *law*. These findings suggest that, when articulating anti-gender rhetoric on social media, the four sectors use a terminology that relates to the realm of liberal democracy, rights, and legislation. In other words, they endorse a democratic language to, however, articulate a «contra-democratic shift» (Prearo, 2020: 265) with the aim of shrinking gender-related rights instead of expanding them.

However, our analysis also indicates that these convergences at the discourse level are unfolding more neatly in some areas of the anti-gender galaxy than

others. As it shows, indeed, ecclesial organizations tend to have less in common with the other three sectors. Where similarity scores reach higher, instead, a closer look at the sectors involved suggests the co-existence of two complementary trajectories of convergence.

On the one hand, the almost total overlap between the objects addressed by anti-gender and right-wing actors in their social media post (~0,99) points towards the continuation also at the level of discourse of the «symbiotic relationships» that these two sectors have developed since the early 2010s and significantly strengthened with the 2022 elections (Lavizzari, 2025). In line with previous literature on common concerns around traditional family and children's protection (Bellè and Donà, 2022), the main objects around which both anti-gender and right-wing actors center their attention are *mother, father* and *abortion*. Additionally, even if less present in anti-gender than in right-wing posts, we also find references to objects related to migration concerns, such as *immigration, immigrant* and *nation*. This element further corroborates the success with which right-wing populist parties have managed to bend anti-gender rhetoric towards an anti-immigration one (Garbagnoli, 2017; Scrinzi, 2024) particularly through femonationalist (Colella, 2021) and racist discourses (Indelicato and Magalhães Lopes, 2024).

On the other hand, higher similarity scores between these two sectors and the anti-trans one (~0,93-0,94) further reinforce the above-mentioned suggestion that the Italian anti-gender galaxy is undergoing a process of internal reorganization for which the progressive distancing of ecclesial organizations is somewhat compensated by the intervention of groups specifically opposing trans* individual rights and gender identity (Prearo, 2023). Amongst the objects transversally addressed by these sectors, we find *mother, father, parent*, suggesting that anti-trans claims may be articulated through broader references to parenthood. Furthermore, anti-gender and anti-trans actors share a specific concern over *violence*, providing further evidence to investigations finding that *gender ideology* is framed as a dangerous and violent attempt of indoctrination (Garbagnoli, 2017).

Table 4. Similarity between the four sectors of actors

	Right-wing	Anti-gender	Anti-trans	Ecclesial
Right-Wing	–	0,988	0,936	0,762
Anti-Gender	0,988	–	0,926	0,777
Anti-Trans	0,936	0,926	–	0,756
Ecclesial	0,762	0,777	0,756	–

5. Conclusions

By digging deeper at the roots of anti-gender rhetoric, this study contributes to broadening our understanding of the complexities that subtend to the persistence and, in fact, progressive enlargement of the anti-gender galaxy in the Italian scenario.

Through an innovative adaptation of the «frame semantic grammar» approach (Vicari, 2010) by means of topic modeling and socio-semantic network analysis (Basov *et al.*, 2020), this article shows that the different sectors of the Italian anti-gender galaxy actively and systematically use social media to contribute to articulating and spreading anti-gender rhetoric.

Our results point to a series of common elements in this dynamic. Not only do all sectors use their social media accounts to discuss gender issues but, in doing so, they coordinate their everyday digital labor towards three pillars of anti-gender rhetoric: *gender ideology*, which continues to function as a symbolic glue (Kováts and Põim, 2015); the traditional family model; and the more recent opposition to the rights of trans* individuals (Gusmeroli, 2024; Prearo, 2023). Importantly, our analysis also shows that, within these common areas of focus, anti-gender rhetoric is based on solid and shared micro-foundations. In particular, all sectors direct their attention to elements such as rights, life, women, children, and the role of law, tactically co-opting a broader discourse on democratic freedoms to articulate an action program that is, in fact, highly exclusionary and anti-democratic.

However, our analysis also allows us to take a closer look at some of the differences that permeate the collective construction of anti-gender rhetoric. Firstly, the contributions of the different sectors are not equivalent. One part of the galaxy, formed by the anti-gender sector and the anti-trans sector, does use their social media accounts almost exclusively to fuel the circulation of anti-gender stances. However, there is also a part, formed by the ecclesial and right-wing sectors, that places their anti-gender discourse within the context of a broader agenda. The contributions to the discussion of the pillars centered on the traditional family model and the rights of trans* people are also not equivalent. While the more established part of the anti-gender galaxy – formed by the anti-gender, right-wing, and ecclesial sectors – focuses its attention on the topic of abortion and the defense of the traditional family model, the anti-trans sector shows a clear interest for anchoring womanhood to «biological determinants» and opposing surrogacy, while animating the overall discussion with a targeted objection against trans* individuals – whose rights are rapidly emerging as a fertile common ground to revamp the anti-gender crusade.

