

Silencing Feminism? Gender and the Rise of the Nationalist Far Right in Spain

Feminism in Spain is experiencing a paradox. On the one hand, the March 8 (8M) movement held two feminist strikes, in 2018 and 2019, that were attended by multitudes. This is not an isolated phenomenon but part of a wave of worldwide feminist strikes that began in 2017. The slogan *Ni una menos* (Not one woman less), coined in Latin America, shows the impetus of these feminist mobilizations against all forms of gendered violence. In Spain, poor judicial performance following the gang rape case called *La manada* (the wolf pack) fueled the first feminist strike in 2018. On the other hand, as a result of the electoral processes held between December 2018 and November 2019, the nationalist far-right party Vox has entered all levels of Spanish representative politics, receiving the third most votes at the national level.

With this sudden shift, Spain is no longer an exception with respect to the rise of the nationalist far Right in Europe. After the Democratic Transition that followed General Francisco Franco's National-Catholic dictatorship (1939–75), far-right parties were largely irrelevant in Spain.¹ Aside from forming small parties that had no parliamentary representation, far-right tendencies coexisted within the broad spectrum of the right-wing Partido Popular. In fact, Vox was founded in 2013 as a scission of the radical wing of this party.² After a series of electoral defeats, Vox gained political representation in December 2018 and reintroduced the far Right into the political scene of the southern European country, with great media resonance and visibility. Why now? Vox's electoral

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¹ Only one far-right party, the *Fuerza Nueva* (New force), had a single member in the National Parliament in the 1979 legislature (Ramos and Büttner 2017).

² See Altozano and Llorente (2018) and Sánchez-Dragó (2019) for an account of the emergence of Vox from the point of view of its leaders. Academic and activist research is being published at the time of the drafting this article; see Ferreira (2019), Rubio-Pueyo (2019), and Urbán (2019).

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breakthrough is often interpreted as a reaction to the Catalan independence movement, which has challenged the territorial integrity of the Spanish nation-state. But other elements must be taken into consideration to better grasp the context of Vox's emergence. Among them, the "de-democratization process" (Alonso and Lombardo 2018) unfolded as a result of the neoliberal austerity measures taken after the economic crisis of 2008. Even more important for the purposes of this article, the feminist protest cycle has turned feminism into one of the main vectors of politicization in Spain. In fact, during its electoral campaign, Vox relentlessly targeted Spain's gender violence policy and labeled feminists "feminazis." Many questions arise. Why does gender, and in particular gender violence, matter to the Spanish far Right? How did Vox use gender while campaigning? How has gender been relevant in the rise of this party? What is the role of feminism in Vox's imagined national community? The aim of this article is to analyze the "significance of gender" (Köttig, Bitzan, and Petö 2017, 3) in the rise of the nationalist far Right in Spain. I will argue that gender is a "primary field" (Scott 1986, 1069) in which the Spanish far Right articulates its exclusionary national project, and therefore antagonism toward feminism is crucial.

Gendered nations: From women's roles to masculinism and militarized masculinity

Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias, in their groundbreaking 1988 work, propose that nations and nationalisms are gendered in specific ways, which requires empirical research. These pioneering authors identify some recurrent roles of women in nationalist discourse and policies. One of those roles is being "signifiers" and "symbols" of the nation (7) and therefore in the struggles to represent and govern the nation. Another recurrent role is being reproducers of the nation and its boundaries. Yuval-Davis (1993) has also proposed that in national projects, women are often construed as others and are consequently colonized and controlled by strict regulations—including, I would add, social norms that legitimize the use of violence. This reveals the complex relation between women and nationalism: they are used as symbols, governed as others, but at the same time they are participants in charge of the material and symbolic reproduction of the nation.

Later in gender/nation theory, the conflation between nationalism and masculinism was addressed through research on the relation between nationalism and dominant men's interests. This shed light on the recurrent distrust of feminism in nationalist movements and on the marginalization of subaltern men. The relation of nationalism, militarism, and hegemonic masculinity or, more precisely, the normative militarization of masculinity (Enloe

[1989] 2014) has also been a theoretical concern. As nationalism aspires to statehood and makes or threatens war against other nation-states, it often encourages a “patriotic manhood” (Nagel 1998, 242). For Elizabeth Wood (2016), the analysis of militarized masculinity is not just relevant in contexts of war but should be extended to the analysis of political leadership using hypermasculinity to expand its power and avoid political debate.

The far Right in Europe: What’s gender got to do with it?

The role of gender in the rise of the far Right remains problematic and contested. Cas Mudde’s influential (2007) research is a good example of early attempts to take gender into consideration while analyzing the rise of populist radical Right parties in Europe. Mudde defines the “thin-centered” ideology of the populist radical Right as threefold: nativist, authoritarian, and populist (23). For the author, the European radical Right is not just nationalist, as the conservative Right is, but nativist: a combination of nationalism with xenophobia where nonnative elements, persons, or ideas are labeled as threats to the (imagined) homogeneous nation-state (22). Where is gender in this characterization? Mudde considers gender an “issue” or “theme” of the far Right but not part of its defining ideology (2007, 1). For this author, “gender relations are secondary to the populist radical right.” Mudde bases this interpretation on the evidence of conflicting views on gender relations among these parties and therefore considers that gender is “instrumentalised for the radical right’s primary nativist struggle” (96).³

