

**The Conception
of Feminism
Research Report
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By:

Women's Rights Team

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Introduction

Feminism is a concept that is highly misunderstood by the world. These misunderstandings range from a belief that feminism is the hatred of men or a movement to bring about matriarchy. These misunderstandings are not just limited to the social sphere. They are also prevalent in the political sphere with politicians across the world using anti-feminist rhetoric as part of their national campaigns.

This research report briefly introduces the concept of feminism and goes on to address misconceptions of feminism in general, as well as in specific countries around the world, especially when used in political rhetoric.

Introduction to the Concept of Feminism

2.1. Meaning or Definition of Feminism

Feminism is a concept that is widely misunderstood by people. It has been defined in a number of different ways. In this part of the report, we will try to provide two basic definitions that exemplify a common and comprehensive definition of feminism.

The term 'feminism' was derived from the Latin word 'femina' which means 'woman' (Raina, 2017). Britannica defines feminism as “the belief in social, economic, and political equality for women” (Britannica, n.d). In a similar but more expansive vein, Merriam Webster defines feminism as a:

“belief in and advocacy of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes expressed especially through organised activity on behalf of women's rights and interests” (Merriam Webster, n.d.).

From the above, one can easily surmise that feminism is a concept that, at the root of it, advocates for equality for women.

2.2. Theories of Feminism

There are various theories and types of feminism. This report will focus on the major feminist theories which consist of liberal feminism, cultural feminism and radical feminism.

Liberal feminism seeks to use the principles and institutions of a liberal society to make the conditions for women better (Ratnapala, 2009). It understands equality as equal treatment of persons in similar conditions.

Cultural feminism argues that liberal notions of law, legality and legal process are influenced by masculine values and views of the world (Ratnapala, 2009). This theory asserts that women and men have different perceptions of themselves and the world as well as differing basic characteristics. It asserts that these differences are inherent in their nature or biological.

Radical feminism spotlights the subjugation of women. Like cultural feminism, this theory also argues that women are different from men. Unlike cultural feminism, however, radical feminism states that these differences between men and women were created through male domination (Ratnapala, 2009).

Misconceptions of Feminism

The dominance of the patriarchal society system ultimately relies on the protection of those who benefit from it, whilst rejecting anything that may threaten it. As a result, this has led to the stigmatisation of feminism and all those who identify themselves as feminists. Although the dictionary defines feminism as the belief in social, economic, and political equality of the sexes (Burkett, n.d.), the term is still surrounded by negative and often incorrect connotations. In addition, although the foundation of feminism is not radical, the countless negative misconceptions and misunderstanding of the movement mean that it may be viewed as something subversive.

One of the main misconceptions is that feminists hate men. In reality, however, feminism at its core embodies the support of human rights for people of all genders and believe in equality for all. The feminist movement is not about putting one group above another, but instead dismantling the systems in place that do so (Shram, 2022). It is also important to mention here the difference between masculinity and toxic masculinity. Another widespread myth about feminists, for example, is the view that they consider all expressions of masculinity to be toxic. While masculinity embraces all the features that are associated with men, toxic masculinity specifically glorifies strength, dominance and is harmful to mental health and society as a whole (Dictionary.com, n.d.). Toxic masculinity has to do with “machismo”, a concept that can be described as “a strong sense of masculine pride” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Stereotypes perpetuated by toxic masculinity are not only detrimental for women, but for men as well. Machismo dictates the duties and defines expectations about men. For example, it is expected that man should provide for his family, that he can not ask for help and express his emotions, and that he has to be strong (Quintana, 2022). Moreover, men who do not fit in these characteristics are put down by society. (Kang, 2021).

Many people believe that feminism is all about women and that men cannot be feminists. However, a movement for gender equality is not just about progress for women. The patriarchal system is upheld with strict gender roles, meaning that men should fulfil typically “masculine” or “macho” criteria. As a result, society expects men to never show their emotions. Moreover, men still do not open up if they have been a victim of domestic violence or rape, because they are not taken seriously (Vance, 2017). There are a number of famous men who are feminists, from popular celebrities such as Ashton Kutcher, Antonio Banderas, Daniel Craig, Matt Damon, Chris Hemsworth and many others (Werft, 2017) to prominent world leaders such as Barack Obama, Nelson Mandela, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and Justin Trudeau (Shah, 2019).