More generally, our results invite further reflection on the progressive internal reorganization of the Italian anti-gender galaxy in a dynamic tension between

consolidation and expansion. On the one hand, our analysis confirms two trends already known in literature. First, the very specific role of the ecclesial sector (Prearo, 2024), which not only has a more limited interest in gender issues than the others but is also completely centralized around the triad of *gender ideology*, abortion, and the traditional family model. Second, the strengthening of the «symbiotic relationships» (Lavizzari, 2025) between anti-gender and right-wing politics, suggesting that the intersection between anti-gender and anti-immigration rhetorics constitutes an increasingly fertile ground on which to build exclusionary and anti-democratic arguments (Indelicato and Magalhães Lopes, 2024). On the other hand, our analysis also helps to clarify the terms of the progressive integration of anti-trans claims into the more consolidated «canon» of antigenderism (Prearo and Scopelliti, 2024). The persistence of a transversal convergence against the «phantasm of gender» (Butler, 2024: 4) is in fact serving once more as a basis to recruit new members in the crusade – particularly, anti-trans feminist organizations. However, in approaching the anti-gender galaxy, the anti-trans sector is hooking on already existing rhetoric on parenthood and gender binarism in the name of womanhood, which becomes a new exclusionary device through which these arguments are weaponized to further limit same-sex parenthood rights, self-determination and the very existence and rights of trans* individuals.

Our study also suggests how the evolution of the anti-gender crusade could be further investigated. Firstly, it appears important to examine similarities and divergences also in the framing strategies adopted by each of the identified sectors and single constituencies within them, for instance by comparing prominent and satellite anti-gender organizations, or anti-trans feminists with anti-trans parent activists. Secondly, more attention should be paid to the articulation of comparative investigations aimed at understanding the role of shifting political and discursive opportunity structures in the composition of national anti-gender galaxies and in how these factors may shape the pillars and micro-foundations of anti-gender rhetoric at the national level. Thirdly, cross-platform investigations should address possible different uses of social media platforms to engage in shared discussions, tackle prominent concerns, and articulate framing strategies to target diverse audiences.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are kept in the Università di Trento Data Repository under closed access due to ethical reasons and privacy requirements. Data will be available after the end of the project – October 2026 – upon reasonable request to the corresponding author (elena.pavan@unitn.it).

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Appendix

Table 1A. List of actors in the analytic sample

Actor name	Facebook	Instagram	Actor category
Alessandro Pagano	https://www.facebook.com/www.alessandropagano.it	https://www.instagram.com/alessandropagano_official/	Right-wing
Simone Pillon	https://www.facebook.com/SenatorePillon	https://www.instagram.com/simone_pillon/	Right-wing
Giorgia Meloni	https://www.facebook.com/giorgiameloni.paginaufficiale	https://www.instagram.com/giorgiameloni/	Right-wing
Lorenzo Fontana	https://www.facebook.com/LorenzoFontanaOfficial	https://www.instagram.com/lorenzofontanaofficial/	Right-wing
Eugenia Roccella	https://www.facebook.com/eugeniaroccella	https://www.instagram.com/eugeniaroccella/	Right-wing
Pro Vita & Famiglia Onlus	https://www.facebook.com/provitaonlus	https://www.instagram.com/provitaefamiglia/	Anti-gender
Family Day - Difendiamo I Nostri Figli	https://www.facebook.com/FamilyDayDNF	–	Anti-gender
Generazione Famiglia	–	https://www.instagram.com/generazionefamiglia/	Anti-gender
Jacopo Coghe	https://www.facebook.com/jacopocoghe	https://www.instagram.com/jacopocoghe/	Anti-gender

(continued)

Table 1A. Continued

Actor name	Facebook	Instagram	Actor category
Rachele Ruiu	https://www.facebook.com/mariarachele.ruiu01	https://www.instagram.com/mariarachele.ruiu/	Anti-gender
Toni Brandi	https://www.facebook.com/tonibrandiprovita	–	Anti-gender
RadFem Italia	https://www.facebook.com/radfem.italia	https://www.instagram.com/radfem_italia/	Anti-trans
Arcilesbica	https://www.facebook.com/Arcilesbica	https://www.instagram.com/arcilesbica/	Anti-trans
RUA - Resistenza all'Utero in Affitto	https://www.facebook.com/rete.rua	–	Anti-trans
Generazione D	https://www.facebook.com/AssociazioneGenD	https://www.instagram.com/generazioned_/	Anti-trans
Associazione Famiglia Domani	https://www.facebook.com/famigliadomani	–	Anti-trans
Movimento per la Vita Italiano	https://www.facebook.com/movimentoperlavitaitaliano	https://www.instagram.com/movimento_per_la_vita_italiano/	Anti-gender
Associazione non si tocca la famiglia	https://www.facebook.com/nonsitoccalafamiglia	–	Anti-gender
Mario Adinolfi	https://www.facebook.com/mario.adinolfi	https://www.instagram.com/marioadinolfi71/	Anti-gender
Alleanza Cattolica	https://www.facebook.com/AlleanzaCattolica/	https://www.instagram.com/alleanza_cattolica/	Ecclesial
Comunione e Liberazione	https://www.facebook.com/ComunioneLiberazione	https://www.instagram.com/comunioneliberazione/	Ecclesial
CEI	https://www.facebook.com/conferenzaepiscopaleitaliana	https://www.instagram.com/conferenza_episcopale_italiana/	Ecclesial

