Evidence Bite - Weaponizing Feminism: Counter-Intersectional Politics in Right-Wing and Populist Radical Right Discourses across Parliamentary Arenas

This article by CCINDLE partners Aurora Perego, Silvia Díaz Fernández, and Olivia Burchietti explores how right-wing and populist radical right (PRR) parties use, reshape, and selectively appropriate feminist ideas in parliamentary debates, and how this differs according to the levels of feminist institutionalisation in Italy and Spain.

Crucially, anti-gender politics does not always articulate explicit anti-feminist claims. This article shows how right-wing and PRR actors appropriate feminist language and concerns while redirecting them towards exclusionary ends. The authors call this the 'weaponization of feminism', i.e. the ways in which feminism is demonised, selectively reframed, or strategically ignored in order to advance anti-trans, nationalist, racist, and anti-immigrant agendas. The result is what the article describes as 'counter-intersectional' politics, or approaches that separate groups experiencing different forms of inequality and position them against one another. This evidence bite offers a concise summary of its conclusions.

The **key observations** of the article include that:

1. Feminism can be discursively constructed for exclusionary purposes

The study shows that feminism can be discursively constructed as a field of reference within parliamentary arenas, and that this is done for exclusionary purposes. The study identifies two discursive strategies through which feminism is constructed and weaponised to articulate counter-intersectional politics. The first is that trans rights are framed as threatening women's rights, with gender affirmation portrayed as erasing or endangering cisgender women. Linked to this is how migration and refugee rights are framed as threatening women's safety, allowing concerns about gender-based violence to be connected to racist and xenophobic narratives.

2. Weaponisation strategies looks different where feminism is more institutionally established

The comparison between Spain and Italy is central to the article. In Spain, where feminist politics and equality institutions are more strongly embedded, feminism itself becomes a prominent target. Right-wing and PRR actors explicitly portray feminism as ideological, authoritarian, or hostile to men, while linking it to 'gender ideology', trans rights, and risks to children and the family. In Italy, where feminist demands have been less strongly institutionalised, feminism is discussed much less directly. Instead, gender becomes the target, and it is entangled with concerns over migration, freedom of speech, and the defence of the (white and heterosexual) nation.

The authors therefore argue that stronger feminist institutionalisation can make feminism more visible, and thus a more direct target of attack. Weaker institutionalisation can instead produce more subtle forms of appropriation and exclusion.

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3. The key mechanism is division between groups

The article's notion of counter-intersectionality is important. Rather than simply opposing every equality claim, right-wing and PRR actors can instrumentally endorse the protection of one group while presenting another marginalised group as the threat. Examples include framing issues as cisgender women versus trans women, white women versus racialised or migrant people, LGBTQIA+ rights versus women's rights, and the protection of women versus refugees or migrants. This selective appropriation builds on exclusionary identity politics to support political projects organised around nationalism, racial boundaries, cisheteronormativity and, more broadly, exclusion.

The **key takeaway messages** of the article include that:

- **Feminism can be discursively constructed for exclusionary purposes**: Anti-gender and far-right politics can work by selectively appropriating feminist language, particularly around (cisgender women's) rights, and giving it an exclusionary political meaning.
- **Intersectionality is a crucial fault line**: A central concern is what happens when politicians build on identity politics to separate gender from questions of race, migration, sexuality, and gender identity. The authors argue that this can create hierarchies between marginalised groups and make them appear to be competing for rights.
- **Institutionalisation changes the form of backlash**: The embedding of feminist politics within national institutions does not necessarily make feminist politics immune from attack. Instead, it may change how opponents engage with feminism: from direct demonisation in Spain to more subtle appropriation in Italy.

The article shows why contemporary anti-gender politics should not be understood simply as opposition to feminism. Feminism can indeed be weaponised for exclusionary purposes, particularly when claims about gender equality are separated from intersectional drives towards justice. For researchers and activists, this highlights the importance of examining how equality claims are connected to one another, who is included within them, and whether protection for one group is being constructed through the exclusion of another. You can read the article in full here.

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Funded by the European Union

Funded by the European Union under grant No 101061256. UK consortium partners are funded by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) under the UK government's Horizon Europe funding guarantee [grant numbers 10051932 and 10048433]. Views and opinions expressed are those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Executive Agency or UKRI. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them. This evidence bite used ChatGPT-5.6 to generate an initial summary of the featured article.