More recently, the rise of the far Right has garnered increasing attention from feminist scholars, which has yielded a vibrant research agenda with a more systematic gender analysis.⁴ The empirical basis for this research comes mainly from contexts where the far Right is in office or has gained influence over the years. A suggestive hypothesis for the role of gender in this process is that it works as the “symbolic glue” (Kováts and Pöim 2015; Grzebalska and Petö 2018) holding previously distinct ideological traditions together in new radical-right formations. As Weronika Grzebalska and Andrea Petö state, this generation of

³ Carles Ferreira (2019) has applied Mudde’s theory to Vox’s ideology. Ferreira regards the party’s “crusade against so-called gender ideology” to be a crucial element of its defense of “traditional values” (90–91). Despite this recognition, gender remains undertheorized, and its relationship to authoritarianism, nativism, and populism—widely considered the ideological core of the European far Right—is blurred.

⁴ See Spierings et al. (2015), Bracke and Paternotte (2016), Köttig, Bitzan, and Petö (2017), Gutiérrez Rodríguez, Tuzcu, and Winkel (2018), Verloo and Paternotte (2018), and Graff, Kapur, and Walters (2019).

far-right political parties is using the opposition to gender policy as a “tool of political antagonism” that functions as a “symbol of everything that is wrong and as a metaphor for all the injustices and insecurities of our times” (2018, 165–66). This creates an enemy figure, which allows far-right parties to attack progressive, feminist, and LGBTI agendas and movements while defending the nation, family, and religion in their most conservative versions.

Feminists researching the rise of the far Right in Europe have also analyzed nativism from a gender perspective.⁵ In the case of Scandinavia, Birte Siim and Pauline Stoltz (2018) argue that feminism and equality policies are in fact a key piece in the production of contemporary forms of national chauvinism. Sara Farris (2017) coined the term “femonationalism” to give a name to the convergence of the defense of women’s rights with Islamophobic and xenophobic aims that, in the author’s view, are present in both far-right parties in Europe and in some trends of feminism. In relation to violence against women, Farris argues, femonationalism allows for a representation of (Muslim) migrant men as aggressors and rapists of (national) women and for the depiction of migrant women as victims of patriarchy.

Vox is a newcomer to representative politics in Spain, so the role of gender was an emerging research subject during the time when I was drafting this article.⁶ However, feminist historians have studied the articulation between gender, nation, and religious conservatism during Franco’s dictatorship. The dictator—who ruled Spain for forty years, from the Civil War until the Democratic Transition that began in 1975—imposed gender conservatism during his National-Catholic dictatorship, rolling back women’s rights. During Franco’s regime, men as fathers and husbands held large legal prerogatives within the family, turning women into perpetual minors. Married women owed obedience to their husbands and could not travel, work, or change their residence without their husband’s permission. The “gendered institution” (Acker 1992) of the family, the building block of Franco’s National-Catholic project, began to democratize after the Democratic Transition, when divorce was legalized and domestic violence was banned. So gender ultraconservatism in Spain remains largely associated with the memory of the dictatorship.

⁵ See Erel (2018), Grzebalska and Petö (2018), Keskinen (2018), and Sager and Mulinari (2018).

⁶ Miquel Ramos and Frauke Büttner (2017) provide an interesting analysis on women and gender ideologies in the far Right in Spain but do not mention Vox. In media, feminist journalist Nuria Alabao (2019), anthropologist Dolors Comas D’Argemir (2019), and political scientist Xavier Casals (2019) have analyzed Vox’s antifeminism and use of the gender ideology discourse.

Antigenderism and “gender ideology” discourse:***A transnational phenomenon***

“Antigenderism” can be broadly defined as a twofold mobilization against gender and sexual equality that uses the so-called gender ideology discourse to accuse feminism and LGBTI movements of distorting reality for their (illegitimate) interests. Antigenderism is in the first place “an epistemological response to emancipatory claims about sex, gender, and sexuality, and second, a political mechanism used to contain policy developments associated with feminist and queer agendas” (Corredor 2019, 614) that, according to antigenderist views, have become hegemonic, oppressive, and totalitarian. As Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk (2017) stress, any attempt to understand antigenderism as a local issue is misleading, despite the fact that it mobilizes ideas about the local and the authentic, building on context-specific concerns and policies.

Scholars studying antigenderism have exposed the leadership of the Vatican in its initial development.⁷ The gender-ideology discourse was first created by the Holy See in the nineties as a reaction to the denaturalization of the sex-gender social order by feminist and LGBTI scholars and activists, who had influenced governments, academic institutions, and international organizations as well as the UN conferences in Cairo (1994) and Beijing (1995). In this context, the Vatican connected gender to apocalyptic dystopias, creating a moral panic (Graff 2016, 272). Proposing a “theology of complementarity of the sexes” (Bracke and Paternotte 2016, 145; see also Case 2016) where men and women are equal in dignity but different and complementary in nature, the Vatican opposed what they labeled as “gender feminism.” Since then, the gender ideology discourse has become a transnational lingua franca (Graff, Kapur, and Walters 2019) that is performed (Fassin 2016; Garbagnoli 2016) in diverse national and local contexts by several coalitions of actors, including far-right parties, through interconnected “anti-gender campaigns” (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017).