Table 2A. List of topics in the analytic sample

Topic	Frequency
1-Gender and Gender Ideology	*2.563*
15-Anti-Abortion and pro-life Claims	*1.886*
32-Politics	515
3-Surrogacy	*485*
16-DDL Zan	*395*
2-COVID and Vaccination	328
17-Pro-Family	*315*
4-Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide	301
13-Trans Issues and Gender Identities*	*264*
5-Catholic values and Anti-Christian Sentiment	237
6-Pornography and Pedophilia;	*175*
20-Covid Restriction Measures	140
10-Cancel Culture/Gender in Pop Culture	*137*
31-Womanhood and Motherhood	*114*
7-Immigration	107
19-Protecting Children	*107*
9-Against Cannabis Legalization	102
29-Difference Feminism	*101*
8-Islam	82
22-Environmental Issues	74
28-Rising Energy Prices	70
12-Lesbianism and Critiques to Transfeminism	*60*
25-Work-related Issues	59
11-World Down Syndrome Day	56
36-Terrorist attacks and other killings	35
14-Disabilities	32
23-Taliban Regime in Afghanistan	27
34-Anti-rave Bill	27
30- Ukraine War	26
35- Relations with Chinese government	22
33-Femicide	*15*
37-Elderly	15
18-Schwa	*11*

Note: topics in italics were selected as gender-related

Table 3A. Topics distribution by sector

	Anti-trans	Anti-gender	Ecclesial	Right-wing
T1-Gender and Gender Ideology	*47,54*	*27,74*	*14*	*22,8*
T2-COVID and Vaccination	0,48	1,51	15,67	8,96
T3-Surrogacy	*9,44*	*5,24*	*1,67*	*4,21*
T4-Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide	0,32	5,3	1,33	1
T5-Catholic values and Anti-Christian Sentiment	0,32	0,22	26,33	6,43
T6-Pornography and Pedophilia	*2,14*	*2,74*	*0,67*	*0,27*
T7-Immigration	–	0,02	0,67	4,7
T8-Islamism	0,71	0,06	2,33	2,85
T9-Against Cannabis Legalization	–	1,55	–	1,04
T10-Cancel Culture/Gender in Pop Culture	*0,08*	*2,29*	–	*0,86*
11-World Down Syndrome Day	–	0,92	–	0,41
T12-Lesbianism and Critiques to Transfeminism	*4,52*	*0,04*	–	*0,05*
T13-Trans Issues and Gender Identities*	*6,98*	*2,5*	*4*	*1,63*
T14-Disabilities	–	0,43	0,33	0,41
T15-Anti-Abortion and pro-life Claims	*8,49*	*32,02*	*6*	*5,6*
T16-DDL Zan	*4,76*	*5,91*	*1,67*	*1,27*
T17-Pro-Family	*0,4*	*3,15*	*3,67*	*6,24*
T18-Schwa	*0,08*	*0,2*	–	–
T19-Protecting Children	*1,03*	*1,13*	*0,33*	*1,58*
T20-Covid Restriction Measures	0,08	0,72	1,67	4,39
T22-Environmental Issues	0,95	0,63	5,67	0,59
T23-Taliban Regime in Afghanistan	–	0,06	0,33	1,04
T25-Work-related Issues	0,56	0,1	2	1,85
T28-Rising Energy Prices	0,24	0,2	1	2,44
T29-Difference Feminism	*6,19*	*0,27*	–	*0,41*
T30- Ukraine War	0,16	0,37	–	0,23
T31-Womanhood and Motherhood	*2,7*	*0,72*	*1*	*1,81*
T32-Politics	1,67	3,5	8,33	13,12
T33-Femicide	*0,08*	*0,08*	–	*0,45*
T34-Anti-rave Bill	–	–	–	1,22
T35- Relations with Chinese government	–	0,02	0,67	0,86
T36-Terrorist attacks and other killings	0,08	0,1	0,67	1,22
T37-Elderly	–	0,27	–	0,05

Note: topics in italics were selected as gender-related