
Can feminism be right?

A content analysis of discourses about women by
female Italian right-wing politicians

by ELIA A.G. ARFINI, ROSSELLA GHIGI
and SVEVA MAGARAGGIA

1. *Introduction: from neoliberal to neo-fundamentalist feminism*¹

Populist, ultra-Catholic, conservative, nationalist and far-right movements have experienced impressive popularity across many Western democracies in recent years. In Europe, this has been read by analysts as a backlash against the political establishment as well as a response to disregarded concerns about globalisation, immigration, growing inequalities, dilution of national identity and about the EU itself.

As feminist and queer theorists have noted, one of the most striking paradoxes of neoliberalism in the West has been its tendency to incorporate sexual and gender subjects who have been framed as minorities, such as women or LGBTQ people (Puar 2018; di Felicianantonio 2015; Duggan 2002), even as such inclusion, not surprisingly, has been contingent on the elimination of any conflictual potentiality. This is the case of gender mainstreaming, where feminist knowledge has been converted into de-politicized technical expertise (Mukhopadhyay 2004; De Jong, Kimm 2017). The 2007-8 economic crisis, however, underscored the precariousness of such differential inclusion (Haritaworn *et al.* 2014), when neoliberalism began to exhibit its harshest, repressive and authoritarian face (see Zappino 2016).

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While renewed forms of mobilization against gender and sexual equality have increased in recent years, in fact such mobilizations started globally as early as the mid-1990s, particularly in reaction to the *International Conference on Population and Development* held in 1993 in the *World Conference on Women* held in Cairo and the *Fourth World Conference on Women* held in 1995 in Beijing. At that time, political parties and movements began to take advantage of sentiments of anxiety and disenchantment and began appealing to the «father of the family» and his allegedly superior common sense (as in Italy the rhetoric used by Berlusconi when he entered politics). But the period beginning in 2010 appears to be a turning point in Europe. During this period, the financial crisis has undermined confidence and trust in the competence of the governing elites. In the meantime, a complex constellation of actors in each country in Europe, the US, and Russia, composed of family associations, anti-abortion groups, religious conservatives, far-right groups and other have united and launched campaigns under the banner of an anti-gender crusade (Paternotte, Kuhar 2017; Ghigi 2019). In some cases, new coalitions have arisen in reaction to proposed laws (such as *Manif pour tous* in France); in other cases, they have revived associations and movements that had lost their appeal to the general public. The opposition to LGBTQI+ movements and the anti-immigration response based on security policies (particularly directed towards Muslim men) were additional elements of convergence of far-right movements with neoliberal conservative parties.

Moreover, the naturalisation of social hierarchies (including those based on gender) – the core value of neofundamentalism – and the idea of the unavailability of social inequalities and the heterosexual biopolitics of population – the grounds on which neoliberal discourses are growing – create new intersections (Cooper 2013). Women's rights, in particular, have been used to foster these alliances and have been mobilized against non-Western societies denounced as exceptionally sexist: a phenomenon that Sara Farris (2017) has termed «femonationalism». Many commentators have also noted the active presence of women activists and politicians within populist and far right movements, in spite of their overt misogynist, sexist and neoconservative assumptions. From Marie Le Pen in France, to Rocio Monasterio in Spain, Frauke Petry in Germany, Beata Szydlo in Poland and Siv Jensen in Norway,

many female political leaders across Europe have denounced second-wave feminist politics (such as gender education policies in schools or reproductive laws) as a threat to heteronormative, Christian, and white family values.

Given the recent advance of far-right movements that challenge the principles of liberal and social democracies and the desirability of equal rights, the academic debates on feminism (McRobbie 2011; Gill 2007) or on the role of women's movements in facilitating corporate globalisation (Eisenstein 2005), may seem already obsolete and overtaken by events. However, it is possible to read all these elements within a single interpretative framework. This is precisely what Farris and Rottenberg (2017) do when they describe the current landscape as the *righting of feminism*, suggesting that, «a complex new constellation has emerged in which not only is being a feminist a mark of pride and source of cultural capital, but the feminist project has also increasingly been linked with non-emancipatory agendas, such as neoliberalism and right-wing xenophobic politics» (*ibidem*, 6). «Alt-feminism» is the label that the independent writer Flavia Dzodan (2017) coined to stress this contradictory use of feminisms to support alt-right issues.

However, it is impossible to fully understand the advance of the far-right if one does not consider the beginnings of the illiberal discourse within neoliberal parties and movements themselves. This also applies to feminist issues: neoliberal forces opened the door to populist and chauvinist discourses on the role of women insofar as they feminized² the capitalist mode of production (Morini 2010). In doing so they never questioned the essentialist understanding of gender difference, nor compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1980), nor the alleged superiority of the Western tradition of gender relations.

The Italian case is particularly interesting from this point of view. According to Garbagnoli (2017) two features make this national context distinctive *vis à vis* anti-gender and sexist

² Feminization of work can refer to the increase of women in the workforce and in traditionally male lines of job. Alongside this sociological use, there is another use of the concept, more markedly political, promoted in particular by the Italian post-workerist school. In this latter sense, the feminization of work is meant to address how capacities traditionally associated with «feminine» qualities – such as the relational aspects typical of domestic and care work – are valorised in immaterial and cognitive precarious labour, crucial to transformation of modes of production in post-Fordism (Marazzi 2011).

campaigns. In Italy, the Catholic Church has traditionally played a crucial role in political affairs and has an overt influence on public opinion: the Vatican's rhetoric of feminine nature and of complementarity between the two sexes is well documented. The second feature is the predominance of the theory of sexual difference, which has been as one of the most influential strands in Italian second-wave feminism. This theoretical perspective promotes a binary, ontological and oppositional view of gender, providing a favourable basis on which to build naturalistic discourses. And this has been reinforced by some ambivalent appropriations of second-wave feminism since the 1990s (Fraser 2013).