Despite this genealogy, Stefanie Mayer and Birgit Sauer (2017) suggest that gender ideology should not be defined a priori because it works as an empty signifier, vague but emotionally charged, that articulates several actors and creates populist antagonism between “us,” the pure people, and “them,” the corrupt elite. I argue that, in the case of Spain, antigenderism was part of Vox’s attempt to draft a populist discourse. During the period I examine, Vox’s antigender discourse was close to Ruth Wodak’s (2015) characterization of populist discourse, with its three main strategies: scapegoating, reversal of the

⁷ See Bracke and Paternotte (2016), Case (2016), Fassin (2016), Garbagnoli (2016), Cornejo and Pichardo (2017), Kuhar and Paternotte (2017), and Cornejo-Valle and Pichardo (2018).

roles of victim and perpetrator, and the construction of conspiracy theories. Nevertheless, this reliance on gender to build a populist strategy was compromised by popular support for feminism in Spain and by the difficulty of portraying it as a foreign or globalized elite conspiring against the common people.

Scholars studying antigenderism in Spain have studied the campaigns against LGBTI sexual and reproductive rights, initially led by the Catholic Church during José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero's Socialist government (2004–8).⁸ Spain is a nodal point in antigender geopolitics, as it has been a “European laboratory” (Pichardo and Cornejo-Valle 2017). Spain was in fact the first European country where this experiment was documented, starting as early as 2005 with opposition to same-sex marriage gaining momentum and between 2010 and 2013 with opposition to abortion. Interestingly, both campaigns met with strong resistance, and neither succeeded in rolling back policy. Despite the fact that Spain is a Catholic country, antigender advocates have so far not succeeded in modifying public policies such as same-sex marriage or abortion, policies with widespread support across the population. José Ignacio Pichardo and Monica Cornejo-Valle (2017) argue that this is the result of the rift between Catholic Church hierarchies and society that stems from the memory of the church's support for Franco's regime. The authors have also identified four key actors of the antigender movement in Spain: the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, antiabortion associations, the neoconservative lobby, and the political parties of the far Right, where the original leadership of the Catholic hierarchy passed to lay organizations (Cornejo-Valle and Pichardo 2018). The latter included Vox, at a time when the party had not yet achieved representation in Spanish democratic institutions.

The “cyber-lobby” (Pichardo and Cornejo-Valle 2017) HazteOir and its international successor CitizenGo deserve a special mention, as they both operate from Madrid. HazteOir was founded in 2001 and granted official charity status in 2011 during the conservative government of the Partido Popular. In 2013, the same year Vox was founded, so was CitizenGo, which merged with HazteOir. CitizenGo expanded HazteOir's scope beyond Spanish-speaking countries, advocating for “life, family, and freedom” from an ultraconservative position.⁹ CitizenGo is well known for its online petitions against LGBTI rights, sexual and reproductive rights, sex education, and, most prominently, against abortion. It has targeted national policies in a wide array of countries around the globe. It has also lobbied in European

⁸ See Cornejo and Pichardo (2017), Pichardo and Cornejo-Valle (2017), Blázquez-Rodríguez, Cornejo-Valle, and Pichardo-Galán (2018), and Cornejo-Valle and Pichardo (2018). Previously, Susana Aguilar Fernández (2011) researched the religious opposition to abortion during Rodríguez Zapatero's government.

⁹ See <https://www.citizengo.org/hazteoir/conocenos>.

institutions and in the United Nations with an antichoice and anti-LGBTI rights agenda. Its transnational links with ultraconservative organizations and parties are considerable, including in the United States, Europe, Africa, and Latin America. Furthermore, the leaders' organizational links with the ultra-Catholic paramilitary organization El Yunque have been recognized judicially (Lobo 2014). Another well-established strategy of CitizenGo-HazteOir campaigns is the circulation of homophobic, transphobic, and antigender buses, which accompany their online campaigns. In 2019, after the circulation of a bus with the motto *Los niños tienen pene, las niñas tienen vulva* (Boys have a penis, girls have a vulva), the socialist Minister of Interior withdrew HazteOir's charity status, a decision that was later confirmed with a judgment against HazteOir's actions "against public interest" (*Público* 2019a).

CitizenGo-HazteOir's links to Vox are well documented and have ranged from public support to providing indirect funding to circumvent Spanish legislation on party funding (Ramsey and Provost 2019; Rivera 2019). Vox's straightforward endorsement of antigenderism represents a turning point in the Spanish context, one that could potentially engage a larger audience and result in increased legitimacy. David Paternotte and Roman Kuhar (2018) warn of the assumption of an automatic link between antigender movements and far-right parties, though they recognize that the far Right has contributed to the development of the antigender movement in Europe. I would like to add that this relationship also works in reverse because antigenderism has provided the far Right with a common discourse across borders and other resources to build a distinct political space, as is the case in Spain.

Methodological strategy and location:

Drifting through Vox's campaign

Electoral campaigns are performances of democratic pluralism and state rituals (Abélès 1997), where political representation is at stake. Rallies, debates between candidates, and investiture rituals play a major role, even in the digital era, when the durability of the discourse and the multiplication of the target audience gives them a new profile. I understand these political rituals—employing Erving Goffman's terms—as the "front stage" of the campaigns, where social media now plays the role of the "back stage" ([1959] 2002, 50). From Madrid, I followed Vox's campaigning, both in the field and online, in the lead-up to the April 2019 general elections. The metaphor of the "drift" (Débord [1956] 1999) is an ironic expression of the "displacement" (Feldman 2011, 46) I experienced in the course of an electoral campaign for a party whose stance is far from my own.