Another common myth is that feminists are trying to be men or trying to take the place of men. What

feminists want, however, is to dismantle the systematic discrimination and oppression to which women have been, and still are, subject to for thousands of years. They do not want to take the place of men, they rather want to have their own, that will be equal to men. They want to have equal rights with men and participate fully in societal life (The European Network Against Racism, 2016).

It is common to see people believing that feminists cannot be feminine or that they do not care how they look. However, the way someone presents themselves might have nothing to do with their political views. Women wear or do not wear makeup and choose their clothes as a way to express themselves and it is no different from the way men express themselves. There are stereotypes about feminists not wearing a bra or not shaving, but these are not the requirements one needs to meet in order to be a feminist. This is related to another important aspect of feminism, that of being able to make your own choices and do what you want (Vance, 2017).

Lastly, one more serious misconception is the belief that equality has been achieved and as a result, feminism is not needed. First of all, here one needs to remember that exactly because feminist groups have been fighting for equality for centuries, women now have more freedom in making choices regarding their sexual and reproductive health, and they can own property and vote. Despite this progress, inequality and misogyny are still ingrained in society and hurting women around the world. Traditional values and religious fundamentalism are pushing women back (The European Network Against Racism, 2016). One can definitely see the progress when looking at The Gender Equality Index 2021 report, which shows that Europe scores 68 points out of 100, but only on closer look does one also see that the greatest gender inequality is in the domains of power and knowledge. It will take us nearly three generations to achieve gender parity if we move at the current pace (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2021). It should also not be forgotten that the prospect of gender equality appears even less promising in other countries beyond Europe.

Even if one personally feels equal to men and does not need feminism, it should be remembered that not all women are able to enjoy the same rights and freedoms. Feminism is not one-dimensional and includes the rights of all women, such as women of colour, Muslim women and LGBTQIA+ women. An American law professor, Kimberlé Crenshaw, defines intersectional feminism as “a prism for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other” (Steinmetz, 2020). Intersectional feminism recognises different aspects of person's identity and how they might affect the way different people experience the world and the barriers they might encounter (International Women's Development Agency, 2022).

Misconceptions of Feminism and Anti-Feminist Rhetoric in Different Countries

4.1. Anti-feminist Rhetoric in Russia

Traditional, namely family and religious values, take a special place in upholding and promoting the image of Russia. The political discussions surrounding these values address their importance in strengthening Russian statehood, preserving the national identity as well as the geopolitical positioning of the country and relations between Russia and the West. In comparison to Russia, Europe is labelled as gender deviant. It even led to the appearance of the widely-used slur “Gayrope”, which denotes the liberal values defended in the European Union (Riabova & Riabov, 2017).

During his speech at a meeting of the Valdai Club in 2013, the president Vladimir Putin accused the Euro-Atlantic countries of abandoning their roots and Christian values, which, according to him, form the basis of Western civilization (Zavrazhin, 2013). Based on the discourse of the Russian government, the difference between the modern European Union and a former, classical Europe is emphasised. For example, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, S. Lavrov said that the values that modern European countries are trying to impose on Russia today are contrary to those that “were followed by the grandfathers and great-grandfathers of Europeans” (Nazarova, 2017).

President Putin repeatedly confirms that Russia is the guarantor of traditional values and does not support Western feminist ideas. The government emphasises the importance of fertility for the greatness of Russia and this discourse is actively used by anti-abortion groups who prioritise the rights of the unborn over the rights of women (Chandler, 2009). In February 2022, it was proposed that any information on the Internet that passes "under the guise of protecting the rights of women" should be blocked. According to the senator Margarita Pavlova, the murder of unborn children is imposed and promoted under this guise, and traditional family values and the role of women in the family are denigrated. In addition, unhealthy sexual relations are supposedly promoted as well as perverted forms of cohabitation and the refusal to create a family and have children (Tagaeva, 2022).