In this article we deal with discourses on women's emancipation by right-wing female MPs in Italy during two parliamentary terms (29 April 2008 – 22 March 2018) with two different aims. The first is to show that where the contradictions in neoliberal and social democracy are most evident we begin to see the seeds of the growth of neofundamentalist and populist movements. The second is to claim that the lack of real critique of the essentialism at the basis of the sexual division of labor within social democratic traditions (particularly in Italy) has allowed for certain ostensibly progressive elements to be incorporated into right-wing political rhetorics.

The choice of the period is dictated by the fact that these years witnessed a particular resurgence of the debate on women's condition and position in Italian society in relation not only to interpretations of sexual difference and feminism, but also to women's role in the family and the labour market, and reproductive rights. During these years, parties and movements engaged in heated debates about these themes, even crosscutting the left/right political spectrum. Different viewpoints emerged within the government. As a matter of fact, while some recent studies have provided a gendered reading of right-wing party politics (Scrinzi 2014; Bellè 2015; de Lange, Mügge 2015), specific positions of right-wing female politicians have been under-researched in Italy. We have chosen to examine the speeches of three female politicians who represent some of these positions: Daniela Santanchè, Flavia Perina and Giorgia Meloni. From neoliberal to conservative to nationalist positions, these three MPs can shed light on how women-related issues «can be righted» in a way that can be seen to prefigure some of the chauvinist and anti-emancipatory agendas of current political parties. Indeed, we acknowledge the

complexity of experiences of women in conservative parties and movements (Avanza 2019). In this article we rather examine the statements of three MPs who are not necessarily representative of the differences within empirical subjects directly involved in these movements. Nonetheless, as political discourses proposed by leaders, we believe these are useful to inquire the construction of a conservative political frame *vis à vis* neoliberal feminism.

In particular, we will suggest that this was facilitated not only by the crucial role of the Catholic Church in political agendas and public opinion, and the widespread acceptance of an essentialist view of sexual difference, but also by the involuntarily low birth rate as indicative of Italian women's discrimination. Confronted with these conditions, our case can be understood as an attempt to address the conflicting and complex forces and discourses around gender under neoliberalism. The Italian case utilized what we term *emancipatory complementarism*, which includes support for a male breadwinner model, but with some liberal elements, such as some (light) forms of life-work conciliation and freer sexuality. Emancipatory complementarism thus incorporates some precepts of second-wave feminism but it does so selectively and without addressing the structural and economic undergirding of gender inequality.

2. Context, data and research methodology

At the end of 2008, the Global Gender Gap Report ranked Italy 67th of 130 countries in the world (WEF 2008); over the next ten years, Italy's position fell ever further, with the same report ranking Italy 70th of 149 countries (WEF 2018) in 2018. The economic crisis and recession from 2008 to 2018 caused the increased exposure of middle-class families to the risk of impoverishment and a widening of the gap between insiders and outsiders in the labour market. This implied a greater degree of precariousness for some categories of people, including women, and, more generally, this entailed the feminization of productive work conditions, such as the normative demand for multitasking and emotional labour (Morini 2010).

Even as women's position in Italian society deteriorated over this ten-year period according to the WEF reports, some women-related measures were passed into law. For example, the

law on the criminalization of stalking was passed in 2009; the ratification of the Istanbul Convention in 2013; the introduction of quotas for women on the boards of directors of companies listed on the stock exchange in 2011, the regulation of same-sex unions in 2016, and the reform of Public Education, including anti-discriminatory education in 2015.

Of the governments in power during the period examined, Berlusconi's fourth Cabinet is the one that had the most to say about women's role in Italian society, even as its agenda did not place women's emancipation among its priorities. Berlusconi's government linked together centre and right-wing parties, and renewed the conservative agenda by mixing neoliberal economic reforms with Italian conservative and Catholic values. During that period (as in former Berlusconi governments during the 1990s and early 2000s), a novel form of political (male) leadership emerged, based on the spectacularization and sexualisation of politics (Boni 2002). Berlusconi's gender politics, according to some scholars (Guerrina 2014; Albertazzi *et al.* 2009), were oriented toward the exploitation of dominant cultural norms, encouraging a multifaceted form of dominant femininity which was supposed to be sexy, religious and maternal. The notorious sex scandals and corruption in which Berlusconi was involved, accompanied by the hyper-sexualisation and objectification of women on television³, made the gap between political discourses and everyday (representational) practices so evident that women's and grassroots movements began to mobilize more forcibly, enabling them to enter the public sphere in more visible ways. Topics such as women's discrimination and female bodily exploitation soon made the front pages of the newspaper, and on 13 February 2011 galvanized thousands of people in more than 200 cities and towns to demonstrate for «more dignity for women», «gender equality», and «Berlusconi's resignation»⁴.

