"Women Are Women":

Right-Wing Women's (Essentialist) Conceptualisation of Sex/Gender in Germany and Austria

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Abstract

In this article, I explore how women in the political parties Alternative *für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany, AfD) and *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* (Freedom Party of Austria, FPÖ) make sense of the social categories: women and men. I draw on preliminary research findings from my interviews with 24 women members. The main aim of my doctoral project is to analyse how women account for their active support of the right wing and how they negotiate their positions in the parties. The rationale for my research is that right-wing parties have gained more influence and power in most European countries in recent times, and women's rights are often either disregarded or misused for a racist agenda. Nonetheless, a diverse range of women are supporting those parties. In this article, I argue that there are conflicting as well as matching conceptualisations of sex/gender between my participants, which are dominated by narratives of biological differences; however, those are entangled with social structural narratives. It is crucial to analyse how women in the parties conceptualise sex/gender, because for some participants those categories are an important part of their worldview and part of their reasons for joining the parties.

Introduction

From my feminist perspective, women's support for the right-wing parties *Alternative für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany, AfD) and *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* (Freedom Party of Austria, FPÖ) seems paradoxical. The paradox does not arise from the essentialist misconception that women are more peaceful (Lang, 2017, p. 72), but from the parties' antifeminist stances and patriarchal discourses on gender and their effects on women and people who are not fulfilling the essentialist characteristics of sex/gender. These characteristics are supported by far-right parties and their antifeminist stances include, for example, their usage of the male form as default in language which supports an

androcentric and patriarchal society (Falter and Stern, 2019). Therefore, I explore the crucial question of how women in the parties themselves use an essentialist view of sex/gender to explain the social categories: women and men. For them, those binary categories follow a 'fixed biological sex' excluding the social negotiability of sex/gender. This article is informed by my wider doctoral research, in which I analyse how women narrate their active support of the far right and negotiate their positions and spaces within the parties.

Continuously, right-wing parties use their influence in most European countries to disregard or misuse women's rights for a racist agenda; however, the number of women actively supporting those parties is increasing (Elies and Gutsche, 2018, pp. 6-9). There is a transnational rise of conservative and right-wing movements, who aim to 'restore' a 'natural' gender order and attack what they call 'gender ideology', which threatens this order (Kovàts, 2018; Klammer and Goetz, 2017). This phenomenon is widely discussed in research on the far right. The AfD and FPÖ are identified as channels for attacks on 'gender ideology'. Scholars draw attention and critically analyse right-wing parties' narratives on 'gender ideology' and their antifeminist stances (Mayer et al., 2020; Lang, 2017; Schmincke, 2020). Furthermore, they identify the significance of the category gender for analysing the far right and its political parties (Klammer and Goetz, 2017; Blee, 2020; Akkerman, 2015). Xydias (2020) explores women's explanations and gendered justifications for their AfD affiliation, she mainly focuses on publicly available information and only includes two interviews with AfD politicians. I contribute to understanding the right-wing discourses on gender by analysing the narratives of women members at a local and national level, enabling an understanding of the complexity of the phenomenon beyond the parties' lines. I argue that the interviewed women held opinions on sex/gender that were in line with the parties' gender essentialist positions; however, their views were more complicated. Their narratives are not cohesive and partly contradict their parties' discourses.

Narratives of women members and the parties' discourses

In 2020, I conducted 24 semi-structured interviews with 18 video/phone calls as well as one face-to-face and five written interviews. Of the 24 women, 20 women actively support the AfD and four the FPÖ, this includes career politicians as well as members who are active at a local level. The first results explored here, on the participants' discussion of sex/gender, arose from my initial analysis of the data. Using socially oriented narrative research, I investigate how my participants construct and express their understandings of their realities around their party membership. This also allows me to position narratives in wider social discourses based on participants' interpersonal, social and cultural contexts (Esin et al., 2013, pp. 204-205). My participants situate their narratives in the discourses of their parties, however, they then continue adding their own experiences/ideas, which partly differ from the parties' discourses. Their everyday discourses can thereby be influenced by or influence the larger discourses (Cohen, 2010, p. 70).

