

# ‘Gender nationalism’: The new (old) politics of belonging

Leila Hadj Abdou<sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Political Science, University of Vienna, Austria

\* E-Mail: leila.hadj-abdou@univie.ac.at

## Abstract

This contribution takes a look at the phenomenon of ‘gender-nationalism’. It argues that references about gender equality and women’s rights play an important role in contemporary politics of belonging: these references are used as boundary markers in nationalist narratives, constructing the self versus the immigrant other. The contribution traces the emergence of this phenomenon in Europe, and focuses on its occurrence in recent debates. It concludes that whilst gender equality is a crucial claim that needs to be upheld in the public sphere, we also need to pay attention to intersectional mechanisms of exclusion and oppression which are at play in contemporary versions of gender nationalism.

## Keywords

Nationalism, Gender Equality, Women’s Rights, Immigration, Populist Radical Right, Muslims

# „Gender Nationalismus“: Neue (alte) Politik der Zugehörigkeit

## Zusammenfassung

Dieser Beitrag setzt sich mit dem Phänomen des „Gender-Nationalismus“ auseinander. Das Hauptargument, das der Beitrag verfolgt, ist, dass in gegenwärtigen Politiken der Zugehörigkeit Referenzen auf Geschlechtergleichheit und Frauenrechte eine zentrale Rolle einnehmen, wobei diese Referenzen als Demarkationslinien zwischen „uns“ und den „anderen“ funktionieren. Die Entwicklung dieses Phänomens seit den späteren 1980ern wird in dem Beitrag rekonstruiert und dessen Manifestation in aktuellen Debatten aufgezeigt. Der Artikel versteht sich als Kritik am Gender-Nationalismus und plädiert für eine Perspektive, die Ausgrenzung und Unterdrückung in ihrer Intersektionalität erfasst.

## Schlüsselwörter

Nationalismus, Geschlechtergleichheit, Frauenrechte, Migration, Populistische Rechtsparteien, Muslime

## Acknowledgement

The ideas presented in this contribution were developed in the framework of cooperation and continuous exchange with Sieglinde Rosenberger. From 2006-2009 we have worked together in the research project “VEIL” on debates about Muslim headscarves. But it was long before that project, that Sieglinde’s extraordinary capacity to think analytically and her passion for research has started to inspire me. I owe her a lot for that, and consider her as a wonderful academic colleague and friend.

The author has declared that no competing interests exist.

## Introduction: the potent revival of nationalisms in Europe

In August 2016 local bans of the Muslim swim-cloth, the so called burkini, in several French coastal towns have sparked a heated controversy across Europe. While some have been outraged by the punishment and forced undressing of Muslim women by armed police forces, others such as the French prime-minister Emanuel Valls have unveiled their discontent with the Muslim swimwear: 'It is the expression of a political project, a counter-society, based notably on the enslavement of women', Valls underlined (The Independent August 24, 2016). Controversies, such as the 'Burkini affair' are closely tied to the revival of nationalism in Europe.

This revival of nationalism is characterized by two major, interrelated components: First, current versions of nationalism in Europe are paradoxically embracing 'Europeanness'. The revival of nationalism is closely related to particular forms of othering, which do not exclusively refer to the national 'other', but to Europe's 'other'. Secondly, contemporary versions of nationalism are deeply gendered. Nationalist projects always have exhibited a gender component, but the specific ways of gendering nationalist discourses and politics have changed, as will be discussed in this contribution. References to gender equality and women's rights have become a core element of boundary making, in establishing 'Europeanized' nationalist narratives of the 'self' and the 'other'. It is this phenomenon which I call 'gender-nationalism', its role in contemporary politics of belonging, and its manifestations in recent debates in Europe this contribution is interested in and will discuss in the following. The contribution shows that gender nationalism is a central instrument in the nationalist repertoire to legitimize the exclusion of the 'other'.

The contribution first introduces the concept of the politics of belonging, which provides a useful tool to understand the dynamics of nationalism. It then looks at the emergence of gender nationalism post-1989. Afterwards it illustrates the phenomenon of gender-nationalism with examples from the current "refugee crisis" debate; a debate which starting from summer 2015 has further raised concerns with immigration and gave nationalism a new boost. It then discusses the nexus between Europeanization and gender nationalism. The conclusion is eventually highlighting some implications of gender nationalism for gender equality.