The constant emphasis on the role of women as wives and mothers can be explained by the intention of the government to focus on the biological capacity of women and consequently relieve the state from an obligation to enforce women's rights and take gender equality seriously (Orlova, 2018). Furthermore, during his annual press conference, president Putin explained why “Russia has forgotten how or no longer

wants to give birth”. According to him, a lowered birth rate is the result of changes in priorities in the lives of women of childbearing age. Women are focused on their education and career, and only after reaching their goals in these areas do they give birth to a child. Putin also emphasised that the joy of fatherhood and motherhood is more valuable than material happiness, and that this is something that should be introduced into the consciousness of the Russian people. He also highlighted that people should be convinced that there is no greater happiness in life than having children (Fontanka, 2021).

Feminism in Russia is highly marginalised and actively used in political discourse. Feminism is blamed by the government for the lower birth rate in the country and used as a term which stands in direct contrast to important traditional values that are considered to underpin Russian society

4.1. South Korea: Winning Elections by Using an Anti-feminist Rhetoric

The 2022 South Korean Presidential Elections which resulted in the nomination of Yoon Suk-yeol were marred by anti-feminist rhetoric. Yoon Suk-yeol from the conservative People Power Party (PPP) is considered a “political maverick”, who is likely going to shatter many long-established practices (Lee, 2022). For example, during his election campaign, he pledged that if he were elected, he would take the necessary steps to dissolve the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (Bicker, 2022).

It has become well-known that both candidates used anti-feminist rhetoric during the South Korean Presidential Elections. However, unlike his opponent, Yoon Suk-yeol constructed his campaign based on anti-feminist sentiments. The shift from the 2017 elections, in which the then-President Moon Jae-in campaigned on a promise to become a “feminist president”, to the 2022 elections that saw future President Yoon Suk-yeol delegitimise feminism while criticising gender equality, was noticeable to many. In 2021, conservative pundits from the People's Power Party (PPP) criticised the rise in feminist discourse within the country, as it had brought to light the gender inequality in South Korea. The party described feminism under President Moon Jae-in as having a “totalitarian tendency” (Rich et al., 2022).

Central to Yoon Suk-yeol's campaign is the support of the grievances of young Korean men, who consider themselves anti-feminists. According to Yoon Suk-yeol's campaign office, “nearly 90 percent of men in their twenties are anti-feminist” (Bicker, 2022). Many Korean men believe that feminism does not fight for equality; instead, it is a movement that is a threat to their social and economic status. As South Korean men

tie their gender identity to their financial position and status as breadwinners in the household, they tend to perceive women's growing independence as a threat to their jobs, masculinity, and self-worth (Kim and Kweon, 2022). The various issues plaguing South Korea, like employment and housing instability, have been blamed on women and feminism. Yoon Suk-yeol's anti-feminist rhetoric, which accuses feminism of the country's problems, has been recognised as creating social divides between genders and further inciting gender conflict (Pham, 2022). Despite South Korea's terrible record with gender inequality, Yoon Suk-yeol succeeded by manipulating the narrative of the issues in the country by adopting anti-feminist rhetoric that appealed to the disgruntled men.

Yoon Suk-yeol's anti-feminist speeches attract young men that believe that women are not discriminated against in South Korea. Despite the ample evidence to suggest otherwise, Yoon Suk-yeol boldly claims that as South Korea has “no structural gender discrimination”, advocacy of women's rights is no longer necessary (Rashid, 2022). The constant manipulation of young men by blaming feminism for their hardship was prominent during Yoon Suk-yeol's campaign. Owing to Yoon Suk-yeol's win, many women and women's rights organisations are afraid of a further growth in gender inequality. As Yoon Suk-yeol claims that South Korea does not have structural discrimination, issues like having the largest gender pay gap out of all OECD countries (Rich et al., 2022), increasing sexual harassment and femicides (Pham, 2022) will be ignored.

It is unclear whether Yoon's anti-feminist rhetoric during his campaign directly influenced the voting of men who refute the existence of gender discrimination against women. Ultimately, however, Yoon Suk-yeol's anti-feminist rhetoric did make him more attractive to people who criticise the gender equality efforts in South Korea. The rhetoric around gender inequality and women's rights has been used negatively for political gain. Political groups and politicians exploit the increase in anti-feminist sentiment in South Korea for their personal benefit. By focusing mainly on anti-feminist rhetoric by promising to remove the national mechanisms for women's advancement, Yoon Suk-yeol avoided other key issues like economic growth. Nevertheless, winning elections based on a campaign that claims women do not face structural discrimination may inadvertently affect the gender equality progress the country has made over the years.