My participants use gender essentialism and deterministic social accounts of gender to conceptualise sex/gender. Gender is used as a social category to essentialise women as fundamentally different to men. Characteristics are applied to men and women, assigning

them to different stable qualities (Lee et al., 2020, p. 685). I argue that essentialising women as fundamentally different to men contributes to gender inequality as it favours the status quo. I follow Judith Butler's (1988) argument against gender essentialism: "[g]ender is not passively scripted on the body, and neither is it determined by nature" (p. 531). In opposition to this, essentialist arguments tend to state that the 'natural' is desirable (Lee et al., 2020, p. 699). Most right-wing actors use biology to explain the existence of a dual gender system, where men and women are part of a binary construction (Mulinari and Neergaard, 2017; Klammer and Goetz, 2017). The AfD and FPÖ are closely connected with antifeminist actors, who want to 'restore' the 'natural gender order' and argue against the social negotiability of gender and sexuality. The feared abolition of those differences is defined as 'gender madness', a term used by right-wing politicians since the early 2000s (Klammer and Goetz, 2017, pp. 82-85). In their eyes, this 'madness' destroys an intact social order, which leads to chaos (Lang, 2017, p. 68). The binary categories are an important part of their worldview. In this context, I want to avoid providing an uncritical platform for these narratives and falling into the trap of essentialism myself. My aim is to build a critical understanding of my participants' binary conceptualisations without reproducing them. I follow the approaches of other researchers who research groups whose worldviews they oppose, and who fear to provide a platform for those views (Blee, 1998, p. 388; Back, 2002, pp. 34-35).

Fear of change: Narratives on sex/gender

While my interviews do not demonstrate an exclusively essentialist biological conceptualisation of sex/gender, almost all participants used some biological explanations. For some those are just side notes and mixed with social explanations and for others they are central. Most participants argued that women are 'naturally' different from men but equal in their rights. There are, however, contradictions both between the participants' accounts and within participants' individual interviews; the views expressed are more complicated than the parties' official lines suggest. Bitzan (2017) argues that women's reasons to join right-wing parties can depend on gender specific and/or gender unspecific aspects. Traditional gendered roles propagated by the far right are not necessarily a relevant motivation to join (p. 69). For some of my participants they were part of their reasons, for others they were not.

One way women members conceptualise sex/gender is through biological assumptions. The main narrative of some participants is that the sexes are 'biologically fixed' as men and women. To illustrate this, I will provide the account of Susanne, who is in her mid-50s and supports the AfD on a local level. After my question on the party's definition of traditional gender roles, she stated:

> So, for me, there are biological sexes, which are male and female.
> For me only women can get children and men make children.
> Everything else regarding sexuality or how a person feels in his
> body, is his private affair.

Her main point is that sex/gender is 'biologically fixed.' This is, for her, linked to the 'roles' women and men have in procreation whereby the role of the woman is passive as receiver of the child and the man's role is active as creator of the child. Additionally, she

recognises that a person can feel outside those categories, but she believes they should keep this private, mentioning that she has friends, who "feel like a woman in their male body." She stated that "Germany offers all possibilities to everyone to do everything with his life regardless of gender, sexuality… or how he feels in his body." In other words, she argued that there is no need to discuss sex/gender, because individuals are responsible for their own lives, no one hinders them. In doing this she emphasised her own training in a male-dominated manual profession, which she took to show that anyone can do anything. Susanne thus reiterates the narrative of 'biologically fixed binaries.' However, for her those do not hinder women and men to take the roles they want to, this is everyone's individual responsibility and not a role for the state. She ignores gender and other social barriers and does not see the need to discuss the implications of gender for life chances.

Additionally, I want to point out that Susanne used male pronouns and nouns as default throughout the interview, which is in line with the party's rejection of gender-reflective language (Lang, 2017, p. 69). My other participants also adopted the male default and in one of my interviews gender-reflective language was called a "mutilation of language", which again mirrors the AfD's and FPÖ's discourses on this topic. I also received an email rejection for an interview request, in which I was addressed as a man and it was stated: "gender does not play a role for us". Addressing me as a man while I am a woman indicates that the respondent ridiculed the usage of gender-reflective language and intentionally disrespected me. In Germany and Austria, the linguistic construction of gender biases has been debated since the 1970s and 1980s (Günthner, 2019; Krondorfer, 2018). The debate against gender-reflective language has been led by several actors including the right wing but also popular media, who, for instance, argue that changing language is oppression of free speech and opinions (Günthner, 2019; Mayer and Goetz, 2019). The debates show their fear of change. The actors ignore studies, which show that the usage of male pronouns and nouns leads to a perceived overrepresentation of men in texts with women and non-binary people remaining invisible. This leads to the reinforcement of existing unequal power relations (Günthner, 2019, pp. 573-574; Krondorfer, 2018, p. 238).