## Nationalism and the politics of belonging

Nationalism and its reproduction is strongly related to the 'politics of belonging', or to be more precise nationalism is the expression of a specific project of the politics of belonging. The politics of belonging is concerned with de-

marcating the political community and establishing „who is in and who is out“. It can be summarized as the dirty work of boundary maintenance (Yuval Davis 2006, 204) separating the world into 'us' and 'them'. Some projects of the politics of belonging are more open, whereas others are more exclusive, but they are always directed at promoting power, either through reproducing existent power relations or by challenging them. Nationalism is based on the idea of a national community that is bound together by common imagined features. Other, competing projects have emerged in addition to nationalism, and are e.g. constructed around the notion of religion or cosmopolitanism (Yuval Davis 2011). It is finally important to note, that the politics of belonging does not only involve the construction of boundaries but also the inclusion and exclusion of certain people based on social categories (Yuval Davis 2011, 19), it is thus not merely a symbolic act, but can have substantive consequences in terms of rights and opportunities.

Although, as noted before, alternative, competing projects of the politics of belonging have emerged, nationalism is undoubtedly still highly relevant today. But there are certain shifts as regards how national narratives construct the ideal image of the nation. The question is, thus, not whether nationalism is still important, but how the idea of the nation is constructed today. Gender is a core element in the process of reimagining the nation. Women have been used throughout history as the symbolic border guards of the nation (see Yuval Davis 1993). It is often the purity and the modesty of female citizens, which morally represent the nation, whereas men are imagined as the protectors of the nation. Through protecting the nations' women, they are 'saving' the nation. As we will see in the following these classical imaginations are still at play in nationalist narratives today. What differentiates gender nationalism from previous variants, though, is the focus on those living in Europe, but who are considered not to be of Europe, namely Muslims immigrants.

## Post-1989: From Economic Concerns to Cultural Values

New variants of gender nationalism emerged at the end of the 1980s, as became particularly evident in growing debates about Muslim headscarves across Europe. An analysis of headscarf controversies across Europe by a project led by Sieglinde Rosenberger and Birgit Sauer (Rosenberger/Sauer 2012) showed, that the oppression of Muslim women, took a central role in establishing new "tales about what differentiates 'us' from 'them'" (Kilic et al. 2008, 403).

The practice of Muslim veiling was widely interpreted as a practice that is (re)importing gender inequality and the oppression of women to European nation states, whereby Muslim women were often constructed as victims in an essentialist, and oversimplified manner. Voices of Muslim women themselves relating the wearing of the headscarf to self-determination were widely ignored in these debates or explicitly rejected as misled.

It is revealing that the first headscarf controversy, concerning two French school girls Alma and Lila, took place in 1989. The end of the cold war stimulated the prioritization of questions of culture and identity over economic questions and the distribution of material resources (cf. Fraser 1995) and therefore triggered this kind of debates.

From 1989 onwards in particularly migrant women have become objects of the politics of belonging in nationalist narratives. These narratives exhibit continuities to the previous colonialist gaze on the "female other", but they also exhibit differences. Colonial ideology often defined the colonized people as a whole as "weak, submissive and irrational" (Hunt 2002, 2). The colonial rule was consequently a reflection of male superiority, which was at the time seen as the legitimate, "natural" order in colonizing societies (ibid.). Today it is "gender equality" rather than "male superiority" which is portrayed in nationalist discourses as defining European nation states.