³ Berlusconi's private television channels marked an important historical evolution in both popular visual imagery and later – with the foundation of Berlusconi's party – in the very rhetorics of political culture. This television aesthetic popularized a hyper-sexualized, objectified and exotic version of femininity alongside a complementary toxic masculine gaze (Boni 2002; Giomi 2012).

⁴ The public protest for Berlusconi's resignation called itself «Se Non Ora Quando?» (SNOQ) inspired by Primo Levi's novel, «If not now, when?». Some scholars have criticized it for being too narrow-targeted and for sustaining a form of moralistic feminism dividing «good» women (entrepreneurial, self-sacrificing for the purpose of meritocratic upward social mobility, typically white, heterosexual, middle and upper class)

In this context three important female right-wing MPs expressed different positions on women: Giorgia Meloni, Flavia Perina and Daniela Santanchè. Of course, these three figures are not the only actors in the vast constellation of right-wing female politicians of the time. Nevertheless, as we shall see, they were prominent in the public debate about women's role in public space and in Italian society because they played a crucial role as right-wing interpreters of feminism in the media as well as spokeswomen on gender issues within their own parties. Moreover, each of them wrote at least one book about women and feminist-related issues, thus allowing the analysis of two sets of discursive data: their speeches as reported by the media and their own authored writings.

Our sources were a) the LexNex full-text newspaper dataset (ranging from Italian daily national newspapers to ANSA news agencies) during two parliamentary terms (from 29 April 2008 to 22 March 2018). To collect our sample, we first used the search feature in each of the Lexis Nexis platforms to gather all the news items that contained the keywords «women» (*donne*) and one of the names of our three MPs, and then we considered the first 1000 items for each of our three MPs ordered by relevance⁵; b) their authored books on women and gender issues: Giorgia Meloni's *We believe. A journey among the best of Italian youth (Noi crediamo. Viaggio nella meglio gioventù d'Italia)*, 2011; Flavia Perina's (with Alessia Mosca) *Without a woman. A dialogue about power, family and rights in the most male chauvinist country in Europe (Senza una donna. Un dialogo su potere, famiglia, diritti nel Paese più maschilista d'Europa)*, 2011; Daniela Santanchè *I am a Woman, I am the Saint (Sono una donna, sono la Santa)*, 2016).

We classified our LexNex results with Atlas.ti software according to the specific topic addressed by the MP and conducted a qualitative analysis of the books. From the analysis, three major themes emerged as the most recurrent: interpretations of sexual difference and references to second-wave feminism; women's role

from «bad» ones, who are allegedly not worth struggling for (Gribaldo, Zapperi 2012; Ottonelli 2011; Magaraggia, Vingelli 2015; Paladino *et al.* 2014).

⁵ We also tested other relevant keywords, such as «woman» (in singular form), «feminism» and «feminist», but the results overlap with the current sample. In other words, articles related to feminism always contained the word «women», so that they did not add new records to our dataset. All quotations have been translated by the Authors.

in the family and in the labour market; and, finally, reproductive rights. As we shall see, all these issues enable us to highlight differences among various modes of addressing feminist issues within the right-wing framework in Italy. But they also show some commonalities, which, we argue, have created fertile ground for the current gender politics of populist, neofundamentalist and nationalist movements and parties – in Italy but also in Europe more generally.

3. Deploying identity and sexuality against second-wave feminism

Giorgia Meloni, born in 1977, was co-founder and leader of the national conservative Party Brothers of Italy (*Fdi-Fratelli d'Italia*), and has a long history in far-right politics. She joined the youth wing of the neo-fascist Italian Social Movement (*MSI-Movimento Sociale Italiano*) at the age of 15. From May 2008 to November 2011 Meloni served as the Minister of Youth in Silvio Berlusconi's Cabinet.

Flavia Perina, born in 1958, has a long history as a journalist and right-wing activist; she was a member of the Chamber of Deputies from 2006 to 2013. She was first active in the National Alliance group (*AN-Alleanza Nazionale*), a liberal right-wing party whose leader at the time was Gianfranco Fini, then with the People of Freedom (*PdL*), Berlusconi's neoliberal centre-right party, and finally with Future and Freedom (*FLI-Futuro e Libertà*), a right-wing party created in 2010 after an internal split of the *PdL* and headed by Fini. In 2011 she joined the SNOQ mobilizations against Berlusconi.

Daniela Santanchè, born in 1961, was formerly a marketing entrepreneur who joined the right-wing National Alliance (*AN*) in 1995. She was head of the party's department for equal opportunities from 2005 to 2007. She resigned from the National Alliance (*AN*) to join Berlusconi's People of Freedom (*PdL*) party in 2010. She served as undersecretary to the Minister for the Implementation of the Government Program from 2010 to 2011 in Berlusconi's government.

Giorgia Meloni, Flavia Perina and Daniela Santanchè articulate different strands of right-wing thought in Italy. Nevertheless, there are some important similarities in how they conceive sexual difference and feminism. While they more or less implicitly

recognise themselves in first-wave feminist emancipation (liberal and, partly, social, from the right to vote to maternity leave), they all reject a link with second-wave feminism, in the name of a «pragmatism free from ideologies» (as the right-wing MP Isabella Rauti puts it, in Terranova 2007, 12). This attitude can be found in many right-wing women activists (Schreiber 2012), and it is often justified as the rejection of the «exaggerated conflict between the sexes» (Rauti in Terranova 2007, 12) that second-wave feminists allegedly preached.

