

CONFRONTING FAR-RIGHT “MASCULINITIES”: IMPLICATIONS FOR NGOS

Far-right populism is a global phenomenon. Despite differing national and local contexts, what ties these forces together is ethno-nationalism predicated on racialized masculinity narratives. In this article, Alan Greig’s three far-right narratives are discussed: barbarous masculinities of the ethnic “minority”, wounded masculinities of the ethnic “majority”, and misogynistic masculinities of the everyday. Understanding and challenging these narratives is paramount for advancing social justice across many issues development NGOs and others prioritize — including the rights of refugees and migrants, sexual and reproductive freedoms, pluralism, and inclusive societies. Successfully challenging the far-right entails NGOs articulating core values and principles centered on an anti-racist feminism: one that seeks to abolish the social hierarchies and inequalities wrought by neoliberalism.

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Last October, Hungary's populist Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, took the extraordinary step of revoking accreditation and funding to universities offering gender studies programs.¹ On the surface, banning gender studies is a bizarre act for a national government to take, even one under the leadership of an illiberal authoritarian like Orbán. However, it is intrinsic to a deeper war being waged by right-wing populists, not just in Hungary or Europe, but other places where the far-right has ascended to power.

Gender studies present a threat to the far-right's core convictions about the *naturalness* of the so-called traditional family. This is because gender studies' contributions include critically analyzing the social and cultural constructions of gender and uncovering how these structures establish and maintain social hierarchies. The threat is palpable to the far-right because the traditional, heteronormative family is understood as the basis of all social and political institutions, especially the nation-state itself.

The attack on gender studies is part of a broader effort to defeat feminism and retard the emancipation of marginalized individuals and communities. These include women and those identifying as LGBTQI, but also migrants, refugees, and ethnic or racial minorities. For social justice Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), the far-right's war on what they label as "gender ideology" threatens a broad agenda: at stake are advances made to legalize same-sex marriage, achieve gender wage parity, access contraception and abortion services, balance care work with greater feminization of the economy, and end discrimination of LGBTQI persons. Importantly, challenging the far-right's war on gender is also central to advancing racial justice, ensuring the rights of refugees and migrants, and promoting inclusive societies.

With no basis in academia, "gender ideology" is a loose term first used by Catholic reactionaries and conservatives in the 1990s.² Its core argument purports that gender undermines the traditional, heteronormative, and patriarchal family structure.³ Indeed, the statement made by the Orbán administration regarding the gender studies ban said, "The Government's standpoint is that people are born either male or female... and we do not consider it acceptable for us to talk about socially-constructed genders, rather than biological sexes."⁴

¹ Lauren Kent and Samantha Tapfumaneyi, "Hungary's PM bans gender study at colleges saying 'people are born either male or female,'" *CNN*, 19 October 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/10/19/europe/hungary-bans-gender-study-at-colleges-trnd/index.html>.

² Mariana Prandini Assis and Ana Carolina Ogando, "Bolsonaro, 'gender ideology' and hegemonic masculinity in Brazil," *Al Jazeera*, 31 October 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/bolsonaro-gender-ideology-hegemonic-masculinity-brazil-181031062523759.html>.

³ Sonia Corrêa, "Gender Ideology: tracking its origins and meanings in current gender politics," *Engenderings* (blog), The London School of Economics and Political Science, 11 December 2017, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/gender/2017/12/11/gender-ideology-tracking-its-origins-and-meanings-in-current-gender-politics>.

⁴ Quoted in Kent and Tapfumaneyi, "Hungary's PM bans gender study."

This past March, Brazil’s right-wing populist president, Jair Bolsonaro, drew a direct line between President Donald J. Trump and himself. He characterized both men as partners fighting back the achievements of women, the LGBTQI community, and “gender ideology”. In late 2018, the Trump administration drafted policies to eliminate the right of students to identify as transgender, and to make it impossible to raise complaints about student mistreatment based on gender.⁵ At the White House, Bolsonaro said, “Brazil and the United States stand side-by-side in their efforts to ensure liberties and respect the traditional family lifestyles and respect to God, our creator, against the gender ideology and the politically correct attitudes and against fake news.”⁶

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Masculinities and the Rhetoric of the Far-Right