A central element of this post-1989 gender nationalism is that the integration of immigrants has become a contested arena. Integration politics, as Uitermark (2010, 6) has put it, have burst out of their specific policy domain and entered the civic sphere, where the conditions and nature of belonging are negotiated. This dynamic became especially evident in the introduction of so called civic integration and citizenship tests in several European countries, which did not only require newcomers to demonstrate linguistic proficiency, but often asked immigrants to demonstrate a commitment to values such as gender equality. Probably one of the most telling examples is the citizenship test, which was introduced by the Netherlands in 2006. It included a compulsory viewing of a film showing a topless sunbathing woman, as well as homosexual men kissing each other (Kilic et al. 2008, 404). Although not explicitly targeted at Muslims these tests were clearly part of a narrative about the cultural alterity of Muslims, their alleged irreconcilable cultural differences and backwardness. In sum, from 1989 onwards debates about immigrants in Europe have been turned into debates about Muslims, and 'Muslimness' was constructed in these debates as incompatible with belonging to the nation. Pre-1989 traditional left-right distinctions had been thus widely replaced by the mid of the 2000s with a culturally loaded distinction between 'traditional (Muslim) immigrants'

and 'progressive natives' (cf. Yilmaz 2015), whereas references to gender relations were at the core of these demarcation processes.

### The populist right and gender-nationalism

These developments supported the rise of the populist right, who have been the agenda setters as regards anti-Muslim mobilization in Europe (see Rosenberger / Hadj-Abdou 2013). Previous dominant issues within political party competition, that structured Europe's political systems along a left-right spectrum, have been complemented by a non-economic, cultural dimension of societal conflicts, which particularly new populist parties were able to exploit.

The discourses of the new populist radical right movement in Western Europe, such as the French Front National, or the Austrian Freedom Party are a paradigmatic example of the use of gender-nationalism. As part of their anti-Islam agenda these parties have emphasized a commitment to gender-equality, women's rights and freedom of choice (Akkermann 2015).

This endorsement of self-determination and gender-equality is somewhat puzzling given that the populist radical right continues to embrace a conservative ideology as regards family values and gender roles, and is usually opposing feminism. The commitment to gender equality has hence been rightly identified as a Janus quality of this kind of parties. Their commitment is predominantly instrumental to an anti-Islam and anti-immigration agenda as Akkermann (2015, 56) noted. Rhetorical references to equality are only rarely accompanied by more concrete proposals to improve the position of immigrant women, instead restrictive policy proposals, such as restricting immigration or prohibiting Muslim practices, leads the agenda of the populist radical right (ibid, 53).

The strong calls for immigration control in the 'liberal' rhetoric of the populist right shows that the main goal is to legitimize immigration control. At the same time it can be also understood as a strategy targeting the female segment of the electorate. The populist, radical right is predominantly popular among a male electorate, in order to increase their electoral basis they hence have to adapt their electoral mobilization strategies to a female audience. Adapting a gender equality rhetoric, while keeping a conservative gender ideology can be interpreted as an effort to attract new voters, while keeping old ones. Nonna Mayer's research (2013), which has shown an increase of female voters in the case of the Front National (FN), suggests that this strategy seems to play out in favour for at least some of the radical right parties.

## The refugee crisis: a new peak of gender nationalism

In the wake of the 2015 'refugee crisis', the degree of gender nationalism reached unprecedented levels. A particular case in point is the debate following the horrid sexual attacks by groups of men of North-African descent during the 2015/16 new years' eve celebration in the German city of Cologne (see also e.g. Goetz 2016). The point I am making here is not that these attacks are not worth of condemnation, they absolutely are, but my claim is that the way these attacks were discussed in public debate have irrevocably perpetuated the idea of a male 'Muslim' threat based on a monolithic understanding of 'Muslimness', and by doing so have legitimized restrictive policies towards refugees in Europe.

The use of gender-nationalism and its objective in the wake of the refugee crisis is again particularly well illustrated in statements of the populist radical right in Western Europe. At the beginning of 2016 FN leader Marine Le Pen made the following appeal to the 'French people':

It is as a political leader, but also as a woman, that I address the French people today. It is as a free French woman, who has been able to enjoy, her whole life, the very precious freedoms fought for long and hard by our mothers and grandmothers, that I want to warn about a new form of social, human and moral regression imposed on us by the migrant crisis [...] The right to preserve the integrity of one's own body, whatever sex one may be, is one of the most essential rights. Today, for many women, this right is under attack. That barbarity can once again be used against women fills me with horror. I remember these words of Simone de Beauvoir: 'never forget that all it would take is a political, economic or religious crisis for women's rights to be called into question', and I fear that the migratory crisis signals the beginning of the end of women's rights. [...] I do not for one minute believe in the European Union to reverse this trend. I do think, very strongly, that France, should she recover her sovereignty [...] can completely choke off this migratory submersion and its diverse consequences. I am persuaded that it is the will of the Nation. (Le Pen, cit. after Galliawatch 2016).