Interestingly, the three female MPs have converged around their criticism of second-wave feminism even when endorsing opposite positions on specific issues. For example, in debates on Berlusconi's sexual scandals and the SNOQ protests, in which she openly participated, Flavia Perina took a position diametrically opposed to that of Santanchè, who supported Berlusconi and his political entourage. On that occasion, the commodification of the female body was defined by Santanchè as the outcome of feminism in the 1970s, as it supported sexual liberation:

All in all, Berlusconi is the victim of a neo-feminist school of thought: I do what I want with my body, I give it, and I get the maximum from it (Santanchè 2016, 39).

Santanchè is thus recalling the second-wave slogan «my body my choice», playing it against itself and completely de-contextualising it.

Flavia Perina, for her part, supported the protest because it was (supposed to be) the expression of «real women», those committed to waged work and meritocratic ideology and who rejected such commodification of women. She openly endorsed the protest because it transcended the left/right spectrum. She accused second-wave feminism of not being able to cross the divide among political parties and ideologies (not surprisingly, in 2011 she wrote *Without a Woman*, a book for the emancipation of Italian women, with a democratic party MP, Alessia Mosca). All three MPs analysed blamed second-wave feminism for not empowering women enough while trying to change the structures of political governance. In her book, Daniela Santanchè sums up this position thus:

I stand for the woman and that's why I'm against feminism (Santanchè 2016, 23).

Our three MPs' statements on second-wave feminism generally pertain to a broader historical account, recurrent in the media, which misrepresents it in terms of a monolithic group of women. The second-wave feminist movement has been viewed as outdated and old-fashioned since the 1980s in many countries. It has been presented more as an identity – and thus changeable – than as a political movement with specific demands (Loke *et al.* 2017; Gillis *et al.* 2004). This kind of superficial discourse, perpetuated mainly by the mainstream and popular media, rarely addresses its internal diversity or its major theoretical strands. As a result, it has been interpreted as one of the conditions that has allowed post-feminism to flourish among the younger generation of women (McRobbie 2009).

But there are three specific features in our three MPs' discourses that are particular to the Italian context. First, all three are quick to point out that the institutions governed by liberal social-democratic ideals during the 1980s and 1990s responded to some of the demands of bourgeois, intellectual and liberal feminist movements, and introduced social reforms and laws (such as parental leaves or changes in the criminalization of sexual violence). Second, feminism is conceived as a movement which has been exploited by leftist parties – especially against Berlusconi – and is considered, as such, ill-equipped to support women's rights, which are better defended by a conservative agenda. Third, feminism is supposed to have disseminated a child-free individualistic culture in overt contrast to Italy's familialistic traditions.

Illustrative, in this sense, is Giorgia Meloni's view. She considers feminism an ideological tool against right-wing politics rather than a pro-women discourse:

I am a right-wing woman, and I proudly support women's issues. In recent years we have had to suffer contempt and racism by feminists. [...] Perhaps as far as feminism is conceived in this way, it is more a question of ideology than of gender and substance (Meloni 2011, 2).

However, Meloni's distance from feminism does not hinder her from positioning herself as «a person for women»:

I'm not a feminist, and I never have been. I am a person who has always thought about how to guarantee women a better future, who has fought against discrimination against women. I have never believed in a political position that pushes women to homogeneity, but rather in one that believes in the specificity of women (Meloni in ANSA, 08/03/2011).

Both Meloni and Santanchè, embrace a neoliberal view that individualises risks and inequalities without recognising the existence of a patriarchal structure, even if they do so differently. It is no surprise that these right-wing MPs, contrary to conservative female politicians in the US, such as Sarah Palin, Michele Bachmann, and Christine O'Donnell, have not waged a battle to (re)define feminism (Schreiber 2012). They have both rejected feminism as hopelessly ideological and left-wing. Whereas Perina, more similarly to US politicians, tries to extend the notion of feminism in order to include right-wing and conservative principles. For example, in the name of a feminism which is no longer sectarian nor monopolized (and betrayed) by left-wing movements and parties, she calls for a welfare State designed to improve women's work/life balance and allow them to work and bear children:

Family is wherever there is a child. In Europe, the theme of support and services to mothers and children is recognized as an instrument for a country's full development of potentialities and energies, much more than as an instrument for equality or the subsidy granted to one weak category (Perina, Mosca 2011, 58-9).

Santanchè, on the other hand, explicitly condemns second-wave feminism for having made Italy a country «with few women wanting to be mothers».

Feminists want us not to be mothers. They have done so much damage because they have taken away all the privileges without giving us advantages and breaking up families. That's why I cannot be a feminist (Santanchè 2016, 23).

Similarly, Giorgia Meloni accuses second-wave feminism of not defending motherhood in favour of the labour market:

Maternity is not an obstacle. Instead we continue to think, even within the more advanced strands of feminism, that motherhood and the chance of becoming established in the labour market are two things at odds with each other (Meloni in ANSA, 07/02/2010).

These positions recall what Patricia Morgan highlighted in the mid-1990s, namely, that «feminism» has been targeted as responsible for the increase in single parenthood and family dissolution in the UK (Morgan 1995). Rosemary Crompton and Clare Lyonette (2005) demonstrated how social policy, the media and public discourse constantly reiterate the belief that the only way to avoid massive social disruption is to bring women back to their natural nurturing capacities and sacrificial desire to provide care, often at the expense of their careers and success in the labour market.

