



## Employing women's rights as a racist weapon: The case of Giorgia Meloni in Italy's radical right

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Radical right  
Italy  
Women's rights  
Giorgia Meloni  
Femonationalism

### ABSTRACT

This study analyses how Giorgia Meloni, leader of the Italian radical right party Fratelli d'Italia and current Prime Minister, employs women's rights as a discursive strategy to legitimise nationalist and anti-immigration positions. Drawing on scholarship in gender, postcolonial and migration studies, it reveals how Meloni's standing for (carefully selected) women's rights serves to nurture and perpetuate orientalist representations of Muslim migrants, grounded in the same binary thinking that justifies colonialism and white supremacy. Based on the analysis of Meloni's social media posts published between January 2015 and September 2022, we argue that her representations of women's rights function as discursive weapons deployed to uphold racialised and exclusionary nationalist agendas. By contextualising her defence of women's rights within her broader self-positioning as the "Christian mother of the homeland", we highlight her dismissal of gender politics, contributing to existing debates on femonationalism.

### 1. Introduction

Across Europe, populist radical right parties, which combine nativism, authoritarianism, and often populism (Mudde, 2007), have steadily expanded their electoral support since the early 2010s (Dennison, 2020). In Austria, Denmark, France, and the Netherlands this trend was evident by 2013, and in 2017 parties such as Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National (RN), the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) of Tino Chrupalla and Alice Weidel, and the Norwegian Progress Party (FrP) of Sylvi Listhaug reached unprecedented results, often ranking among the top three most voted parties in their respective countries (Dennison, 2020; Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2019). In the 2014 and 2019 European elections, Eurosceptic populist forces also consolidated their presence (Kamenova, 2023). These parties draw on nationalism (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2019) and a populism that weaponises immigration as scaremongering (Diab, 2020; Thorleifsson, 2019), often combined with the instrumental use of women's rights either to justify such scaremongering or as an additional strategy (Butler, 2024). Alongside these traits, radical right populist parties have increasingly relied on social media as a central arena for communication, where leaders perform political rituals, construct identities, and mobilise antagonisms between 'the people' and their opponents (Chadwick, 2017;

Engesser et al., 2017; Moffitt, 2016; Wodak, 2015).

In Italy, the most recent general elections (2018 and 2022) saw the progressive rise of the radical right parties. In March 2018, the Lega Nord (LN), a radical right, anti-immigration and Eurosceptic party led by Matteo Salvini, multiplied its votes fourfold, reaching 17.3 % of the national vote, its best results ever (Paparo, 2018). In September 2022, the coalition comprising two radical right parties, the Lega Nord (LN) and Fratelli d'Italia (FdI), led by Giorgia Meloni, alongside the centre-right party Forza Italia (FI), led by Silvio Berlusconi, secured a historic victory, winning 44 % of the vote and subsequently forming a coalition government. The 2022 victory of the centre-right was a triumph for FdI, which emerged as the most voted party within the coalition and at the national level, securing 26 % of the vote. The 2022 victory was also regarded as a personal success of Giorgia Meloni, who helped to found the party in 2012 as a splinter group from the centre-right Popolo della Libertà (People of Freedom, PdL). This move positioned the FdI as the heir to a longer tradition of the Italian right. The Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI), established in 1946 by former Fascist officials, was formally dissolved in the mid-1990s when Gianfranco Fini transformed it into Alleanza Nazionale (AN) (Ignazi, 1994). Although the FdI emerged more than a decade later, it has consistently drawn on the MSI's heritage, both in symbolic terms (notably through the tricolour flame in

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2025.103237>

Received 13 July 2025; Received in revised form 26 October 2025; Accepted 26 October 2025

Available online 3 November 2025

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its logo) and in its self-representation as the custodian of a 'national-conservative' tradition (King, 2024).

With Meloni's victory in 2022, a party considered the primary heir to Italy's post-fascist tradition emerged as the largest political force in post-World War II Italy, and Meloni became the first woman appointed Prime Minister of the republic (Agnew, 2023; Gaweda & Siddi, 2023). Here, post-fascist refers to the Italian political lineage descending from the Italian Social Movement (MSI), distinct from historical fascism, and aligned with the broader radical right family in Europe. Meloni is not an isolated case: an analysis of the presence of women leading parties with parliamentary representation in national or European elections shows that their presence has become more significant since the early 2000s, precisely among right-wing parties (Stefanutto Rosa & Caiani, 2023). Meloni's overwhelming electoral victory thus appears emblematic of the two general trends that characterise political representation in Europe: the rise of the radical right, and its tendency to place women in top party leadership positions. This development is not confined to Europe. Women have risen to prominent positions in right-wing parties worldwide. While framed as milestones for gender equality they exemplify what scholars identify as neoliberal feminism: the incorporation of women into political projects that reinforce rather than challenge patriarchal, racialised, and classed structures (Ulus, 2018; Venugopal, 2015). From Golda Meir to more recent figures including Ayaan Hirsi Ali or Dilan Yeşilgöz, women's leadership has frequently been mobilised to legitimise nationalist, neoliberal, or exclusionary agendas (Farris, 2017; Havertz, 2018; Lahav, 2022; Weaver, 2016). These cases highlight the importance of distinguishing between descriptive representation and substantive feminist gains: women's visibility in power does not necessarily advance feminist politics but can instead sustain conservative or even anti-feminist projects.