Similarly Nigel Farage, the then leader of the populist right United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) claimed at the height of the Brexit referendum campaign in June 2016, that women would be at risk of mass sex attacks carried out by gangs of migrant men if Britain stays in the European Union: 'It depends if we vote for Brexit or not. It is an issue' (Metro News, 5 of June 2016), Farage claimed.

Gender-nationalism, though, is not limited to certain political parties and Eurosceptic actors, as the above mentioned statements might suggest. Gender nationalist narratives have actually become a dominant perspective to 'understand' the 'immigrant other' across Europe. This has become not at least clear in media debates in the aftermath of the Cologne attacks in January 2016. The German daily 'Süddeutsche Zeitung' as well as the news magazine 'Focus' produced media covers of female white bodies that were penetrated and/or invaded by black male (migrant) hands.

The discursive images employed in all these debates indicate that gender-nationalism has anew transformed itself. The previous focus on migrant women has to some extent shifted again to a focus on 'our women' that are threatened by the alien 'other'. This signifies that gender-nationalism has partly abandoned the arena of integration politics. Within the domain of integration politics gender nationalist narratives have left some space for inclusion. The 'other' could transform into a citizen, by adapting to 'our' liberal values. In this new old variant of gender-nationalism the only option left, however, is the exclusion of the 'other'. The issue is no more incompatibility, but the existential threat of the nation (symbolized by its women) itself. This is not to say, that the old focus on migrant women has completely vanished. As the in the beginning mentioned burkini controversy suggests, debates about migrant/Muslim women are still relevant today, the discursive focus though has certainly shifted from assimilation/integration to exclusion.

## Gender-nationalism and Europeanization

The above described strong deployment of gender-nationalism by the Eurosceptic, populist-radical right suggests that the revival of nationalism is strongly linked to an anti-EU agenda. Things are however slightly more complex than that. While these parties indeed reject the EU, the trope of the Muslim 'other' also reflects that national identities and consequently nationalisms in Europe now include a strong European component.

As Bunzl (2005) highlights, modern anti-Semitism as a product of the 19th century was closely related to nationalism and the emergence of the nation state, whereby the Jewish 'other' served primarily as a marker of who did or did not belong to the national community. The construction of 'Muslim other', on the other hand, determines who belongs or does not belong to Europe. As Bunzl (ibid.) remarks, those that mobilize against the 'Muslim other' are not worried whether Muslims can be good Germans, Italians or Danes; rather they question whether Muslims can be good Europeans (ibid., 502). Gender nationalism hence functions less in the interest of national, ethnic purification than as an instrument to

fortify Europe in face of international (to a great extent Muslim) migration.

The existence of gender-nationalism in current politics of belongings is moreover, also related to the fact, that family migration has replaced labour migration as the dominant type of migration to Europe (cf. Akkerman 2015). The strong focus on the role of migrant women in the past decades, hence, is also related to this changing pattern of immigration.

Gender nationalism and the Muslim trope eventually also mirror the fact that the majority of Europeans today indeed express some kind of identification with Europe. National and European identities often co-exist as research has shown (Wodak/Boukala 2015, 90). This is a fact that also actors such as the populist, radical right cannot and does not ignore. These parties successfully albeit in a paradox manner integrate and combine gender-nationalism with their Eurosceptic, and anti-immigration agenda. Gender nationalism, thus, has also "modernized", and to some extent Europeanized the rhetoric of the radical right.

In sum, current politics of belonging, which (re)constitute the nation through demarcating 'us' from the 'women oppressing Muslim immigrants' is to be understood as a deeply European phenomenon. It is linked to the emergence of 'Europeanized' national identities as well as changing patterns of immigration to Europe.