4. Women's role in the family and the labour market

Right-wing discourses on women's role in the family and the labour market in Italy vary from neoliberal positions that favour free market capitalism and are not interested in sustaining laws against abortion and same sex marriages, to conservative Catholic positions that recognize only one natural (heterosexual) family with wives who are perfect homemakers and husbands who are the breadwinners. We found heterogeneous discourses following these different traditions of rightist thought in our sources: while Meloni's and Perina's positioning during the decade 2008-2018 can be interpreted as concerned with women's social rights and supporting a traditional notion of the family as well as a nationalistic framework, Santanchè can be read as representative of the neo-liberal economic right because she endorses a State and corporate disinvestment from social welfare, while recruiting women into the paid labour force. In line with the neoliberal feminist turn (Rottenberg 2014), she centres on individual women gaining access to the corridors of power, and she encourages women to invest in themselves and their aspirations and to build their confidence. She understands emancipation as individual access to economic success and leadership, rather than as the outcome of equality policies:

I don't like Barbie-women, I like bossy women. Equality can't be made by a law» (Santanchè in «ItaliaOggi», 01/05/2014).

We are mothers and politicians, ministers and mistresses, wives and warriors. We do it all at the same time. And we do it better, at the top (Santanchè in ANSA, 23/09/2008).

Money makes parity, that's the point! (Santanchè 2016,132).

Perina, instead, recognizes the importance of gender mainstreaming policies (such as quotas) thus interfering with neoliberal institutions because they are not as meritocratic as they claim to be. However, Perina's position can also be interpreted as part and parcel of the neoliberal feminist imaginary, since the idea that simply having more women in office will automatically make the lives of most women better is part of her view (Rottenberg 2014) and she endorses a political identity which is useful for neoliberal regimes to be accepted as progressive and emancipatory (Fraser 2003). This is where an individual woman's success and empowerment are considered the main goal of feminism.

The extinction of family and of 'private' support for motherhood [because grandmothers legitimately no longer want to be just grandmothers] requires services, which are not available; the lack of services makes working mothers less competitive; the lack of competitiveness makes them 'undesirable' for businesses; being second-class workers makes them the first victims of the crisis and brings them home; at home they are required to realign themselves with the model 'slave woman, keep quiet and do the housework' (Perina, Mosca 2011, 61).

Despite its individualistic and gender-neutral rhetoric, this position does not really question women's traditional role, as emerges from the contradictions in Perina's arguments. On the one hand, she claims that women should be freed from their biological destiny as mothers and housewives:

Soon companies, due to redundancies, will look askance at women, because they 'steal the men's jobs'. In the penniless municipal administrations, women who do not work will be told to keep their children at home and services will be cut. We risk seeing cancelled, with the most elementary services, the very possibility of imagining a role outside the home (Perina, Mosca 2011, 37).

The first stereotype to be fought against, therefore, is the overlap between 'policies for motherhood' and 'policies for the family': in Italy, since it is almost solely women who manage family-related issues, the two categories still overlap, as if one were synonymous with the other» (Perina, Mosca 2011, 58).

On the other hand, she returns to the exaltation of motherhood:

It is motherhood, regardless of the structure in which it occurs, that is considered in the West a bearer of a social value that is decisive and therefore worthy of public protection in a period of crisis and cuts. It is on motherhood that the use of all available resources should be concentrated (Perina, Mosca 2011, 59).

Moreover, she proposes childcare policies but also supports women who are full-time mothers. Meloni, as mentioned, adopts similar positions, even if the language that she uses echoes more closely the traditional far-right symbolic horizon: policies are needed in order to protect women's natural caring and nurturing nature. For example, she stated that:

We are close to all women who express their feminine talent for the service of others [...]. It is especially in her giving herself to others in everyday life that the woman grasps the profound vocation of her life (Meloni in «Il Resto del Carlino», 10/03/2011).

Furthermore, the assumption of women's sacrificial and caring nature is used also to guarantee them a space in the public sphere par excellence, the Nation:

[Mothers are] the backbone of the nation, its solidity and its legacy. We should celebrate them and protect them instead of leaving them alone to face the difficulties of a society that is not built for their sacrifices (Meloni 2011, 147).

In addition, Meloni emphasises women's traditional role; and again it is mothering and caring that guarantee them respect and access to the social sphere. Sexual complementarity substitutes women's submission in conservative discourses and is supposed to guarantee equal dignity to men and women (see Bellassai 2018; Garbagnoli, Prearo 2018) within a meritocratic neoliberal framework:

We need equal freedoms rather than equal opportunities. [...] Their goal is to give value to the talent that women have painstakingly built with courage. [...] This courage] professes itself in the somersaults of women who raise their children and who assist their parents. [...] What matters is] building a society of equality to guarantee merit, so that there will be no need for quotas (Meloni in ANSA, 08/03/2010).

The year before, during the celebration of International Women's Day, this contradiction became even clearer. On that occasion, Meloni spoke about the «revolution of merit» that needs to be accomplished so that women can compete regardless of their gender – as she put it: «And I can assure you that capacities have no gender identity» (ANSA, 06/03/2015). She stated:

Let's help us to build the revolution of merit that can allow everyone to evaluate themselves, regardless of their gender, age and starting conditions. [... Young women should] have the courage of their own identity, of not becoming similar to men, to overcome prejudices, and to demand equal freedom to define their own life paths, without being forced to decide whether to be mothers or workers (Meloni in ANSA, 07/03/2009).