Throughout the electoral process, Vox's communication strategies were based on the production and online dissemination of grand and spectacular

political rituals, particularly rallies, along with constant activity on social networks while avoiding interviews and debates on media outlets with opposing views. For the front stage of the campaign—Vox political rituals—I attended rallies and other public events. For the back stage, I followed the Twitter and Facebook accounts of Vox’s main figures as well as the party’s official accounts; I also followed the campaign’s audiovisual output on YouTube. I compiled a corpus organized in a time line, including written and audiovisual electoral documents, newspaper articles, blogs, websites, social media records, and parliamentary debates in Andalusia as well as recordings and direct observations of rallies. To analyze the data, I took a critical discourse analysis stance, with the objective of revealing manipulation and abuse of power through discursive means (Van Dijk 2009).

Reconquering Spain for whom? The masculinist frame and leadership of the Vox campaign

For me politics is not a profession. It’s war.

—Vox President Santiago Abascal (in Altozano and Llorente 2018, 17)

La Reconquista de España (the Reconquest of Spain) has been the “collective action frame” of Vox’s electoral campaigns since 2015 (Benford and Snow 2000, 611). It was used both in the Andalusian elections of December 2018 and in the national elections of April 2019. This deeply gendered war frame has defined Vox’s interpretation of reality, its model of leadership, its call to action, and its representation of political actors mobilizing feelings of patriotism. This frame has been personified and performed by Santiago Abascal, Vox’s party leader and presidential candidate, who reactivated the memory of Franco’s masculinist nationalism and religious justification through the *Reconquista* frame. In fact, this frame was widely used during the dictatorship, when Spain needed to be reconquered from *los rojos*, the leftist Republicans who fought the dictator during the civil war that followed Franco’s military coup.

Spain has awoken: The Vistalegre rally

The rally at Madrid’s Vistalegre Stadium in October 2018, before the Andalusian elections, marked a relaunching of Vox, which had suffered a number of electoral defeats since its founding in 2013. This spectacular rally in Madrid was attended by some nine thousand people and viewed on YouTube by 153,900 more (Vox 2018b). “The living Spain has awoken, thanks be to

God,” was how Abascal opened his speech, with his characteristic epic tone. “A nation awakens when she is provoked,” continued the Vox leader, referring to the challenge to national unity presented by the Catalan independence movement. During the rally, Abascal painted a picture of Spain as a feminized nation that had been “humiliated” and “tainted” and that needed to be saved and brought back to life. The leader juxtaposed the “living Spain” against the “dead Spain” of its political enemies. Abascal concluded his speech by proclaiming “From now on, Spain will not cease until she has reconquered her greatness, her dignity and her destiny.”

Riding for Spain: Creating a hero

Vox’s “Andalusia for Spain” campaign spot is characteristic of the frame of the Reconquest.¹⁰ In this wordless twenty-three-second video, which went viral on social media during the electoral campaign in Andalusia, Abascal rides out on horseback with his men, who include a bullfighter, to reconquer Spain, to the soundtrack from *The Lord of the Rings*. The music creates a hybrid atmosphere that transforms Abascal into a Spanish Aragorn and relates the Andalusian country scene to Hollywood movies. This extravagant spot revives the myth of the Reconquest of Spain, which was part of Franco’s National-Catholic narrative, one that was underpinned by nineteenth-century historiography (*Público* 2019b), and presents it in a contemporary epic style that Joseba Gabilondo (2019) terms “medieval globalization.” Vox’s borrowing of tropes from epic Hollywood movies allows for the modernization of the national myth of the Reconquest, providing an intergenerational resonance to this vernacular far-right frame that appeals to younger audiences as well as to the old “sociological Francoism” (Urbán 2019, 20).

Like all campaigns since 2015, Vox’s campaign for the April 2019 national elections began in Covadonga, where, according to the dominant national narrative, the medieval Reconquest from Muslim rule began. The frame of the Reconquest gave the campaign the feeling of an epic battle, which has important consequences. In a battle, the protagonists are men. An authoritarian, classist, and masculinist model of national leadership arises in which the party’s leader is represented as a country *señorito* (nobleman) mounted on horseback. The spot thus constructs a patriotic manhood, a militaristic representation of masculinity, personified in a hypermasculine knight with a “conquistador-style” beard, as Abascal explained in an interview (Sánchez-Dragó 2019, 80). This image of a muscular and virile adult man close to nature is reminiscent of Vladimir Putin’s iconic horse ride but with certain

¹⁰ The spot is no longer available online in the Vox YouTube channel.

differences, such as having his chest covered, which is more suitable for a religion-saturated frame. The main signifier of Vox's campaigns was "Spain," a nation represented as a passive "humiliated" woman who must be reconquered and liberated, as Abascal stated in Vistalegre. The Reconquest frame thus demands action: a military mission with a transcendent religious justification against Muslims.