Despite the so-called war on gender ideology, far-right messaging is deeply embedded in gender constructions.⁷ In particular, the language deployed for recruiting supporters and promoting political agendas relies heavily on narratives and tropes drawn from beliefs concerning masculinity. Far-right forces deploy these discourses not only in the United States, Europe, and Brazil, but also throughout the Americas, Asia, and elsewhere. For example, across countries the far-right mythologizes the ethnic majority as a nation-family under siege from both internal threats and those looming on the border. In this story, the patriarchal and heteronormative family is invoked to represent the nation. By reifying the nation-family as the traditional family, the far-right aims to normalize xenophobia, ethno-nationalism, and authoritarianism in at least a couple ways.

First, it normalizes obedience to “strongman” authoritarians like Orbán, Trump, and Bolsonaro. Obedience carries with it the promise of fast and resolute action by the father-leader to solve the country’s problems, even if pesky democratic procedures need to be tossed aside. Second, it invokes a sense of duty among the citizenry,

⁵ Scott Jaschik, “Trump May Eliminate Trans Rights,” *Inside Higher Ed*, 22 October 2018, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/10/22/trump-administration-considers-plan-end-legal-status-transgender-students>

⁶ Jen Kirby, “Jair Bolsonaro says Brazil and the US stand side by side ‘against fake news,’” *Vox*, 19 March 2019, <https://www.vox.com/2019/3/19/18272995/jair-bolsonaro-trump-white-house-brazil-fake-news>

⁷ V. Nicholas Galasso, Gianandrea Nelli Feroci, Kimberly Pfeifer, and Martin Walsh, “The Rise of Populism and its Implications for Development NGOs,” *Oxfam*, (2017), www.oxfamamerica.org/riseofpopulism

especially among men. This duty rests on protecting the nation from the impurity of those delineated as outsiders. This includes ensuring the racial purity of the ethnic majority into the future, keeping out foreign values seen as threatening the nation's supposed identity, and protecting women from the sexual predations of non-native men. Analogizing the nation as a family, therefore, advances the far-right's casting of "outsiders" as normal, non-controversial, and even commonsensical.

We can identify three broad narratives drawing on masculinity in the far-right's rhetoric. Developed by Alan Greig, these are: barbarous masculinities of the ethnic "minority", wounded masculinities of the ethnic "majority", and misogynistic masculinities of the everyday.⁸ As alluded to above, barbarous masculinities of the ethnic "minority" are narratives concerning the predatory male *Other* used to mobilize fear and strengthen ethno-nationalism. Donald Trump executed this flawlessly when announcing his candidacy for president. Referring to Mexican migrants, he said, "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best...They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists."⁹ In doing so, Trump taps into the *dangerous masculinities* posed by *barbarous* Mexican male migrants who threaten the American ethnic-majority with sexual and drug-related violence and crime.

In Europe and the United States, the hashtag #refugeesnotwelcome frequently follows statements depicting Muslim refugees as racial, cultural, and sexual threats to the nation-family. While Islam has long been slandered as incompatible with liberal democracy, today we see the far-right grabbing onto the values of secularism and gender equality to normalize nativist ideologies. In Sweden, France, and the Netherlands, the far-right portrays Islam as antithetical to modern western values, including gender equality and LGBTIQ rights. Tropes invoke Muslim men as backward adherents to dated moralities they scheme to impose on Europeans. Even France's Front National now venerates gender equality as a defining French value to advance their anti-immigrant agenda.¹⁰ Keskinen neatly summarizes how the far-right deploys masculinities in messaging on border security:

What characterizes such masculinities is a fixation on borders, border-control, cultural boundary work and exclusions that are treated as necessities in the changing setting. The racial and sexual "homeliness" of the nation is seen to be under threat, which serves as a basis for reimagining national and sexual

⁸ Alan Greig, "Masculinities and the Far-Right: Implications for Oxfam's Work on Gender Justice," *Oxfam America*, <https://www.oxfamamerica.org/explore/research-publications/masculinities-and-the-far-right>

⁹ "Donald Trump's Presidential Announcement," *Time*, 16 June 2015, <https://time.com/3923128/donald-trump-announcement-speech>