By following the rhetoric of an essential difference between women and men, men as fathers and husbands are never brought into the picture, thus confirming that masculinity and care work occupy two separate symbolic spheres.

Overall, despite some clear differences in their positions in regard to womanhood and maternity policies, Perina, Meloni and Santanchè seem to share a common ideology. As Fraser (2016, 104) puts it, they fail to challenge those social forces that «[externalize] care-work onto families and communities while diminishing their capacity to perform it». Their position does not aim to dismantle the current bifurcated organization of reproduction work, which is commodified for those who can pay for it and privatized for those who cannot, because they provide care-work in return for (low) wages for those in the former category (Ehrenreich, Hochschild 2003). Lacking a global, structural understanding of feminized social reproduction as the invisible support for the capitalist system, they seem to «believe in women's equality without having a theory of inequality, which often leaves them without a political strategy to deal with inequality» (Campbell 1987, quoted in Bryson 1999, 120).

5. Reproductive rights

Tensions around reproductive rights have not yet resolved in neoliberal right-wing movements and parties, as highlighted by Bryson and Heppell (2010): pro-family ideas of neoconservatism often clash with neoliberal faith in the free market. The former

promotes positions not only against abortion but also against prostitution, pornography and reproductive technologies, while the latter shows no interest in battling against the commercialization of sex or bodies. The discussion of surrogacy is a clear example of these contradictions. While Perina considers it a useful means for women's self-determination and part of their reproductive rights, Santanchè is critical and subordinates it to the traditional heterosexual model of the family.

Gay marriage does not exist in nature. And it does not give the right to use girls as ATMs that give birth to babies for rich gay couples (Santanchè 2016, 74).

Similarly, Meloni considers surrogacy a universal crime under any circumstances:

Aren't uteruses for rent a commodification of the female body? No, in this case [they who ask for surrogacy] don't care about the woman's body. So you buy a child, you come back to Italy, and the other [man] adopts it. Is this modern? If this is modernity then I am super-ancient and I'm proud of it (Meloni in ANSA, 25/01/2016).

In a similar vein, the reproductive capacity of the female body is not considered as a potential object of a self-determined entrepreneurial choice, as this would be incompatible with the naturalized version of motherhood in conservative agendas.

Abortion is another key issue that is able to make the variety of claims within conservative and right-wing ideologies visible. Meloni, for example is not explicitly against abortion, but she states that «if women are holders of that right to self-determination, then they must be put in a position to be able to turn it towards life» (Meloni 2011, 149).

Again, here, all three MP's defend a public role for women on traditional, but also neoliberal grounds, underlining an essential and pre-social difference between the sexes. Abortion naturally goes against women's essence, and they would avoid it if only there were enough economic support. Thus within this interpretation, being pro-life is presented as the ultimate pro-women position.

The only way to represent an added value is to be aware of our specificity, defending our being women, and being proud of it. The value of the family,

the courage of motherhood, the defence of life, social solidarity: this is what makes women unique and indispensable. I do not accept lessons of feminism from those who believe that not being able to offer different solutions to the devastation of abortion is a conquest (Meloni 2011, 147-48).

The idea that childlessness can be the result of a choice is never taken into account, except when it is deemed to be the result of second-wave feminist ideology that induces women to misinterpret their own desires and aspirations. The low fertility rate is openly cited as proving that Italian women are squeezed between the necessity of caregiving and their aspirations in the labour market.

In her analysis of the National Front's gendered politics, Francesca Scrinzi (2017) highlights the contradictions and ambivalences between Marine Le Pen's claims about gender parity and the reality of the political programme of her party, which is still marked by rather traditionalist views on women's role. For instance, Scrinzi notes that even if Le Pen is not against abortion nor professional work, she suggests that the real choice women should make is not to have an abortion and not to work. Scrinzi also points to the classical nationalist roots of Le Pen's politics by demonstrating how the National Front advocates higher (French) women's fertility rates while being silent on the sexual division of labour in households. These contradictions can be found in our three MPs' positions as well. They also attempt to connect the conservative Catholic fringe with the more «modern» Catholics who want to revamp it and bring it into the mainstream. Meloni's political strategies, in particular, are very similar to Le Pen's, in that she is creating an updated version of her nationalist and conservative party by inserting women-related issues into her non-emancipatory political agenda. In general, Meloni, Santanchè and Perina have different agendas on abortion and motherhood. But as conservatives they do not address the contradiction arising from capitalism's need for female participation both at home and in the labour market (Fraser 2016), since they see it as a problem for individual women to solve rather than a matter of collective concern (Bryson, Heppell 2010). Insisting on women's choices to have children and to be full-time mothers without addressing the power relations resulting from this choice, conservatives avoid addressing the gendered power relations and the forms of exploitation

involved in them. However, can we really speak about choices (England 1989; Hakim 2000) without contextualising them in power structures, relationships, and economic resources?