Naming the nation's enemies: Becoming victims

I attended several rallies in the lead-up to the April 28 national elections. The Leganes rally, in Madrid's "red belt" (Vox 2019b) took place in the working-class outskirts of Madrid, which traditionally supported left-wing parties. Vox narrated this rally in social media as a territorial conquest. Holding a yellow and red flag—reestablished by Franco after the Civil War to replace the Second Republic's three-colored flag—allowed me to blend in with the crowd, confirming my understanding of Vox as a Spanish nationalist project. During the rally, Abascal, in his characteristically epic style, identified the "enemies of Spain" from whom the nation needed to be reconquered. The list of enemies included "progressives," with a special mention for "communists" that evoked Franco's demonization of communism; "separatist coup plotters," referring to the Catalan independence movements and parties; the "Islamic invasion," the quintessential enemy of the Spanish nation under the Reconquest frame; "terrorists," putting the Basque separatist movement together with Islamic extremists; and even "urban animalists" who oppose bullfights together with "feminist supremacists," the nation's feminine other. The "gay lobby" was also mentioned, but individual gay people were invited to join the far-right nation if they chose to leave behind the rainbow flag. In contrast to the "Islamic" enemy figure, "Hispano-Americans" were explicitly labeled as "friends" and—most interestingly—as "Spaniards with or without a [Spanish] passport." This discourse builds upon the yearning for an imperialist nation, which, Abascal clarified, "shouldn't be ashamed" but should instead be proud of one of the most important "feats" in world history: the so-called Conquest of America. He labeled the right-wing Partido Popular and the centrist party Ciudadanos legitimate adversaries, in juxtaposition to the "enemies" of the Spanish nation, among them feminism. This aligns with Chantal Mouffe's distinction between these two categories, where adversaries belong to a democratic frame and imply a mutual recognition of legitimacy, while the category of the enemy relates to a war frame where enemies must be eradicated. But during the campaign and in this rally, Abascal described the Partido Popular as the "cowardly little Right," feminizing it.

In Abascal's Leganés's speech, both Spain and Vox were depicted as victims of "forty years of progressive dictatorship," a bizarre reference to the

democratic period that followed forty years of totalitarian rule under Franco. As this meme exemplifies, Vox's imagined nation is defined against a multitude of "others" who were transformed into enemies through reference to the battle to reconquer Spain (fig. 1). Within this frame, Vox's antigenderism is connected to their idea of Spain, their "imagined community" (Anderson 1983). What strategies has Vox adopted to oppose public policies against gender violence? In what ways have they represented feminism?



Figure 1 "Let the battle begin!" Tweet the day before the general elections of April 2019. Vox's Twitter account, @vox_es, April 28, 2019. A color version of this figure is available online.

Campaigning against gender violence policy and “feminazis”

Antigender campaigns are usually triggered by policy debates (Paternotte and Kuhar 2017b). Scholars studying this phenomenon have evidenced the opposition to sexual and reproductive rights and LGBTI rights, but gender violence policy remains a gray area. For Elizabeth Corredor (2019, 627), antigender campaigns have categorized gender violence as a “good” feminist policy worth supporting. But my case study suggests that opposition to this emblematic feminist policy, which has been at the center of transnational feminism since the 1990s, is underway, and antigenderism is pushing a new boundary. Recent opposition to the ratification of the Istanbul Convention on gender and domestic violence in Eastern and Central Europe supports this argument (Graff 2014; Kováts and Pöim 2015; Roggeband and Krizsán 2021). In Spain, after the failure of the opposition to same-sex marriage and abortion, gender violence has taken center stage. Gender violence is a pillar of male domination that expresses male sovereign power over women, so any backsliding should be examined when discussing far-right authoritarianism. As Joan Wallach Scott has written, “the connection between authoritarian regimes and the control of women has been noted but not thoroughly studied” (1986, 1072). In particular, opposition to the regulation of gender violence can be revealing when analyzing rising authoritarianism from a feminist perspective.

In Spain, public policy on gender violence was first established in 2004 with the approval of the Law on Comprehensive Measures against Gender Violence during Rodríguez Zapatero’s Socialist government. The law sparked social debate but was passed unanimously by Parliament, even though the right-wing Partido Popular took it to the Constitutional Court and lost the case. Internationally, this legislation was regarded as pioneering because of its comprehensive character, despite the fact that the definition of gender violence was limited to violence perpetrated against a woman by her male partner or ex-partner in the context of a heterosexual relationship. Later Spain ratified the 2014 Istanbul Convention, followed by a state pact against gender violence in 2017, but Vox’s electoral breakthrough shattered the aura of consensus on gender violence, with consequences that remain to be seen.

A declaration of war on gender: Vox’s electoral program

Vox’s program “A Hundred Measures for a Living Spain” (2018a) contains a diverse assemblage of actions. This includes a straightforward neoliberal economic program centered on tax reduction and the reduction of public expenditure, the rolling back of the state, and the elimination of grants to non-governmental social projects, with many consequences for women. The hundred measures advocate for the concentration of power in national structures,

through the elimination of the Autonomous Communities that were established after the Democratic Transition, in opposition to the demands for self-government and independence in territories like Catalonia. With regard to the family, the symbolic construction of national identity, and anti-(Muslim) immigration measures, the program shifts to nativism and masculinism. The one hundred measures include the deportation of illegal migrants, the construction of an “impenetrable wall” to protect the border with Morocco, the protection of national symbols such as the flag and the monarchy, and the exaltation of the army and the police as the pillars of their imagined nation and state.