I also identified a reinforcement of existing unequal power relations in most interviewees' narratives on the attribution of specific characteristics to women and men, which is linked to the idea that women are different from men. The explanations for those characteristics fluctuate across the interviews but contradictions exist also within individual interviews. For the most part men and women's specific characteristics were seen by my participants to be the result of biological differences; however, this was not consistently pursued throughout interviews. One example for fluctuating explanations can be found in AfD politician Petra's interview. On the one hand, she argued that women are normally politically less conservative, preferring harmony, avoiding conflict and being compassionate. On the other hand, she indicated that women are less likely to pursue a political career because of structural problems within the socialisation of young girls. Therefore, she argued for fostering girls' self-esteem early on. This shows a structural explanation of gendered characteristics. However, in the same interview she stated that she is for equality but not for sameness, invoking the notion of biological differences between the sexes. Common phrases in the interviews included: "women are too sensitive", "women are not so good in boring party work", "women are not as political" and

"men are braver". Many interviewees mentioned that politics is a tough business and that many women are 'too sensitive' as they 'normally avoid conflict,' which if I follow their argument means that women in politics are stronger than the 'normal' woman. In other words, my participants' characteristics are not necessarily the characteristics they specified for women, which implies they see themselves as exceptional women. This is of relevance to discussions on how women in right-wing and conservative parties negotiate the contradictions between their political role and their framing of gender and femininity (Pettersson, 2017; Klatch, 1987).

The participants' conceptualisation of sex/gender is dominated by their fear of change and the common narrative that changes have gone 'too far', which leads to their perception that women are not allowed to be women anymore. Mulinari and Neergaard (2015) explore the same narrative in their research with women in the right-wing Swedish Democrats. The phrase "things have gone too far" recurred several times in their research (p. 515). I will illustrate this narrative with Jessika's account. Jessika is in her mid-30s and supports the FPÖ locally. She stated that women should have the same rights as men, however she added "women are women." During the interview, she emphasised that equality between women and men is one of her main topics, however she said:

> There are certain topics, where I say, this is too much for me, just too much, I am of course, I am a woman myself, I want that women have the same rights as men and that we are equal but not the same, there should still be differences.

She connected those differences with characteristics attributed to women. For her 'feminists' try to be more masculine than men. This perception on feminism is entangled with her conceptualisation of womanhood and sex/gender and can also be found in most of the interviews. Several participants argued that "many who call themselves feminists are exaggerating and go too far", which, for them, means that the 'natural' divisions of the sexes are abolished and they fear to not be allowed to be women anymore. This is connected to the parties' discourses on the threat of 'gender ideology'. However, some participants support a certain level of feminism, Jessika said that she hopes that all women are feminists, but not 'those feminists', who want to erase 'natural' differences. In some interviews active support for women is approved, but the participants' relationships with feminism is ambivalent.

Conclusion

Most participants argued that women are different from men but equal in their rights. All participants have – at least partly – a biologically essentialist way of seeing womanhood and sex/gender. However, in some narratives, this is entangled with social structural explanations, which shows that their views are often more complicated than the parties' lines. Participants' roles in the parties somewhat contradict their conceptualisations of sex/gender, most describe themselves as exceptionally strong women. They are women members of parties, who attack 'gender ideology' and feminism, but some still emphasise the importance of a 'moderate' level of feminism if the 'differences' between men and women are secured. Their narratives on sex/gender matter because of the significance of

gender and antifeminism to the AfD and FPÖ. Women members help to portray the parties as women friendly and therefore help to spread ideas opposed to 'gender ideology'. Therefore, there is a need for understanding these women's narratives.

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