As Schreiber (2012) highlights in her study on righting feminism in the US, some argue that the legacy of feminism is that women should be free to make whatever choices that they feel appropriate for them regardless of whether or not their actions are «feminist». The individualized act of women being able to choose «freely» has become equated (by some) with feminism itself. However, this neo-liberal interpretation of choice ignores and dismisses the role of power; in so doing it privatizes choices and responsibilities and avoids challenging the public sphere.

6. Discussion: feminizing the Right

Our analysis of the discourses on women by our three MPS has shown how they attempt to address women's needs in the name of a pre-social, ontological and function-based specificity which is supposed to be the opposite to that of men's.

Sexual complementarity for the right is traditionally part of an organicist, hierarchical and functionalist vision of society, and equality is seen as levelling and homogenizing. This is also true of our Italian MPs; but we believe that, for them, it is more a matter of *feminizing the right* than of *righting feminism* (Farris, Rottenberg 2017). They do not embrace feminist ideals nor define themselves as feminists, but rather they put a decontextualized lionization of women in the service of complementarity. Existing research (Corsi, Scrinzi 2019) on representations mobilised by right-wing parties in their narratives, also points to this form of essentialism, in which gender relations are isolated from collective and material conditions. In these cases, structural inequalities are ignored as gender is seen as a private and individual aspect of existence. How, then, does this complementarity come to terms with neoliberal ideology? Gender difference is no longer seen as a destiny, as it was in the past, but as a dichotomous essence within a meritocratic neoliberal framework which is supposed to guarantee equal dignity to men and women (Bellassai 2018; Garbagnoli, Prearo 2018). In this respect, the labour market needs to be both exclusive for men and inclusive for women. Here we concur with Rosemary Crompton and Clayre Lyonnnette

(2005) who suggest that gender essentialist assumptions can resolve these kind of logical contradictions for neo-liberal thinking. Since differences between men and women are considered to be «natural», the presence of fewer women than men in the labour market can be explained due to their natural predisposition to care giving. Very similarly, our three MPs attack the idea that differences and inequalities between men and women are completely socially constructed. In so doing, they undermine the legitimacy of women's struggle for equality in the labour market, as the unequal *status quo* is rendered «natural» (what Bourdieu 1998 calls the «naturalisation of the social»), and the inequalities which arise as a consequence of these differences are legitimized. Moreover, many of their underlying assumptions make it unfeasible to pursue key feminist values and goals with any consistency or success: «The importance of natural hierarchy, sentiment and tradition as the basis for social cohesion have been used to defend the 'naturalness' of traditional gender roles and hierarchies and the folly of abandoning these in line with abstract principles of equal rights. Any threat to family values is also a threat to social cohesion» (Bryson, Heppell 2010, 33). But our three MPs' position goes beyond complementarity, as they cannot but address the problem of childlessness. Italy has one of the lowest fertility rates in the world (1.37 children per woman in 2017), despite the fact that the average number of desired children remains two. As Fraser (2003) puts it, we could say that Italy is a country where the crisis of reproductive work is at its higher levels⁶. In relation to this point, many parties across the left/right continuum have taken a stance, both to ask for greater welfare measures and to celebrate traditional gender roles in the family with a return to the «golden age» of the family. In the women-related discourses of our three MPs the low fertility rate is presented as Italian women's major problem. Despite their internal differences they find a common ground in the name of «motherism».

⁶ The crisis of reproductive work was identified as early as the late 1970s by materialist feminism (dalla Costa 2006; Federici 2014) as a broad field of political struggle, encompassing the social construction of motherhood, the reproduction of the labour force and the social organization of care needs (Casalini 2016). More recently, contemporaneously to the neoliberal reorganization of production and reproduction, the issue of Italian low fertility intersects with global inequalities, the neoliberal rhetoric of choice and individual responsibility, and the racialized market of intimate labour (Hochschild 2012).

This leads them to propose an *emancipatory* discourse on women. On some occasions, as neoliberals, they reject the idea that the State should intervene in economic or personal life to promote gender equality; on others, as conservatives, they call for more welfare services enabling work-life balance. But in both cases they are obliged to come to terms with women's disadvantaged position in the Italian context precisely in the name of their complementarity. If being a housewife is the result of a natural predisposition of women for care work, childlessness (or having just one child) is considered unnatural and the result of social conditions affecting women. To put it in other words, they cannot avoid taking the Italian low fertility rate (and unmet desires for motherhood) into account and consider it as evidence of women's social disadvantage. In so doing, they propose a politics of women's emancipation allowing Italian women to freely choose to be mothers again.

The overall result is that our three MPs propose what we call an *emancipatory complementarity*: a mix of liberal and neoliberal elements with conservative assumptions, and for this reason they often commit incongruencies and internal contradictions. They endorse a male breadwinner model, accept some forms of conciliation between work and family, and tolerate the expression of sexuality. But the solutions that they posit do not address the structural and economic undergirding of these phenomena. Indeed, they endorse regressive policies that will continue to hurt the most vulnerable women. And they do not aim at changing the traditional sexual division of productive and reproductive work. Indeed, by examining the Italian case in detail, we gain insight into the contemporary rise of neo-fundamentalist and populist movements. By drawing on essentialist discourse, these MPs not only renaturalize women's reproductive and caring roles, but they also help to reify gender injustice and social hierarchies more generally. In so doing, they feminize the Right, rather than righting feminism. What this highlights, in turn, is that until liberal democracies stop justifying the naturalization of social hierarchies and so long as they leave gender roles unquestioned, the strength of these right-wing and anti-emancipatory movements will only grow.