The program does not have a section on gender or women but rather on “life and family.” In this section, Vox represents itself as the defender of traditional family values, arguing that the “natural family” is an “institution that precedes the state,” offering to support large families and to promote child-birth through state legislation and through a Ministry of the Family. The party aligns itself with antiabortion movements and against euthanasia, defending human life from conception to “natural death.” Although the program proposes to prohibit surrogate maternity and other “objectifying activities”—though it does not specifically refer to women’s bodies—there is no mention of prostitution or the trafficking of women for sexual exploitation. In the one hundred measures, Vox also commits to promoting shared custody in divorce, aligning itself with antifeminist associations that defend men’s care rights. On the topic of gender violence legislation and policy, Vox declares “war on gender” (Graff and Korolczuk 2017, 175): “We call for the repeal of the Gender Violence Law and of any other laws that discriminate between one sex and the other. In its place we will enact a law against violence within the family that gives equal protection to the elderly, men, women and children. We call for the suppression of publicly funded radical feminist organizations [and] effective prosecution of false allegations” (Vox 2018a, 17). In this section of the program we find a number of discursive strategies that we will see reiterated throughout the campaign and in their first months in the Andalusian Parliament: Vox’s masculinist reinterpretation of the Gender Violence Law as being discriminatory against men; the reframing of violence as a problem of family values; the negative representation of feminism and the appropriation of equality; and, finally, the delegitimization of gender violence victims, who are depicted as making false allegations. A few days before the April 2019 elections, Abascal proposed a legal reform to allow “good Spaniards” to bear arms in order to protect their families and homes (*El Plural* 2019). This measure was not included in the electoral program, but it reveals the family model and the idealized masculinity that underpin their imagined national community.

The Andalusian spearhead: Vox's electoral breakthrough

Vox's first parliamentary steps in Andalusian legislature are important to this research project, as they clarify the political force of gender. The family magistrate, Francisco Serrano, number one on Vox's candidate list for the Andalusian elections, is well known for promoting male activism against the gender violence policy (see Serrano 2012) and for his overtly misogynistic stance on sexual violence. His Twitter profile shows that his antigender crusade is a long-term commitment and one of the main focuses of his political activism. Serrano accuses feminists of propagating false interpretations of reality and promoting false allegations by women, thus questioning the truth and knowledge production (Verloo 2018) behind the gender violence policy. Both his judicial and political actions have been met with feminist resistance.

Vox's first antigender action in representative politics came in January 2019 during the negotiation for the investiture of the conservative Partido Popular candidate for the presidency of the Autonomous Community of Andalusia. Although the Partido Popular had the most votes, it did not achieve an absolute majority, so it depended on an alliance with Ciudadanos and Vox to govern. Against a backdrop of feminist protests, Vox argued unsuccessfully for the repeal of the Gender Violence Law in Andalusia and for the elimination of its public funding (López Pavón 2019; *La Sexta* 2019).

The second instance of antigender politics consisted of Vox making its stance on this subject a key issue for its parliamentary activity. In his speech during the investiture ceremony, Serrano put a positive spin on representations of Vox as an extremist party by claiming that it was a "party of extreme common sense" (Parlamento de Andalucía 2019, 4). Presenting Vox as a representative of "Spaniards and Andalusians" (4), Serrano denounced the "imposed ideology of gender politics" (5) and the disbursement of public funds to feminist organizations. At the same time, he claimed that in his political party, "we believe in equality, and we are against any use of violence within the family" (5). Appropriating democratic signifiers, he stated that in order to achieve "the creation of a fairer, egalitarian society" (8), Vox would fight for the "repeal of laws based on an ideological understanding of gender" (8).

A third antigender action in the Andalusian parliament was the appointment of Serrano to the Equality Commission, a strategic position from which he could pursue his antigender crusade (Marqués Perales 2019). Vox's fourth antigender measure was to file a parliamentary request to disclose the identities of everyone who worked for the Andalusian government's Gender Violence Integral Assessment Units. The party wished to obtain the workers' names and their inscription numbers in order to verify that they possessed the necessary expertise and to "purge any ideological appointments" (Cela 2019). The petition was initially rejected, but the consequences of this delegitimation

have yet to be seen. What is certain is that in less than three months, Vox Andalusia has put gender policy in the eye of the hurricane.

The empire strikes back: Counterdiscourse around March 8

VOX, ¡vete!, al siglo diecisiete (Vox, go back to the seventeenth century!)

—March 8 demonstrations in Madrid, from my field notebook, March 8, 2019

On March 8, 2019, the March 8 Assembly called for a second feminist strike. In their Madrid Manifesto, the March 8 movement joined the “global outcry” of women facing “patriarchal reactions” and an “extreme Right that has placed us women and migrants as a priority objective” (Comisión Feminista 8M Madrid 2019, 1). If the first feminist strike of 2018 was a success, the second one was described as a “feminist high tide” (Rodrigo 2019).

The March 8 strike coincided with the run-up to the April 2019 general elections. During the days that preceded and followed the feminist strike, all the major political parties outlined their positions on feminism. The Socialist and Unidas Podemos parties identified with the feminist movement, while the centrist Ciudadanos party defined its view as liberal feminism. The conservative Partido Popular had to navigate its way through several controversies regarding feminism that exposed both deep contradictions within its leadership and the fragility of its support for equality politics. Meanwhile, Vox and the antigender movement intensified their crusade using well-known strategies such as the controversial HazteOir buses but also producing some innovations such as the defense of a “Spanish feminism.”