Spain: The Rise of VOX

Background

After the death of authoritarian dictator Francisco Franco in 1975, a rapid democratisation process took over in Spain. The process led to tremendous social transformations which altered the position of women in Spanish society. Gender equality became the primary political focus, and this influenced the various Spanish regions to develop specific policy frameworks for women's empowerment. These state policies specifically aimed at dealing with gender equality, are called State Feminism (Kantola and Squires, 2012). Spanish regional governments and parties followed the federal model and developed their own framework to create a region-specific system for women. The Spanish example of State Feminism has been described as the “vanguard in European Gender Equality Policies” (Bustelo, 2016).

While Europe was experiencing tectonic changes with the rise in anti-European Union sentiment and the rise of nationalism, Spain became an 'exceptional' case as it rejected right-wing populist parties. However, the 2018 regional elections of Andalucía in Spain shook the country with the success of the right-wing political party, Vox (Turnbull-Dugarte, 2019). While Spain has had right-leaning conservative parties, like Partido Popular, Vox was the first radical right-wing party to win more than one percent in Spanish elections (Turnbull-Dugarte et al., 2020). In the aftermath of the elections, Vox not only gained 12 seats in the regional parliament, but it was fundamental in ousting the socialist-led regional government that had been in power for more than 36 years (Turnbull-Dugarte, 2019). Since the 2018 regional elections of Andalucía, Vox's popularity has been steadily increasing. Owing to its growing popularity, Vox has been acknowledged as the “third-largest party in Spain” (Laudette, 2019).

Anti-Feminist Discourse

Vox was established in 2013 and therefore not a new political party in the 2018 regional elections. Since its inception, Vox has placed women's rights, feminism and gender ideology at the centre of its discourse to emphasise the loss of traditional values, specifically “the loss of male



Let the Battle Begin. Source © Vox/Twitter (@vox_es), 2019

Who Votes for Vox?

ox's voters are not inherently people that are against women's rights. While Vox's leaders have been explicitly vocal about their hostility towards feminism, their voters are not all against women's rights. During the 2018 Andalusian election, Vox's voters were identified as people who rejected the Spanish Socialist Workers Party (34.2 percent) as they had been embroiled in corruption scandals as well as those with a 'fear of African immigrants' (41.6 percent) (Rubio-Pueyo, 2019). The fear of immigration, which was the primary motivation for the rise of Vox's voters, is based on cultural-identitarian ideas, which views immigration as a threat to "Spanishness" (Rubio-Pueyo, 2019). During the 2018 Andalusian election campaign, Vox leaders often portrayed Spain as a "feminised nation that had been humiliated and needed to be saved" (Cabezas, 2022). As a result, a patriotic, nationalistic project was constructed which depicts the rescuing of a humiliated Spain (woman) by a true Spaniard (man) personifying hypermasculinity. Vox's manifesto that proposes a return to the "old days" of Spanish glory is attractive to many people. However,

Vox's articulation of the Spanish glory days is based on Franco's dictatorship which imposed strict gender conservatism (Cabezas, 2022).

Nonetheless, as Vox's popularity increases, many researchers have recognised that the party's anti-feminist rhetoric has also become attractive to many people. While the party's initial success has been credited to numerous factors, the continued rise in popularity has been attributed by many researchers and journalists to the party's anti-feminist rhetoric. Vox attempts to delegitimise feminism to fit its agenda, wherein the party's leaders blame 'gender laws and feminism for Spain's humiliating image (Cabezas, 2022). Therefore, Vox's vision for 'real equality' which encourages traditional gender roles has become attractive to many people. The rhetoric surrounding gender has become an essential tool for the right-wing political party.

On the one hand, Vox attempts to create an 'us versus them' divide, encouraging Spaniards to confront feminists with the perception that they are against Spanish values. Moreover, the divide creates a conflict between genders by condemning feministic values of gender equality. On the other hand, Vox uses gender to present itself as a masculine identity fighting the perceived loss of male power. The anti-feminist rhetoric has become central to the political party to the extent that it is unfathomable to separate it from the party itself. Vox has not only used gender to mobilise support for its agenda, but it has also mobilised gender to create its own distinctive identity (Cabezas, 2022).