Meloni is an illustrative case of how gender and nationalism intersect in the radical-right discourse. She shows that women leaders can serve as a symbolic resource to reframe xenophobic politics in socially acceptable terms (Stefanutto Rosa & Caiani, 2023), mobilising a highly gendered identity – as “a woman, a mother, an Italian, a Christian” – to advance a political project that fuses Catholic morality, national sovereignty, and the instrumental defence of women's rights (Colella, 2021; Donà, 2022). Her case thus represents a paradigmatic example of femonationalism, understood as the convergence of nationalist, feminist, and neoliberal agendas that stigmatize migrant men and construct migrant women as passive victims in need of salvation (Farris, 2017). At the same time, these femonationalist discourses intersect with the anti-gender backlash within a post-fascist ideological framework, shaped by both national specificities and transnational logics of the European radical right (De Giorgi et al., 2023). While deeply rooted in the Italian context, Meloni's trajectory reflects broader European trends in which female leadership serves as a symbolic resource to normalise radical right agendas. Her case exemplifies how nationalist, maternalist, and anti-feminist discourses converge in ways that resonate transnationally, while also expressing the specificity of Italy's Catholic and post-fascist legacy. Previous research on women's leadership in right-wing parties suggests it serves these parties' aim of expanding their electoral basis, by softening their image and distancing themselves from the 'virilism' that has traditionally distinguished them (Pető, 2013). Women's leadership has also served to legitimise right-wing parties' progressive engagement with issues such as women's rights, gender violence and more broadly gender and sexuality issues, often framed within broader (and more traditional) anti-feminist and anti-immigration views (Roth, 2021).

As happened in other European radical right-wing populist parties (Abou-Chadi et al., 2021), in her election campaign Meloni emphasised her being a woman to define her clearly conservative political profile and other identity dimensions. Her “I am Giorgia, I am a woman, I am a mother, I am Italian, I am a Christian” (Agenzia Vista, 2019), pronounced during the centre-right's 'Italian Pride' event on 19 October 2019 in Rome, has probably become her most famous catchphrase. Meloni has constructed and valorised a distinctive woman's identity,

declaring herself the guarantor of the 'traditional family', based on marriage, and founded on blood and ethnic ties (Dancygier, 2020; Donà, 2022; Forti, 2022; Gaweda & Siddi, 2023; Giordano & Antonucci, 2023). This understanding of 'traditional family' is conceptualised as the pillar of society (Cilento, 2023; Forti, 2022; Griffini & Montecchio, 2023). Simultaneously, she vehemently opposed the so-called 'gender ideology' (Dancygier, 2020; De Giorgi et al., 2023; Gaweda & Siddi, 2023), including marriage between same-sex couples (De Giorgi et al., 2023; Donà, 2022) and same-sex parenting (Lasio & Serri, 2019), as well as abortion (De Giorgi et al., 2023; Donà, 2022; Griffini & Montecchio, 2023) and surrogacy (Griffini & Montecchio, 2023). Embodying the role of the mother of the homeland herself, she upholds traditional gender norms and emphasises the importance of family unity, analogously to that of the nation (Akkerman, 2015; Geva, 2020). This strategy is unique neither to Meloni nor to the radical right; historically, women in nationalist and postcolonial movements have mobilised motherhood and traditional gender norms to claim political agency and legitimacy. What is distinctive in Meloni's case is how this maternalist self-representation is embedded within a femonationalist discourse that racialises migrants while presenting the Italian (and Western) nation as the ultimate guarantor of women's rights.

Through the case of Meloni, this study examines how radical right actors appropriate women's rights to racialise migrants and sustain exclusionary nationalist agendas. By showing how maternalist and gendered narratives mobilise orientalist imaginaries of Muslim men and women, this article highlights the specific discursive strategies through which femonationalism operates in Italy while resonating with broader European patterns. It contributes to feminist and postcolonial critiques of Eurocentric gender regimes by demonstrating that narratives of emancipation are co-opted to reinforce racial hierarchies and reject feminist politics, notably through the reduction of gender to sexual violence and the construction of a 'phantasmagorical' gender as part of migrant scaremongering (Butler, 2024). We contribute by identifying the specific discursive strategies through which women's rights are mobilised to legitimise anti-immigration positions, and by showing how these strategies are articulated and amplified via social media.