The antigender movement supports Vox:

HazteOir’s #StopFeminazis campaign

The #StopFeminazis campaign is a good example of the links between Vox and the antigender movement. Open Democracy’s undercover research revealed that HazteOir and CitizenGo raised funds indirectly for Vox campaigns and that they actively electioneered against its opponents (Ramsey and Provost 2019; Rivera 2019). A few days before the March 8 strike, HazteOir—the founding organization and core of the international CitizenGo—sent another of its controversial anti-gender-ideology buses on a tour against Vox’s political competitors, with a slogan that read “It’s not gender violence, it’s domestic violence.” The text beneath stated “Gender laws discriminate against men” and called on the leaders of the Spanish center-right parties—all men—to “repeal gender laws.” This message was accompanied by an image of Adolf Hitler wearing lipstick and a military cap bearing a feminist symbol, along with the hashtag #StopFeminazis (see fig. 2). The resulting outcry led to



Figure 2 “It’s not gender violence, it’s domestic violence. Gender laws discriminate against men. Casado, Rivera, Abascal REPEAL GENDER LAWS #StopFeminazis. HazteOir. Victims of gender ideology.” HazteOir’s antigender bus. © 2019 by Europa Press Photographic Archive. Reprinted with permission. A color version of this image is available online.

the bus being banned. This bus illustrates the discursive acrobatics employed by the antigender movement supporting Vox and reveals its intended effects. The first strategy involves reframing gender violence as violence within the family and calling for the repeal of the Gender Violence Law. This alternative framing, if it were to be adopted by the Spanish government, would mean that violence would no longer be an issue of equality—a feminist policy—but of family, a policy area that is more susceptible to right-wing conservative activism. The second discursive strategy undermines the Gender Violence Law by inverting its meaning, representing it as a discriminatory measure against men rather than as a positive step toward gender equality. HazteOir, therefore, identify themselves with men, even in gender violence cases. Furthermore, they demand solutions exclusively from male politicians. This symbolic identification contrasts sharply with the Gender Violence Law and its identification with female victims of gender violence. Finally, a third discursive strategy associates feminism with Nazism—a grotesque collocation that borders on hate speech—with the intention of delegitimizing it.

Like HazteOir, Vox also used the term “feminazi” during their campaign, along with “feminist supremacists,” “gender dictatorship,” and “totalitarian feminism.” By means of this discursive strategy, they project their antidemocratic shadow over feminism and its allies. This hate speech against feminism enables a positive representation of Vox and the antigender policy network as democrats, despite their murky ties to the heritage of Franco’s dictatorship. It should not be forgotten that Franco was Hitler’s ally. In the Spanish context,

the use of Hitler's image to represent democratic forces, such as feminism, by organizations that do not distance themselves from Francoism and its legacy is manipulative to say the least. This legitimization strategy is necessary to counteract the impact of a number of Vox's practices, such as their inclusion in the national parliament's candidate list of two former generals who recently signed a manifesto supporting Franco's dictatorship (Galaup 2019a), and of a homophobic historian who publicly denied the Holocaust during the run-up to the elections, who finally had to renounce to his candidacy (Caro 2019). A fourth and final discursive strategy is to construct themselves as victims by reversing the roles of victim and perpetrator (Van Dijk 2009; Wodak 2015). According to this logic, men are the true victims of the gender violence policy.

Spanish feminism? Vox's modernization through a parasitic-opportunistic appropriation of feminism

Vox's response to the March 8 movement was led by Rocío Monasterio, Vox's president in Madrid and number one on their candidate list for this autonomous community, their most emblematic female leader.¹¹ Serrano's misogyny was replaced by Monasterio's defense of "Spanish feminism," juxtaposed with "supremacist feminism," to use her own words. During this period of intense feminist debate and mobilization, Monasterio led a more sophisticated anti-gender discourse, which I have called a "parasitic-opportunistic" appropriation of feminism: parasitic because it aims to damage feminism by appropriating its legitimacy, opportunistic because this appropriation was used only to counterattack feminism at a moment of rising support and legitimacy.¹²

There are some antecedents to this shift in Vox's antifeminist stance. Shortly after the December 2018 Andalusian elections, Monasterio was photographed as Rosie the Riveter, a World War II icon for working women who became a global feminist emblem, by a journalist from a conservative mainstream media outlet (see fig. 3). The contrast created by the appropriation of this feminist icon "against feminazis" (Negre 2019), suggests a dichotomy between good and bad feminism (Fassin 2016; Garbagnoli 2016; Paternotte and Kuhar 2017a). This strategy went relatively unnoticed in comparison to other, more spectacular antigender strategies deployed by Vox and the antigender movement in this period, such as HazteOir's #StopFeminazis bus and campaign. So, what is Vox's "Spanish feminism"?

¹¹ From an interview in Altozano and Llorente (2018).

¹² This formulation encompasses Grzebalska and Petö's observations of the appropriation of gender policy in Eastern Europe by far-right-led states (2018).



Figure 3 Rocío Monasterio, Vox's muse against "feminazis," dressed as Rosie the Riveter. Photo by Sergio González, in *Negre*, 2019. © 2019 by *El Mundo*. Reprinted with permission. A color version of this image is available online.