### Implications of gender-nationalism for gender-equality

Gender-nationalism often harms those it claims to 'save'. For instance, it is particularly refugee women who suffer from restricted immigration and asylum regulations, in particular restrictive family reunification rules, which are legitimized by gender-nationalism. Consequently, while initially it was mostly men, women are increasingly crossing the Mediterranean too. Women are more at risk to be sexually exploited on their way to Europe, but also to die during the travel, given that in contrast to men they are more often placed in areas below deck where exposure to fumes, leaking water, and other hazards is likely (Pickering/Cochrane 2012, 33).

Gender-nationalism establishes a 'hierarchy of oppression', which puts oppression of women before other forms of oppression. This hierarchy of oppression blends out intersectional dynamics and its consequences, such as in the example above, of being a woman and simultaneously a refugee.

It also ignores what scholars of interculturalism and multiculturalism have emphasized for some time now, namely that cultures are negotiated and transformed through encounters and interactions with others (Siim/Stolz 2015, 7).

The construction of monolithic, single collectivities through nationalist narratives, moreover, is problematic not only for those who are constructed as 'outsiders'. It is potentially also a problem for those who are imagined as being within the political community. To put it differently, the construction of difference equally homogenizes those within the community, and is oppressing differences such as class, gender, age, and political interests. These processes in turn maintain existing inequalities within the "national" community through omitting these inequalities, including gender inequalities. In other words, nationalist narratives are a-politicizing inequalities within the political community and historic struggles to overcome them, by claiming that it is the supposedly 'common achievements' (such as gender equality), that are threatened by the alien Muslim 'other'. This tale also oppresses that 'the history of secular democracy was profoundly gender-unequal, in which both women and religion were pushed to the private sphere in order to make way for masculine rationality. It was only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that women's challenge to patriarchal secularism succeeded in winning for them suffrage and eventual entry into political institutions', as the historian Joan Scott (cit. after Aune 2015) reminds us.

What is needed is not gender-nationalism, but an active thinking through intersectional dynamics which are constitutive of inequality. A critique of gender-nationalism that guided this contribution, thus, is not implying that a struggle for gender-equality (in an increasingly nationalist but also increasingly religious fundamentalist world) is obsolete, on the contrary.

Instead what this contribution has tried to emphasize is that references to gender-equality are part of a nationalist repertoire of exclusion. As such they are not primarily about gender-equality or about women's rights, but they are used instrumentally, reifying existing power-relations.

### References

- Aune, Kristin (2015). Is secularism bad for women? Internet: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/transformation/kristin-aune/is-secularism-bad-for-women> (Access: 1.8.2016)
- Akkermann, Tijtske (2015). Gender and the radical right in Western Europe: a comparative analysis of policy agendas, in: *Patterns of Prejudice*, Vol. 49(1-2), 37-60.
- Bunzl, Matti (2005). Between Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia: some Thoughts on the New Europe, in: *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 32(4), 499-508.
- Galliawatch (2016): Marine Le Pen in Cologne and women's rights. Internet: <http://galliawatch.blogspot.co.at/2016/01/marinelepenoncologneandwomens.html> (Access: 29.7.2016)