## 2. Migration flows and the radical right

Increasing migration flows are among the main factors behind the rise of the right-wing in Europe (Halikiopoulou and Vlandas, 2019). Since the Arab Spring of 2010, political unrest in Tunisia and other Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) countries has caused the deaths of thousands of people and forced more than two million people to flee (De Haas, 2014). By 2014–2015, Europe faced an unprecedented humanitarian crisis: over 2200 people died in the Mediterranean Sea in the summer of 2014, while more than one million refugees arrived in Italy and Greece the following year (IOM, 2016; UNHCR, 2017). This dramatic escalation brought migration to the centre of public debate, and humanitarian framings of 'innocent victims' were progressively replaced by hostility, with migrants increasingly depicted as 'economic' migrants, not political refugees, undeserving of support (Krzyżanowski et al., 2018; Vollmer & Karakayali, 2018).

The increased mediatisation of migratory flows also fuelled the idea of a real emergency requiring drastic measures, thus justifying national governments' decisions to tighten borders' control and regulations. Immigration has progressively assumed greater public centrality, becoming a key part of the political agenda, entering the discourses of national political parties and becoming a central theme in electoral competitions (Colombo, 2018). This politicisation of immigration (Krzyżanowski et al., 2018) has been contextualised at the national and regional levels in relation to each country's degree of involvement and its history of seeking or offering refuge and hosting migrants and in relation to existing challenges including Euro-scepticism (Triandafyllidou, 2018). Fuelled by the so-called 'politics of fear' (Wodak, 2015), public debate has become progressively more polarised

because of the widespread use of 'migrant crisis' or 'refugee crisis' frames (Colombo, 2018). These discursive choices carry an alarmist connotation, justifying stricter border controls and legitimising the EU's alleged urgency while deflecting responsibility for the poor conditions faced by asylum seekers (Krzyżanowski et al., 2018).

The intensification of border enforcement and immigration policing has been accompanied and substantiated by a scaremongering construction of migrants as a threat (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017; De Genova, 2017; Thorleifsson, 2019) and by essentialist racist practices, which assume a coherent (and idealised) European identity that must defend its democratic and liberal values from chaotic and exceptional migration (Cantat, 2016). These dynamics have been further fuelled and amplified by the resurgence of radical right populist and nationalist agendas, which have entrenched the exclusionary rhetoric of otherness (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017; Krzyżanowski et al., 2018) both within and outside European countries, labelling immigrants and asylum seekers as a threat to their economy, safety, and national identity (Gontijo & Lana, 2020). The narrative construction of the duality between Self versus Other — sustained and reproduced by both state policies and radical right discourses — has reinforced asymmetrical power relations between an internal identity and an external alterity (Gontijo & Lana, 2020). This has led not only to the dehumanisation of migrants and their stigmatisation in political and media discourses and practices, but also to the legitimisation of brutal and repressive measures against them, including detention, deportation, and forms of physical and psychological violence (Cantat, 2016; Eberl et al., 2018).

Overall, in addressing the so-called 'migration crisis', nationalist parties' campaigns and agendas have consistently portrayed migrants (particularly Muslims) as the Other par excellence, perpetuating colonial tropes around misogyny, patriarchy, backwardness and violence (Sager & Mulinari, 2018). These orientalist and racialised constructions of migrants and migration crises are closely intertwined with gendered narratives, where women's rights are instrumentalised to justify exclusionary and nationalist agendas. These framings are actively (re) produced through hybrid media dynamics, where social platforms amplify simplified narratives of threat and contribute to the affective polarisation of the debate (Chadwick, 2017; Engesser et al., 2017). The next section explores how the radical right mobilises such gendered discourses through the lens of femonationalism.

### 3. Gender, migration and the radical right

In exploring right-wing parties' engagement with women and gender issues, a particularly useful notion is that of femonationalism (Farris, 2017). It represents a right-wing nationalist ideology which advances anti-immigration, particularly anti-Islam, agendas, by exploiting feminist and gender equality themes, with the support of 'femocrats', i.e. representatives of governmental gender equality organisations (Farris, 2017). A peculiarity of this ideology is that while it naturalises reactionary views on women and gender issues (e.g. by opposing equal opportunity policies, gender studies, feminist movements, and same-sex marriages, supporting a traditional conception of gender roles and the family), it also defends the rights of Muslim women, portrayed as victims of the patriarchy that is supposed to uniformly characterise Islamic culture (Berg, 2019).