¹⁰ Francesca Scrinzi, "A 'New' National Front? Gender, Religion, Secularism and the French Populist Radical Right," in Michaela Köttig, Renate Bitzan, and Andrea Petö (eds.), *Gender and Far Right Politics in Europe* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 127- 40.

politics in order to gain hegemony, instead of merely vocalizing passive nostalgia.¹¹

Narratives and tropes concerning the wounded masculinities of the ethnic “majority” center on how feminism, along with the economic and cultural dislocations of globalization, inflict gender specific injuries to men. These tropes originate in the “men’s rights” movements of the 1990s that first proclaimed men to be in crisis at the hands of feminism. Men’s rights advocates implicated the shifting sands of social norms, globalization, and workforce feminization as responsible for escalating men’s abuse and disempowerment. They also suggested that feminist scholarship neglected to account for these abuses.

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In far-right narratives, feminism and these broad socio-cultural changes are not only a crisis for men, they are an existential crisis for society. While the barbarous masculinities of the ethnic “minority” pose a threat to the nation-family from outside, feminism is the more sinister internal poison. Feminism diminishes the vaulted status of men comprising the ethnic majority by challenging the established social and racial hierarchy. Doing so undermines the sanctity of the traditional heteronormative family, and therefore weakens the foundation of the social order underpinning the nation-state.

It is important to acknowledge that some men are, arguably, in crisis because of the economic and social dislocations of recent decades. In the US, millions of men now exist outside work, marriage, and community life.¹² Loneliness, addiction, and despair among men are significant public health challenges in advanced economies. However, we find the far-right exploits this crisis to advance ethno-nationalism and impede struggles for racial and gender justice. The “men in crisis” tropes articulated by the far-right go beyond suggesting these changes are disempowering men. Instead, far-right messaging plays on feelings of loss and disillusionment in order to stoke anger and resentment among the ethnic majority who feel left behind. Blame

¹¹ Suvi Keskinen, “Anti-Feminism and White Identity Politics: Political Antagonisms in Radical Right-wing Populist and Anti-immigration Rhetoric in Finland,” *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (2013), pp. 225–32.

¹² Andrew Yarrow, *Man Out: Men on the Sidelines of American Life* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2018).

goes to feminism, along with racial and social justice movements, for displacing men as breadwinners, heads of household, and atop the social hierarchy. White supremacists understand that these messages of loss and displacement are fertile ground for recruiting.¹³ To activate men toward joining their ranks, white supremacists cast men today as weak, emasculated, feminized, and tame.

Lastly, misogynistic masculinities of the everyday refer to the increasing personal and vitriolic attacks on women and the LGBTQI community. Their venom is also directed to men who have yet, or refuse, to acknowledge that marriage, monogamy, and expected gender roles operate in the interest of women and against men. These include the public declarations of misogyny by far-right political leaders like Trump – who has called women “fat pigs,” “dogs,” and “slobs.”¹⁴ However, it refers more directly to the personal attacks and extreme misogyny found in the “manosphere” – the collection of websites, forums, and blogs focused on men’s wounds, fighting feminism, and normalizing misogynistic views. In this cesspool of the internet, women are regularly deemed absurd, spiteful, and secretly desiring men to dominate them. Worryingly, the anonymity of the manosphere facilitates the escalation of violent and vile language toward women, feminists, minorities, and others deemed as allowing these challenges to the traditional order to occur. Further, the alt-right’s embrace of a more extreme misogyny seems to be fueled by the influence of the manosphere. Though the alt-right’s white nationalist rhetoric was always imbued with idealized notions of the patriarchal family structure, the manosphere seems to be shifting their discourse on women and feminism to more extreme positions.¹⁵

How NGOs Should Challenge the Far Right

Right-wing populism is a transnational phenomenon that threatens both domestic and international NGOs working on economic and social injustices, including gender justice and the rights of refugees and migrants. Addressing the far-right’s challenge to the values of inclusion and equality begins by paying attention to their racialized gender narratives. Here, I’ve touched on narratives casting refugees and migrants as threatening outsiders, feminism and globalization as responsible for rendering men emasculated and dislodged, and women as irrational and vindictive creatures who need men to rule them. Oxfam’s recent analysis of its gender justice work offers recommendations for challenging these narratives that are relevant to all NGOs whose mission is social justice.¹⁶

¹³ Michael Kimmel, “Globalization and Its Mal(e)contents: The Gendered Moral and Political Economy of Terrorism,” *International Sociology*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (2003), pp. 603–20.