- Fraser, Nancy (1995). From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a 'Postsocialist' Age, in: *New Left Review* 212, 68–93.
- Goetz, Anja (2016). Feminismus von rechts. Eine unbehagliche Frage, in: *Femina Politica*, Vol. 25(2), 129–137.
- Hooghe, Gary/Liesbet Marks (2016). Europe's Crises and Political Contestation. Paper presented at the Conference "Theory Meets Crisis," Robert Schuman Centre, EUI, June 30–July 1, 2016
- Hunt, Tamara (2002). Introduction, in: Tamara Hunt/Micheline Lessard (Hg.): *Women and the Colonial Gaze*, New York, 1–16.
- Kilic, Sevgi/Sawitri Saharso/Birgit Sauer (2008). Headscarf Regimes in Europe. Comparative Perspectives, in: *Social Politics. International Studies in Gender, State and Society*, Vol. 16(4), 397–410.
- Mayer, Nonna (2013). From JeanMarie to Marine Le Pen: Electoral Change on the Far Right, in: *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 66(1), 160–178.
- Metro News* (2016). Nigel Farage slated for saying women more likely to be raped if we stay in EU. June 5, 2016. Internet: <http://metro.co.uk/2016/06/05/farage-slatedforsayingwomenaremorelikelytoberapedifwestayintheeu5925625/> (Access: 29.7.2016)
- Pickering, Sharon/Brandy Cochrane (2012). Irregular border-crossing deaths and gender: where, how and why women die crossing borders, in: *Theoretical Criminology*, Vol. 17(1), 27–48.
- Rosenberger, Sieglinde/Birgit Sauer (Hg.) (2012). *Politics, Religion and Gender*, London.
- Rosenberger, Sieglinde/Leila Hadj-Abdou (2013). Islam at Issue: Anti-Islamic Mobilization of the Extreme Right in Austria, in: Brian Jenkins/Andrea Mammona (Hg.): *Varieties of Right Wing Extremism*, London and New York, 149–163.
- Siim, Birte/Pauline Stoltz (2015). Reframing nationalism, citizenship and gender: Reflections on contemporary European nationalisms. Paper presented at Being a citizen in Europe, Zagreb, Croatia. Internet: [http://vbn.aau.dk/files/219159089/Reframing\\_Nationalism\\_Zagreb\\_final\\_2015.pdf](http://vbn.aau.dk/files/219159089/Reframing_Nationalism_Zagreb_final_2015.pdf) (Access: 15.4.2016)
- The Independent* (2016). Brexit: Wave of hate crime and racial abuse reported following EU Referendum. 26 of June 2016. Internet: [http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/homenews/brexit-eu-referendum-racial-racism-abuse-hate-crime-reported-latest-leave-immigration\\_a7104191.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/homenews/brexit-eu-referendum-racial-racism-abuse-hate-crime-reported-latest-leave-immigration_a7104191.html) (Access: 29.7.2016)
- Uitermark, Jan (2010). *Dynamics of Power in Dutch Integration Politics*. Doctoral thesis. University of Amsterdam.
- Yilmaz, Ferruh (2015). From immigrant worker to Muslim immigrant: Challenges for feminism, in: *Journal of Women's Studies*, Vol. 22(1), 37–52.
- Wodak, Ruth/Salomi Boukala (2015). European identities and the revival of nationalism in the European Union, in: *Journal of Language and Politics*, Vol. 14(1), 87–109.
- Yuval-Davis, Nira (2011). *The Politics of Belonging: Intersectional Contestations*, London.
- Yuval-Davis, Nira (2006). Belonging and the politics of belonging, in: *Patterns of Prejudice*, Vol. 40(3), 197–214.
- Yuval-Davis, Nira (1993). Gender and Nation, in: *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 16(4), 621–632.

## Author

Dr. Leila Hadj Abdou is an Associate Lecturer at the Department of Political Sciences of the University of Vienna. She is specialized in international migration governance, immigrant integration and immigration policies, and the populist right. From 2014–15 Dr. Hadj Abdou was a Research Fellow at the University of Sheffield (UK); and in 2013/14 she was a Research Fellow at the Centre for Transatlantic Relations in Washington D.C.. From 2003–2009 she held a position as a research associate at the Department of Politics of the University of Vienna. Dr. Hadj-Abdou holds a PhD in Social and Political Sciences from the European University Institute (2013). Latest publications include: *Migration and Refugees in the Mediterranean*. In: Volpi, Frederic and Gillespie, Richard (eds.). *Routledge Handbook on Mediterranean Politics*. Routledge 2017 (with Sarah Wolff); *The religious conversion of the Austrian populist right*. In: Roy, O., McDonnell D. and Mazouki N. (eds.): *Saving the People: How Populists Hijack Religion*. Hurst 2016; *An unstable equilibrium: Freedom of movement and the welfare state in the European Union*. In: Freeman, G. and Mirilovic, N. (eds.): *Handbook of Migration and Social Policy*. Edward Elgar 2016 (with Andrew Geddes); *The Europeanization of immigration policies*. In: Amelina, A., Horvath, K. And B. Meeus (eds.): *International Handbook of Migration and Social Transformation in Europe*. Springer 2016.