Some women leaders appropriate the feminist discourse of European radical right forces. By identifying themselves with 'the people', they idealise their nation and their own - often ethnic - community, oppose immigrants and left-wing elites, and in doing so destabilise and appropriate feminist genealogies traditionally associated with progressive politics, through maternalist and nationalist tropes (Álvares, 2019; Bader & Mottier, 2020; Berg, 2019; Colella, 2021; Farris, 2017). These dynamics are increasingly articulated on social media platforms, where populist antagonisms and appeals to 'common sense' are performed and circulated. This environment favours simplified dichotomies - people vs. elites, insiders vs. outsiders - and enables leaders to enact

femonationalist logics with high visibility and immediacy (Engesser et al., 2017; Moffitt, 2016; Wodak, 2015).

Multicultural coexistence models are seen as an imposition of the 'corrupt elites' of the left, which are distant, ineffective, disrespectful and unresponsive to the real problems and needs of the people (Basile & Mazzoleni, 2020; Mazzoleni & Ivaldi, 2022). In this sovereigntist rhetoric, 'the people' feel threatened by both migration flows and multiculturalism imposed by elites, leading to the fragility and permeability of national borders — a threat often articulated through the instrumentalisation of women's rights and the figure of the national woman as a symbol of cultural integrity (Álvares, 2019; Mouffe, 2005). Opposition to immigration finds its justification in the rejection of specific cultures, particularly Islam, as misogynistic, patriarchal and violent (Colella, 2021; Farris, 2017, 2022).

An Orientalist lens (Said, 1978) allows for the homogenisation of both one's own nation and the 'host' culture, with European nations being placed at the pinnacle of civilisation - the model for gender equality, progress, freedom and emancipation - and the Others constructed as backward and in need of civilisation (Berg, 2019; Gianettoni & Roux, 2010). For instance, Marine Le Pen presents herself as a "free Frenchwoman," warning that immigration could trigger a regression that jeopardises freedoms won by French mothers and grandmothers (Álvares, 2019). More broadly, European right-wing parties perpetuate and construct Non-Western cultures and societies, in particular those Islamic, unequivocally as inferior, backward and violent: a real threat to Western Europe exceptionalism (Colella, 2021; Farris, 2017). The Muslim migrant man is constructed as dangerous, patriarchal, misogynistic and prone to rape (Colella, 2021; Sorce, 2018), while Muslim women who wear the veil are depicted as the victims of Islamic patriarchal culture (Farris, 2017). Islam thus becomes the unacceptable and invasive antagonist (Colella, 2021).

Contemporary nationalism revives colonial tropes through Orientalist, racist and Islamophobic narratives that portray Muslim women as passive, incapable of self-determination, and in need of salvation from the oppression and violence of Muslim men (Abu Lughod, 2013; Sarkar, 2017). In turn, Muslim men are now depicted as a threat to the West (Farris, 2017, 2022; Olufemi, 2021). This recalls Spivak's (1988) formulation of colonial discourse as "white men saving brown women from brown men," which the European radical right reconfigured as Western liberal women saving brown women; through this shift, female leaders mobilise gender equality discourses to legitimise racialised and exclusionary agendas. As Leila Hadj-Abdou (2010) makes clear, this rhetoric portrays an inequality between the emancipated and free women of 'one's own people' and the subjugated Muslim women, which obscures the inequality between men and women within 'one's own nation'. For example, the Swiss Christian Democratic People's Party traditionally opposed political initiatives for equal opportunities, but today considers women's rights as an established reality in the country, irreconcilable with Muslim and African immigrants considered 'backward' (Bader & Mottier, 2020).

Against this backdrop, this study analyses Meloni's social media posts, showing that her rhetoric aligns with femonationalism and orientalist narratives, while reflecting the specificities of Italy's Catholic tradition and national political culture. Our analysis specifies that these logics materialise in three recurrent discursive strategies: (a) the good mother of the homeland, (b) the Christian defence of civilisation, and (c) the proclaimed commitment to women's rights against migration. It thus clarifies the discursive strategies through which femonationalist politics are normalised in the Italian context.

### 4. Methodology

This study adopts a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach (Fairclough, 1995, 2001, 2003, 2005). The central tenet of the CDA is that discourses do not simply represent the world out there or individual positions but contribute to sustaining or transforming them (Jørgensen

& Phillips, 2014). Discourses are thus shaped by and shape the social world, existing in a dialectical relation with other social practices and processes. The CDA links everyday language to macro social processes, examining how discursive practices produce and reproduce ideologies, hierarchies, and relations of domination, and may become sites of contestation and resistance. For this reason, the CDA is politically committed to showing how inequalities and injustice are reproduced through discourse, and how discourses can foster emancipatory transformation (Priola et al., 2013).