Feminism and Populism

Feminism and Populism are two concepts that seemingly oppose one another but often intersect for the purposes of opportunistic populist leaders. In other words, they represent “opposite sides of the political spectrum, one emancipatory, the other exclusionary” (Kroes R., 2017). While feminism by its very nature represents absolute equality between men and women, and not the domination of one gender over the other as one might think, populism shapes its policy around the aim of representing “the common people” within the framework of traditional values, which in most cases do not even remotely touch on gender equality (Gwizda A., 2020). Additionally, populism is also associated with the idea of proclaiming ‘popular sovereignty as the only legitimate source of political power’ and thus attacking the so-called ‘elite’ (Kantona J., Lambardo E., 2020).

Nevertheless, when it comes to carrying out political ambitions, two strategies are commonly used by populists. On the one hand, populists use anti-feminist political rhetoric as a tool in their political agenda to bolster traditional senses and movements under the illusion of protecting the nation's values and cultures. In practice, this means seeking to limit the presence of women to the house in order to preserve the male-dominated tradition and to prevent the so-called social, economic and political "threat" against men as women increasingly work more in a wide range of sectors. Right-wing populists aggressively oppose abortion rights to portray women as no more than “mothers” or “housewives”. An apt example is the case of Brazil since Bolsonaro’s election in 2018, where reproductive rights have been under attack due to the president’s anti-feminist populist policy in the country (Kozłowska H., 2022). In Europe, similar examples can be identified; “populist parties such as the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany have been promoting the traditional image of the woman as a mother with children” (Hörst C., Groenendaal L.). Incidentally, when we cross the border and look at France, the right-wing populist party Front National (FN) literally countenanced "natalism" in its manifesto in 2017, a policy that "considers childbirth and parenthood as desirable for society" (Gilloz., Hairy., Flemming., 2017).

With a strong political stance against “elitist values and principles”, right-wing populists have branded democratic principles of gender equality, and hence feminism, as dangerous foreign ideologies imposed by Western institutions, such as the EU and the UN (Kantona J., Lambardo E., 2020). This framing of gender equality around traditional values, therefore, is known to be a political strategy to manipulate votes in

elections (Kantona J., Lambardo E., 2020). The reluctance to address women's rights and implement feminist policies has helped some populist leaders gain more votes. This can in part be explained by the fact that in some countries, men feel "attacked" and "threatened" by the rise of democratic principles that promote gender equality and women's rights. "As a result, radical right parties' opposition to gender equality is a threat to democracy itself" (Kantona J., Lambardo E., 2020).

Yet, since populism is defined as the voice of the "common people", populist leaders need to attract the attention of the electorate and present themselves charismatically to the public. This is why some, like Marine Le Pen, disguise themselves as "fake feminists" or manipulate "feminism" in their political discourse to win the election (Igdir I, 2022).

5.1. Manipulation of feminism in political elections

5.1.2. French presidential election

On April 24, 2022, the runoff election between Marine Le Pen and Emmanuel Macron resulted in the defeat of the populist party, Front National, thus achieving the victory of Macron's second-term presidency. While the result was welcomed by many world leaders, escalating economic and social problems in France led to a rise of populism simultaneously with Marine Le Pen receiving 42 per cent of the vote, a dangerous sign to say the least (Ladepeche, 2022).

Marine Le Pen, a far-right populist leader, is known to be an anti-feminist given her past rhetoric and political agenda. However, Le Pen uses or manipulates feminism for her political gain in her campaigns to attract women's votes. Although she has consistently shown her opposition to abortion rights over the years in France, she has decided to make a "U-turn" in 2017 by targeting working-class women "who may fear that their low-paying jobs are threatened by immigrants" (Poirier A., 2017). She recasts the concept of feminism within a populist framework by defending women's rights against immigrants, thus pushing for a homogeneous and non-pluralistic society in France. Osez le féminisme, a French feminist organisation, analysed her political agenda ahead of the 2022 election and said that "she only talks about women's rights from a racist perspective when she uses them to attack foreigners" (Makooi B., 2022).

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