7. Concluding remarks

In 1983, the Italian historian Anna Rossi-Doria asked the public listening to her speech at a conference about the new right and women's movement: «The contemporary left assumes some of the features of the right: refusal to see history as progress, search for roots, positive assumption of [sexual] differences, nostalgia for the past, cult of nature. Are the traditional themes of the right occupying the space left empty by the crisis of the left?» (*ibidem*, 211). In this article, we have addressed the inverse question: how is the contemporary right assuming features from second-wave feminism, while simultaneously denying them or transforming them. Our study thus aims to add another piece to «the larger puzzle of the how's and why's we are currently witnessing an enfolding of feminist themes into movements and rationalities that appear antithetical to such themes» (Farris, Rottenberg 2017, 12).

Indeed, we agree with Bryson and Heppell (2010) when they state that there is no straightforward way of assessing «whether any of the ideological tendencies or policies of conservative right movements are compatible with feminist goals and values, for feminism itself has never constituted either a cohesive ideology or a unified political movement; its history has been one of discontinuity and fragmentation» (*ibidem*, 37). Neo-populism, conservative and neoliberal currents of right-wing parties are also far from being univocal and monolithic, even with reference to women's issues. But across different positions, they all currently seem to exhibit a number of shared contradictions. At its core, the neoliberal ideology affirms that people should be free to make choices and that the market is the best means to achieve one's own goals. However, «liberalism's stress on reason, self-interest and achievements in the public sphere counters the traditional belief that women can best be fulfilled in their domestic role, while its rejection of State intervention precludes the development of policies that would actively promote marriage or domesticity as a choice for women» (*ibidem*, 33). In this sense, the politics of economic gain, merit and market-driven positioning of people across social hierarchies clashes with traditional ideologies which give people a pre-established role in society thus limiting choices along with traditional gender roles.

Our analysis of the discourses on women by our three MPs sheds light on these contradictions, but also shows how a common response allows them to solve these apparent aporias in terms of complementarity. This is certainly due to what Garbagnoli (2017) noted about the Italian context: the crucial role of the Catholic Church in political agendas and public opinion (especially among right-wing positions) and the widespread acceptance of an essentialist view of sexual difference (especially in the intellectual field). But our analyses have added a third major element to that framework: the importance given to the birth rate as indicative of Italian women's disadvantaged position that requires remedy. Facing this disadvantage, our MPs propose a emancipatory complementarity, a mix of liberal elements with conservative notions whose purpose is not to dismantle the structural basis of inequalities (as they are constantly fuelled by essentialist views of gender identities and of gender relations) but to leave the hierarchical organization of society unaltered. Indeed, they feminize the Right, making it more appealing, especially for female voters.

This is not surprising and can be explained by the historical features of second-wave Italian feminism, which faced the difficult challenge of proposing a theory of sexual difference not based on immutability. This difficulty left these discourses open to misrepresentations and claims by right wing movements. In this respect, we agree with Anna Rossi-Doria when she claims that the right deals with sexual difference according to hierarchy, immutability, while the women's movement with solidarity and transformation. This is a major point worth stressing because it makes right-wing conservative feminism, in a sense, an oxymoron.

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Can feminism be right? A content analysis of discourses about women by female Italian right-wing politicians

Drawing on the debate about how feminist issues have increasingly been invoked in neoliberal and conservative discourse (Stacey 1983; Eisenstein 2005; Fraser 2013; McRobbie 2013; Gill 2007; Rottenberg 2014; Schreiber, 2008; Banet-Weiser 2018; Banet-Weiser *et al.* 2019), this paper addresses how women-related themes are mobilized in the discourses of Italian right-wing female politicians. By combining content analysis and feminist political theory, we provide an in-depth reading of the public statements by three current and former right-wing MPs at the forefront of their parties: Giorgia Meloni, Daniela Santanchè and Flavia Perina. Despite some clear differences, the discourses of these three MPs regarding Italian women's conditions are representative of how feminist issues can be addressed in conservative neoliberal and nationalistic terms, especially in a context characterized by the overt role of the Catholic Church in political matters and widespread agreement on natural sexual difference (Garbagnoli 2017).

Our sources are their discourses on «women» as reported in: 1. the LexNex full-text newspaper dataset during two parliamentary terms (29 April 2008 – 22 March 2018); 2. their authored books on women and/or gender issues. Our inductive analysis of their discourses on three topics related to gender issues (interpretations of sexual difference and second-wave feminism, women's role in the family and in the labour market, and reproductive rights) will shed light on both their «righting» of feminism (Farris, Rottenberg 2017) and their misrepresentations of it.

Our discussion of these data will show that the lack of real critique of the sexual division of labour and of essentialism within neoliberal and social democratic traditions in Italy has allowed for certain ostensibly liberal elements to be added into the right's discursive field. In particular, we will show that one pervasive theme in their arguments is that a low fertility rate is the main problem of Italian women. This induces all of the female MPs to uphold what we term *emancipatory complementarism*, a mix of liberal and conservative elements that generates incongruities and internal contradictions. Ultimately, we argue that emancipatory complementarism, in its being a conservative political strategy, is at odds with feminist projects of structural transformation.

Keywords: conservative feminism, gender politics, content analysis, Italy, right-wing parties.