In recent years, a growing body of scholarship has relied on social media posts to analyse discourses and related processes of social reproduction and contestation (Han & Liu, 2024), often employing the CDA (Esposito & KhosraviNik, 2023; Shirazi, 2013; Zhang et al., 2022). Some of these studies examine online platforms as central sites for the performance and dissemination of populist discourse. While populist discourses are our focus, we acknowledge that online platforms are also important sites of resistance and activism (Abbas et al., 2022; Jackson et al., 2020; Murthy, 2018). Social media posts are not mere personal expressions but constitute performative acts through which political leaders construct identities and communicate directly with 'the people' (Moffitt, 2016; Wodak, 2015). Social media thus provide a privileged arena for articulating the ideological core of populism, including the dichotomies between 'the people' and 'the elite' or between the national community and threatening outsiders (Engesser et al., 2017). Moreover, within a hybrid media system, digital content produced by politicians often circulates across mainstream outlets, thereby influencing broader public debate and agenda-setting (Chadwick, 2017).

Building on this scholarship, our study employs a CDA, informed by the concept of femonationalism, to analyse Meloni's social posts on gender, women's rights and migration. Informed by Fairclough's (2001) CDA approach, our analysis aims at shedding light on the subjugation and dehumanisation of migrants and migrant women through the discursive appropriation of women's rights, and to unveil the discursive strategies employed to perpetuate and reproduce forms of oppression.

Our data consist of Meloni's social media posts published on her official accounts on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Posts were selected according to the following criteria: 1) published between January 2015, when migration became a central theme in the Italian public debate, and her electoral success in September 2022; 2) contained explicit reference to three themes, gender, women's rights and migration; 3) when a post merely announced Meloni's participation in a TV, radio, or press interview on these themes, we retrieved the corresponding intervention from the media source indicated in the post and included it in the corpus only when the full transcript or recording was publicly available.

By applying these criteria, we identified 41 posts which, together with the transcripts of the interviews and speeches, constitute our empirical material. In some cases, the archives of major Italian newspapers were also consulted to contextualise the events mentioned in Meloni's statements.

The analysis was iterative and reflexive. We began by individually reading and examining the empirical material before engaging in collective discussions to refine our interpretations. Our focus was on the discursive strategies employed by Meloni in her communication on gender, women's rights, and migration. To guide the analysis, we adopted a twofold lens: moving from the micro level of everyday language to the macro level of Meloni's women's rights agenda, and vice versa. Through this process, we identified three recurrent strategies (the good mother of the homeland, the Christian defence of civil rights, and the radical right's proclaimed commitment to women's rights), which we examine in the following section to show how women's rights are mobilised as weaponry to stigmatize Muslim migrant men and women and justify anti-immigration positions.

## 5. Results

### 5.1. *The good mother of the homeland*

Commenting on the femicide of Saman Abbas, a young woman of Pakistani origin killed on 30 April 2021 by her family allegedly because she opposed an arranged marriage with her cousin, the FdI leader portrayed Islam as anti-democratic, misogynist and violent. This pattern was evident in a Facebook post of 28 May 2021: "Saman, like so many others [women], risks being a victim of Islamic fundamentalism, which considers women as inferior beings to men to be subjugated" (Meloni, 2021). Through the racialisation of sexism (Indelicato & Lopes, 2024), Meloni constructed misogyny and gender violence as the founding basis of Islam and the culture of othered Islam. The acts of violence and subjugation committed by Muslim men were framed as a result of their culture and religion, thus essentialising and homogenising this social category.

Muslim women were seen as accomplices of the Islamic patriarchy, as Meloni stated on the Abbas case:

If the investigators' thesis is confirmed, it would mean that this girl's mother lured her [...] into a trap, knowing exactly what was going to happen. I am a mother, and to me, something like this is simply unthinkable. And I think we cannot pretend that this problem does not exist because we are a civilisation where women have fought for decades to have equality (Diritto e Rovescio, 2021).

By invoking her identity as a mother, Meloni presented herself as an authentic guardian of national and gendered values, contrasting her own maternal role with that of Muslim mothers portrayed as complicit in violence. Meloni's femonationalist rhetoric portrayed Muslim women either as victims to be saved or accomplices of Islamic 'fundamentalism' and unable to protect their offspring from it. While portraying Abbas as a victim in need of protection, incapable of self-determination, dominated and subjugated by Muslim men, Meloni positioned herself in opposition to the Muslim mother who 'lured her daughter into a trap', something 'unthinkable' for a mother in the West, elevated as the model civilisation where women equality was achieved. Meloni's paternalistic and pseudo-feminist rhetoric instrumentally used this tragic news story to legitimise the cultural primacy of the West, placing Italian women and their culture on a higher plane than Muslim women, as if gender equality had already been achieved in Italy. Her statement blurred the inequalities still present in the global North.

