EUROPE 18.12.2018 | Weronika Grzebalska & Eszter Kováts

Beyond the anti-women backlash

How we can understand women's support for the right in Poland and Hungary

Read this article in German.

'What's wrong with them?', asked one Guardian columnist who questioned women's continuing support for the Republican party in the United States. The issue is far from novel, yet the question is regularly echoed by progressive commentators, usually accompanied by a grim story of a patriarchal backlash under right-wing populist governments.

But rather than furthering our understanding of the gendered aspects of rising right-wing populism, this question invites the explaining away of women's support for these projects in terms of women's 'false consciousness' – unawareness of oppression – or 'exercising privilege', meaning the betrayal of gender interests or minority groups for individual gains.

As such, the very question treats women as victims or double agents of patriarchy rather than pushing us to take women and their lives seriously. It also overlooks the ideological complexity of right-wing projects that are not simply anti-women but combine reactionary elements with advancing some of women's interests. By presenting right-wing women as the problem that demands urgent reaction, it also diverts attention from the structural causes that breed support for right-wing politics among women.

Rather than asking what's wrong with right-wing women, we should ask: what's wrong with the politico-economic system they find themselves in, and the political alternatives available to them? Here, Poland and Hungary can provide some insight. In both countries, governing parties Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS), since 2015, and Fidesz-KDNP, since 2010, have engaged in illiberal transformation, dismantling liberal democratic institutions such as the rule of law, colonising the state apparatus, targeting and securitising rights-based civil society and rolling back the liberal infrastructure responsible for women's rights.

Despite this radical platform, both parties were brought to power by a slightly larger percentage of female than male voters, and enjoy women's continuous support. As many as 39.7 per cent of Polish women supported PiS in 2015, compared to 38.5 per cent of men, and this number only slightly decreased after two years in power, despite ongoing threats to reproductive rights. In 2018, amid a historically high turnout, 52 per cent of women voted for Fidesz-KDNP, compared to 46 per cent of men. How can we make sense of this continued support?

They don't vote solely as women

First and foremost: the political reality obscured by popular feminist discourse is that voters' problems cut across gendered lines and are often determined by wider socio-economic divides. Women vote for these parties not solely as women but because of problems and hopes they share with men from their national collective or social class, reminding us of the limitations of political projects based on a construct of women's interests alone. As a recent Hungarian study points out, the most pressing problems women highlight are exploitation on the labour market and the poor state of healthcare and education systems.

These issues, of course, have an underlying gendered dimension – such as the feminisation of certain low-paid jobs or care work falling on women's shoulders – yet they go beyond it. In a situation where women do not see any parties addressing these gendered problems, they still believe Fidesz-KDNP represents them the best.

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Another answer is that right-wing populists actually address some of women's practical gender interests: those that Maxine Molyneux saw arising from women's positioning within the gendered division of labour rather than from a theory of women's oppression. Both PiS and Fidesz-KNDP went on to undo certain socio-economic consequences of the post-1989 transformation that have affected women in particular, as those primarily responsible for household budgets, children and other care work. In Central Europe, the transition to liberal democracy was intertwined with the adherence to the neoliberal world order that assigned the region a semi-peripheral position.

Among other matters, this took the form of rolling back the state in areas

responsible for welfare and public services, resulting in growing commodification for those who could afford it and a refamilialisation for those who couldn't. These changes empowered some women within their own social class, yet passed on economic burdens of austerity to those of lower economic standing. The dominant cultural feminism made structural problems difficult to formulate. The insecurity and inequality created by this double-faced gender regime is precisely what both illiberal parties of Central Europe have exploited when addressing their female voters.

A successful redistribution effort

The paradigmatic example is Family 500+, a flagship programme PiS launched immediately after coming to power, which offers families an unconditional monthly cash transfer of 500 PLN (€120) for every second and subsequent child until they are 18, and for the first child in families with a monthly income below €190 per family member.

This biggest redistribution policy since 1989 substantially decreased poverty among families with children and received popular support in society. While the opposition rightfully points to its limitations – specifically, a reliance on the traditional family model that underprivileges single parents – the measure proves to the electorate that their government does indeed govern, and has the capacity to push for a new social contract that respects their dignity.

In Hungary, there's a strong priority for family policy in service of demographic policy. The benefits bound to paid employment – showing a clear preference for non-Roma, heterosexual families with a decent income – have been expanded. As for the lower classes, three measures highlight a tangible effect on the everyday life of women: expansion of the public work programme, providing a monthly income of less than minimum wage but more than allowances; state intervention in the energy sector, resulting in lower utility costs; and a large rise in the minimum wage that also decreased the gender pay gap, with women representing a wide share of the worst-paid sectors.

They don't see alternatives

Who should women vote for? Across electorates, the call to choose the 'lesser evil' or return to the past is losing its momentum as a mobilising tool. As Hungarian historian Andrea Pető argued, resistance alone is not enough; there is a need to draw conclusions from how we got here in the first place.
Still, in the recent electoral campaign, the Hungarian opposition focused

on the constraints of the one-round electoral system, and on whether and which technical coalitions are necessary. They made no efforts to engage in building grassroots support in the previous eight years, nor did they develop an alternative that would go beyond 'Orbán or Europe'. If opposition parties are preoccupied with defending crumbling pillars or engaging in business as usual, it's not surprising that the illiberal right has both men and women on board.

Yet to right the wrongs, we need more than a condescending labelling of the female electorate as allies of patriarchy.

Employing what US writer Cynthia Enloe called 'feminist curiosity' and taking all women, their lives and their voting behaviour seriously can be illuminating. By highlighting the limitations of identity politics, the importance of practical interests and the lack of viable alternatives, it pushes us to go beyond the simplistic backlash framework when understanding women's support for the right in Poland and Hungary.

Rather than seeing the familialism and traditionalism promoted by illiberal right-wing politics as solely reactionary and patriarchal, it's perhaps beneficial to view them as moderate emancipatory politics *for some* when progressive politics faces a broader legitimacy crisis. They rise in importance when wider safety nets of solidarity and alternative channels of political influence are being dismantled, offering social security and political representation to a clearly delineated community.

Two wrongs don't make it right for women

By exploiting the failures of the transformation and the limited capacity of progressive movements and parties to produce real emancipation, the populist right in Central Europe has temporarily managed to win women for their project. This goes against the line of hopeful thinking that women are the ones who can save us from the Right.

However, the fact that the dominant neoliberal paradigm, along with blind spots of cultural or identity feminism that are unable to address structural problems, were the problem not the solution does not make the illiberal answer right. In fact, Kaczyński and Orbán are not building social democracy but rather a crony national capitalism with family welfare.

The model of governance employed by right-wing populists brings with it

insecurities and exclusions: dire polarisation, curtailing of press and academic freedom, colonisation of the state, eradication of the gender perspective in academia, policy and beyond, and ruthless productivism demonstrated by the recently adopted 'slave law' in Hungary and dismissing welfare claims of the disabled in Poland.

Yet to right the wrongs, we need more than a condescending labelling of the female electorate as allies of patriarchy. We need a politics that learns from its failures and combines voters' practical interests with strategic feminist goals: a politics that addresses women's socio-economic problems in a way that changes rather than petrifies gender relations.



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