Days before the March 8 strike, Vox launched a three-minute video on social media, "Vox Women Break the March 8 Feminist Strike" (Vox 2019a), with the hashtag #NoHablesEnMiNombre (Don't speak in my name). In this spot, Monasterio speaks in the name of "women of the Living Spain," addressing a constituency of women who refuse to be represented by the March 8 feminist movement. Monasterio begins by "paying homage to

the efforts of those Spanish women who achieved advancements for all of us,” mentioning female suffrage, education, and economic autonomy and, in so doing, appropriating many of the hallmarks of the feminist historical agenda and presenting Vox as an advocate for “real equality.” A second strategy is the denial of inequality in contemporary Spain, a country where “women and men are equal before the law.” Monasterio attacks “supremacist feminism” for representing women as “victims” and for “criminalizing” men, in reference to the gender violence law; for “collectivizing” and “muzzling” women’s diversity; for “totalitarian indoctrination”; and for imposing an “ideological burka” that misinterprets reality. Subsequently, Monasterio accuses feminism of wasting public resources on “imposing their gender ideology on politics,” thus associating feminism with clientelism and corruption. Monasterio concludes the spot by defending women’s “independence” and “freedom” but announces that the women of Vox will not adhere to the March 8 strike. “This is real feminism,” posted one of Vox’s followers on YouTube.

Immediately after March 8, Vox continued its antigender campaign, trying out a femonationalist stance. In a second video, titled “Feminists Don’t Want to Hear about Families” (Vox 2019c), Monasterio appears supervising a construction site wearing a helmet in her professional role as an architect: the image of a modern, professional, and successful woman. In this spot, Monasterio denies the supposed machismo of Spanish men and the wider society, insisting that she has only experienced discrimination from Muslim migrant workers on construction sites because they will not “accept orders” from a (Spanish) woman. She criticizes feminism for not caring about Muslim women and girls oppressed “by their culture,” portraying them as victims. She concludes, “I have always been proud of Spanish feminism.” This is a discourse that simultaneously stigmatizes Muslim men and “culture” as well as existing feminism, representing Spain as a country where gender equality has already been achieved by virtue of the Constitution. For this reason, the good Spanish feminism of the past is no longer needed in the twenty-first century.

In brief, in this period Vox made an effort to modernize its discourse through a parasitic-opportunistic appropriation of feminism. Not only did they appropriate equality—a key signifier of feminist and progressive politics—but they appropriated feminism itself, as well as female empowerment and leadership strategies. Despite this discursive contortion, their objective of delegitimizing existing feminism remained unaltered. In fact, the press had access to Vox’s internal communications manual in which the party’s leaders gave explicit instructions to manipulate discourse by using lies to deflect blame for all the ills of society onto feminism and “separatism”: “If we want to complain about the state of the asphalt on a street, we should relate it

to the use of public funds for purposes that aren't relevant to local citizens: i.e.,] the funding of separatist and radical feminist organizations" (Vox communications manual, cited in Galaup 2019b). Despite Vox's effort to mobilize women, the results of the April 2019 general elections showed a large gender gap: only 28 percent of Vox voters were women (Lucas-Torres 2019).

Final reflections: The gender dependency of the Spanish far Right

This article has examined the ways Vox mobilized gender during its electoral breakthrough, analyzing both its campaigns and its antigender discourse. The *Reconquista* frame reveals how nativism, authoritarianism, and masculinism interlock in Vox's imagined nation, while the antigender discourse unmasks Vox's links to the transnational antigender movement, despite the localizing effect of the *Reconquista* frame.

This twofold analysis, of the *Reconquista* frame and the antigender discourse, has highlighted the relevance of gender at the critical time of Vox's emergence. First, it shows that gender is a primary field where this new far-right party disputes power, turning gender into a language of contention. In fact, divergent positions on gender helped structure antagonisms and alignments. Second, gender has allowed Vox to establish its identity, a distinctively masculinist one, and to differentiate itself from competing parties that had signed the State Pact against Gender Violence. And third, gender has structured antagonisms, defining feminism as the nation's enemy. The antifeminist reaction of the rising far Right shows that feminism holds a significant legitimacy and that Vox perceives a threat to its authoritarian and nativist project. The display of masculinism and antigenderism projected a perceived loss of male power, a grievance that the party identifies with and fuels.

It should by now be clear that gender has not been a secondary issue for the Spanish far Right but is at the core of their national project. This gender excess unmasks the reconfiguration of power relations that Vox embodies and pursues. Paradoxically, thanks to its antigenderism, male domination was neither taken for granted in public debate nor part of a marginal gender agenda but moved to the center of the political conflict. If this reveals that the feminist project is under threat, it also shows that male domination is, in Vox's view, at stake.

I would like to conclude that this case study shows that mobilizing gender was not only crucial for Vox's electoral breakthrough but that the reliance on gender to dispute power, to create a distinct identity, and to establish primary antagonisms makes the Spanish far Right gender dependent. This reliance on gender has been both an asset and an impasse. It has put Vox in a minority,

although influential, position in a context where feminism is also on the rise and is one of the most important vectors of politicization. In fact, Vox's parasitic appropriation of feminism could be a way out of this antigender impasse. But if mobilizing gender has been crucial for the rise of the far Right in Spain, and feminism faces a powerful enemy, it is also plausible to think that its gender dependency and antagonism toward existing feminism could be turned into its Achilles heel.

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