By constructing Abbas's mother as an accomplice to the Islamisation of the nation (Colella, 2021; Donà, 2022), Meloni emphasised her own role as a mother and positioned herself as a cultural guardian of Eurocentric values at the expense of Non-Western othered, differentiating Western mothers from Muslim immigrant mothers in terms of their ability to ensure the healthy reproduction of the nation by protecting their offspring. This discourse showed that Meloni mobilised maternalist and orientalist tropes to legitimise exclusionary and racialised representations of Muslim migrants, aligning with broader patterns of femonationalism identified in the literature (Berg, 2019; Farris, 2017). This maternalist framing aligns with broader patterns in radical right gender discourses, where motherhood is elevated as a key marker of women's political legitimacy and a symbol of national continuity (Akkerman, 2015; Farris, 2017; Geva, 2020). In such narratives, the mother of the nation embodies the cultural and moral superiority of 'the people' and contrasts sharply with racialised and othered maternal figures, demonised and constructed either as victims in need of salvation or as accomplices of violence and misogyny who failed to integrate into Italian society and embrace its values.

### 5.2. *The Christian defence of civil rights*

Meloni's rhetoric constructs Muslim men and women as the Other, casting Islam as inherently violent and backward while presenting

Christianity as the foundation of Western freedoms and gender equality. Her speeches emphasised that the roots of Western culture are to be considered superior to those of the East, where 'East' refers to the 'Arab and Islamic world' taken as a paradigm (Said, 1978). The Christian religion, particularly the Catholic Church, seen as the foundation of Western values, was contrasted with Islam whose characteristics would make it potentially threatening to the West because of possible interpretations that could justify criminal actions.

One of the great differences that exist between the Christian, Catholic religion and the Islamic religion is that we have [...] sacred texts, like the Koran, which are certainly very old and very important. But in our part of the world, there is an official interpretation of those sacred texts, in Islam this is not the case: in Islam there is no official interpretation of the sacred texts; in Islam there is no official ecclesial religious hierarchy. So, this implies that anyone can interpret the Koranic law as they please, and this does not only happen elsewhere, it happens unfortunately at our place too (Diritto e Rovescio, 2021).

Exasperated by the 'cultural differences' between Italy, and Europe in general, and the racialised Other, the Muslim migrants, Meloni evoked the risk of religious extremism as intrinsic to Islam due to the absence of an authoritative guide to interpret sacred texts. By creating a division between 'us' and 'them', Meloni constructed Islam as a threat to Italian values and culture, incompatible with Western civilisation, whose stability is guaranteed by the Christian-Catholic religion, the cornerstone of Italian and European identity.

Islam was often associated with fundamentalism, and its (alleged) aim at attacking Western gender and sexual rights. As reported by an Italian press agency specialising in video coverage of political and institutional events, Meloni declared:

We saw an attack in Orlando, in the United States, that produced 50 dead in a club for homosexuals [...]. I believe that this ability of the West to continue to deny that there is a problem with Islam, that there is an internal problem within Islamic culture, that it is not simply a matter of madmen who have nothing to do with religion, who have nothing to do with the preaching of hatred that unfortunately continues to exist in the world, does our civilisation no great favour [...] There is a part of Islam that hates our freedom (Agenzia Vista, 2016).

Here, Meloni appropriates the language of LGBTQ+ rights — which she otherwise opposes — to reinforce the image of Islam as a threat to Western civilisation, a parallel that aligns with broader patterns of femonationalism. Although she has relentlessly opposed the recognition of LGBTQ+ rights, and the government she has led since 2022 has been criticised for its backlash against women's reproductive rights, her speeches trace the danger to the West and its freedoms back to Islamic terrorism and its hatred for Western liberties.

Islam, portrayed as homogeneous and unitary, was pitted against the West. This reinforced the idea of confrontation with the Muslim faith, which was allegedly at the root of terrorist attacks worldwide. For Meloni, terrorism was an inherent problem of Islamic culture, and Muslim men were portrayed as uncivilised, prone to violence, fanatics, and terrorists. By advocating the idea that Islam is a political ideology susceptible to interpretations that undermine the West's values of freedom and rights rooted in the Christian tradition, Meloni constructed and legitimised prejudice against migrants and asylum seekers and normalised hostility towards them. Through these statements, Meloni mobilised orientalist and femonationalist tropes to justify the exclusion of Muslim migrants, presenting Western civilisation as inherently protective of women and minorities and Islam as its antithesis.