¹⁴ John Walsh, “11 insults Trump has hurled at women,” *Business Insider*, 17 October 2018, <https://www.businessinsider.com/trumps-worst-insults-toward-women-2018-10>

¹⁵ Matthew N. Lyons, *Ctrl-Alt-Delete: An Antifascist Report On the Alternative Right* (Boston: Kersplebedeb Publishing, 2017).

¹⁶ Greig (forthcoming), p.73.

The first recommendation is re-thinking work with men and boys in ways that respond to the growing influence of the far-right. Too often, gender justice work focusing on men and boys engages at the individual, familial, and interpersonal levels. This is insufficient because it ignores the broader structures of patriarchy that shape ideas about gender roles and social hierarchies. Therefore, the assumptions on which masculinities are constructed go unchallenged.¹⁷ Instead, questions about masculinities and “what it means to be a man” need to be posed structurally and ideologically. The far-right has a clear ideological answer to this question: they posit a racialized masculinity that upholds a heteronormative gender order. Insider/majority men are responsible to uphold and defend this order from threats within and outside the nation. Work with men and boys, therefore, needs to begin by emphasizing the links among misogyny, power, and social stratification from the interpersonal to the societal levels.

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Second, addressing social and economic inequalities will be more effective if embedded in gender justice. NGOs have to grapple with the paradox that advances in gender equality have occurred in-step with massive increases in wealth and income inequality. Further, certain elements within feminism have failed to link gender inequality and economic justice more closely. For Arruza, Bhattacharya, and Fraser, “liberal feminism is part of the problem,” in that it feminizes social hierarchy instead of aiming to abolish it. They suggest the “equal-opportunity” paradigm of liberal feminism, which took off in the 1980s, intends for women to ascend the top of the social hierarchy with men from their own class. Yet, this is only possible through the labor of poorly paid migrant and working class women.¹⁸ In effect, as structural adjustment programs and liberalization were shattering women’s lives in the global south, elite women, mostly in the global north, instituted equal-opportunity feminism on top of this calamity.

As Arruza et al. suggest, we are at a fork in the road.¹⁹ We can continue pursuing an equal-opportunity feminism embedded in reproducing the hierarchies and inequalities

¹⁷ Coalition of Feminists for Social Change (COFEM), “How a Lack of Accountability Undermines Work to Address Violence Against Women and Girls,” *Feminist Perspectives on Addressing Violence Against Women and Girls Series*, Paper No. 1 (2018).

¹⁸ Cinzia Arruza, Tithi Bhattacharya, and Nancy Fraser, “Notes for a Feminist Manifesto,” *New Left Review*, (2018), p. 114.

¹⁹ Arruza et al (2018).

inherent in global capitalism, or we can articulate an anti-capitalist feminism leading to a new society. The far-right recognizes this fork too. Much of their appeal derives from promising to allay the anxieties and dislocations wrought by neoliberal globalization. However, their solutions rest on restoring a mythical racial-gender order to protect the nation-family from the devastations of transnational capital and migration. Development NGOs need to move beyond acknowledging the crises of neoliberalism. Instead, our responsibility should be advancing a feminist vision of social justice aimed at countering the exclusions and hierarchies inherent in the far right's idealized social organization.

Last, development NGOs need to publicly challenge ethno-nationalism, and the racial and gender formations that underpin such projects of exclusion and hierarchy. Doing this entails confronting far-right tropes and appeals within the range of issues we work on. This includes combatting nationalism and xenophobia, but also excavating them within the terrains of care work, sexual and reproductive rights, and gender-based violence.

During this long moment of global disorder, it is paramount that NGOs clearly articulate core values centered on an anti-racist feminism. In addition to confronting the far-right in the areas where we seek to advance justice, we also need to challenge their narratives by creating and encouraging public spaces based around pluralism and abolishing hierarchies. The manosphere exemplifies how narratives and digital communities can effectively promote division, resentment, and exclusion. However, it is equally true that networked digital publics can foster connectedness through sharing stories linking global efforts to advance racial and gender justice.