### 5.3. The radical right's commitment to women's rights

The third discourse identified in Meloni's speeches illustrates that gender issues are instrumentalised within the values of the radical right,

and thus reinforces orientalist and femonationalist constructions of Muslim men and women. Meloni identifies the veil as a symbol of Islamic misogynist oppression that is incompatible with Western democratic values: "in Europe, women have freed themselves, after centuries of struggle, from symbols of subjugation such as these [the veil] and we have no intention of giving up our achievements in the name of left-wing political correctness" (Meloni, 2022b).

Within a neocolonialist framework, Meloni portrayed the wearing of the Islamic veil as an oppressive practice akin to a prison chain (Panighel, 2023). Her concern for Muslim women's freedom is articulated through a comparative essentialist lens, attentive to the ways in which they differ from Western women, entirely neglecting their individual and collective agency. Importantly, beyond perpetuating racist tropes, the obsession with the veil (Yeğenoğlu, 1998), widely manifested in right-wing discourses — especially by white women leaders — excludes women who wear it from the production of discourses about themselves, furthering the marginalisation and oppression that these right-wing actors claim to oppose. This exclusion enacts the denial of agency and self-determination of Muslim women, who cease to be subjects with their own experiences and ideas because what matters is interpreted as being only "in their heads", not "underneath" (Panighel, 2023).

Another theme emerging from this discourse is the constant construction of the left as permissive to attacks on women's rights because of its openness to migrants and asylum seekers. Meloni invoked this discursive clash between women and migrants on several occasions, including: "I want to ask my left-wing colleagues and feminists what sense it makes to have decades of fighting for equality and then pretend that a problem eradicated from our civilized society is now coming back through immigration and Islamists coming here to Italy" (Diritto e Rovescio, 2021).

Meloni described herself as committed to defending women's rights and Italian and European values, which she portrayed as threatened by Islamic immigration. Her position as a woman and mother lends credibility to this rhetoric, presenting her as an authentic defender of Western women against the supposed threats of immigration. Women politicians in left-wing parties and feminists are depicted as distant, ineffective and unresponsive elites who fail to protect Western women from the risks of immigration (Basile & Mazzoleni, 2020). By instrumentalising women's rights issues, Meloni has fuelled the sense of insecurity to strengthen her supranationalist political agenda aimed at preserving the state, its traditions, and its people through border management, opposition to migratory flows, and rejection of the opening policies of supranational powers.

She often touched on sexual violence to fuel fear of immigration, to emphasise the right-wing's supposed commitment to women's rights, and to attack centre-left politicians accused of colluding with the violence of Islamic men. An example can be traced to her comments about the sexual assault and robbery of several girls on New Year's Eve 2022 in Milan's Piazza Duomo. The girls reported being victims of 'packs' of immigrants of Egyptian origin. In her statement, Meloni highlighted what she called the cultural roots of the violence:

So, if we go even further back than Cologne, when did we first hear about this phenomenon? I will tell you: we are in Egypt, in 2013. There are street demonstrations against then-President Morsi. At the end of those demonstrations, it came out that there had been hundreds of rapes. It was a political act to say that in a certain culture, women do not have the right to demonstrate against the established power [...] in the left-wing ideological circuit, the woman wins over the man, and therefore should be helped if harassed, but the Muslim, the immigrant, the illegal immigrant wins over the harassed woman (Meloni, 2022a).

Meloni accused Muslim men of being enemies of the state, to be excluded because their fundamentalism and aggression were portrayed as threats to the social order. Framing herself as the defender of women's safety, she warned that immigration endangered both the achievements

of Italian women and the integrity of the nation. Meloni's orientalism (Said, 1978) rested on the assumption of an ontological distinction between the 'West', imagined as open and free from gender violence, and the 'East', depicted as closed, violent, and oppressive. This categorisation constructed immigrants as a monolithic, uncivilised Other, opposed to the civilized European Self. Within this framework, 'Muslim culture', and specifically migrant men, functioned as the constitutive outside (Butler, 1993), the excluded yet necessary figure through which Italian identity, presented as a Eurocentric paradise guaranteeing women's rights (including those of Muslim women), was defined and asserted.

#### 5.4. Women's Rights used as racist weaponry: concluding remarks

In October 2019, in one of her most influential speeches at a right-wing coalition convention, Meloni stated: "I am a woman, I am a mother, I am Italian and Christian, and nobody will take this away from me." This became a catchphrase widely referenced in TV programmes, newspaper articles, and social media memes. This statement deserves its notoriety, as it succinctly encapsulates the femonationalist, anti-feminist and anti-immigrant force of her gender agenda. As our analysis has shown, the appeal to motherhood echoes Meloni's broader self-representation as the 'good mother of the homeland', contrasted with racialised maternal figures portrayed as complicit in violence, such as in the case of Saman Abbas.

In line with radical right populist campaigns, Meloni's political discourse intertwines women's rights with the four classic sovereigntist themes (immigration, nationalism, security, crime) by using highly personalised narratives rooted in her working-class background and upbringing. This connection emerges most clearly in her instrumental use of news events, such as the sexual violence cases in Milan, to tie gendered insecurity to migration, or in her repeated denunciations of the veil as a symbol of Islamic oppression. These examples illustrate that women's rights are mobilised to rearticulate nationalist and exclusionary agendas.

The Italian case is not unique: other European examples have similarly entrusted female leaders with the task of naturalising and promoting traditional radical-right views under an ostensibly emancipatory agenda. Thus, traditional anti-immigration positions today find a renewed justification in the alleged need to counter the 'Islamisation' of Europe, which would allegedly threaten women's rights and security (Farris, 2017, 2022). In Meloni's discourse, migrants, especially Muslims, are constructed as a threat through scaremongering strategies that reduce gender to violence against women. She consistently associates Islam with misogyny and terrorism, while presenting Christianity and Western culture as guarantors of women's emancipation and LGBTQ+ freedoms.

This apparent contradiction rests on a clear separation between the figure of 'woman' and the concept of 'gender', enabling the selective appropriation of certain women's rights while rejecting others. Meloni frequently frames herself as the authentic defender of women, contrasting her position with feminists and left-wing politicians, accused of complacency in the face of migrant violence. Radical right parties thus co-opt women's rights to sustain their racist agendas (Indelicato & Lopes, 2024), defending only those rights and groups that fit within a sovereigntist ideology and facilitate the othering of immigrants, particularly Muslim men (Gianettoni & Roux, 2010).

Women are linked to the electoral campaigns of radical right-wing parties through their ability to find a reassuring and 'gentle' basis for promoting political agendas that remain subversive of democratic achievements and that have often placed such parties on the margins of institutions. Meloni's rise to power, grounded in family values and traditional gender roles (mother, sister, daughter), fits this pattern. She selectively invokes women's rights to purplewash anti-immigration positions, presenting herself as defending women — both Western and Muslim — from the machismo allegedly intrinsic to Islamic culture.

Meloni asserts that both Italian and Muslim women should be protected from Muslim men, leveraging her position as a woman and mother to advance and legitimise these claims. In doing so, she presents herself not simply as a politician, but as a woman assuming responsibility for defending women and their rights, and western civilisation more broadly. As our empirical analysis demonstrated, this strategy operates through three recurring discursive frames: the maternalist contrast between Western and Muslim mothers, the Christian defence of civilisation and its freedoms, and the radical right's proclaimed commitment to women's rights against the 'threat' of migration. Together, these discourses fuel fear of the 'Islamisation' of Italy (Colella, 2021; Donà, 2022). This is how women's rights are instrumentalised in Islamophobic anti-immigration campaigns (Farris, 2017, 2022; Griffini & Montecchio, 2023; Indelicato & Lopes, 2024): through their detachment from broader gender politics and their reduction to a limited, racialised agenda (Butler, 2024).

Meloni justifies the discrimination against the racialised violent Other, whose mere presence is construed as an 'invasion' (Farris, 2017). The result is the construction of an orientalist category of 'Islamic culture' as a hypostatised identity: a culture that is described but that is denied the ability to describe itself. Debating the veil and the oppression it supposedly symbolises becomes a more subtle way of accusing these cultures of misogyny while presenting European cultures as free of such shackles (Farris, 2017; Olufemi, 2021). Finally, this femonationalist, neocolonialist, and racist rhetoric portrays Muslim migrant men as inherently disrespectful of women's freedoms and gender equality (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017), blaming them for the challenges of integration.

In this way, women's rights become a discursive weapon, deployed not to challenge gender inequalities but to uphold racialised and exclusionary nationalist agendas. In this sense, Meloni exemplifies the shift from the colonial trope of "men saving brown women from brown men" (Spivak, 1988) to that of Western women presenting themselves as the authentic protectors of women's rights, thereby legitimising exclusionary nationalist projects. This study contributes to feminist scholarship on femonationalism by showing how Meloni mobilises women's rights as a selective, racialised, and maternalist discourse — rooted in the Italian post-fascist and Catholic context, yet resonant with broader European trends.

#### CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Diego Lasio:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Emanuela Girei:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **João Manuel de Oliveira:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Luana Piras:** Data curation. **Francesco Serri:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

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