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# 'We Don't Co-parent with the Government': Gender Ideology as a Global Culture War

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By Catherine Tebaldi (<https://gnet-research.org/author/catherine-tebaldi/>)

15th November 2023

In Insights (<https://gnet-research.org/category/insights/>)

## Introduction

On 22 January 2023, the New York Times ran an article under the headline 'When Students Change Gender Identity, and Parents Don't Know' (<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/22/us/gender-identity-students-parents.html>). This seemingly routine piece, alongside other mainstream articles about parents opposing the recognition of students' gender identities in schools, exacerbated a growing moral panic around the so-called scourge of 'gender ideology' among young people. The far-right news outlet Breitbart has dedicated an entire section of its website to gender ideology, which frames it, along with 'critical race theory', as an insidious force which infiltrates schools and threatens the traditional family structure and the rights of parents. The fear and discontent surrounding this topic converge in a global movement opposing the spread of so-called gender ideology.

Originally an academic term referring to beliefs about gender in the social world (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/gender-ideology#:~:text=Gender%20Ideology%3A%20Cross%2Dcultural%20Aspects&text=The%20study%20of%20gender%20ideologies,men%20C>

gender ideology has now been weaponised by far-right groups to become a catch-all phrase for a range of social ills, from the decline of Christianity (<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/gender-ideology/>) to the rise in the price of milk.

(<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34006634/>) Undergirded by religious revival and belief, far-right opposition to all things gender (<https://journal.equinoxpub.com/GL/issue/view/2377>) includes protesting against women's rights to reproductive autonomy, access to gender-affirming care for trans people or the rights of gay people to adopt or marry. In this way, 'anti-genderism' is similar to the opposition of many religious and socially conservative movements to feminism or LGBTQIA+ rights. This discourse is on the rise transnationally and is occupying a larger space in the digital sphere as well.

Contemporary anti-genderism distinguishes itself from other iterations in three main ways. First, it is *global* – circulating between and linking various transnational movements. Second, it is *nationalist*, associating gender, race, nation (<https://journal.equinoxpub.com/GL/article/view/25635>) and economy (<https://fastcapitalism.journal.library.uta.edu/index.php/fastcapitalism/article/view/421>). Third, it is *reactionary* and frames feminism as an attack on men in highly mediated discourse. In this Insight, I will explore the spread of the anti-gender movement across different contexts, touching on its transnational flows, nationalist politics, and reframing of feminism as misandry. I conclude by offering recommendations to practitioners and tech companies to reflect on the global spread of this discourse and its potential to normalise hate.

## Gender Ideology and Transnational Connections

Anti-genderism transcends borders, as evidenced in its presence in discourse among white nationalist and Christian fundamentalist groups from the US to Russia. This language is centred around family and religious values and unites the US, Eastern Europe and Russia in their opposition to gender ideology. One prominent organisation fostering this collaboration is the World Congress of Families (<https://archive.thinkprogress.org/russian-american-christian-fundamentalists-world-congress-families-moldova-45d9d8143668/>), a transnational right-wing group aiming to safeguard children from what they perceive as satanic influences promoting aggression and progressive gender ideals. They take credit for influencing significant legislation, such as the 2011 abortion ban and 2013 ban on LGBTQI+ media in Russia (<https://archive.thinkprogress.org/americas-biggest-right-wing-homeschooling-group-has-been-networking-with-sanctioned-russians-1f2b5b5ad031/>), referred to as the 'anti-propaganda law'. This oppression extends its reach to the US, as exemplified by Florida's 'Don't Say Gay' bill which restricts teaching on gender and sexual equality in schools.

Moms for Liberty (<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/education/moms-for-liberty-poised-to-clash-with-teachers-unions-over-school-board-races-nationwide>) (M4L), an organisation designated by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) as an extremist group, is also at the forefront of the anti-gender movement in the US. Formerly a parent-teacher association (PTA) group that fought against mask mandates during the pandemic, M4L protest the teaching of critical race theory, inclusive school pedagogy and curricula and the indoctrination and over-sexualisation of children through acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community (<https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/moms-liberty>). M4L have advocated for book bans (<https://www.newsweek.com/moms-liberty-banned-book-list-schools-1756574>) and the abolition of the Department of Education, claiming they "don't co-parent with the government". As was the case in many women's conservative movements throughout history (<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/jul/06/moms-for-liberty-long-history-rightwing-activism>), like those who opposed integration, these activists emphasise the fact that they are 'just moms'. Nevertheless, they are funded and organised by the powerful Christian conservative organisation, The Leadership Institute. (<https://www.leadershipinstitute.org/news/?NR=15874>) The impact of M4L is palpable; their last summit hosted 3 of the leading Republican presidential candidates, former President Trump, Governor DeSantis, and Ambassador Haley. (<https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/moms-liberty-fired-philadelphia/story?id=100554051>) During the summit, Ron De Santis claimed that "the most powerful political force in this country [is] Mama Bears".

### Gender Ideology and Nationalism

Anti-gender ideology has also gained significant traction in Hungary and Poland, where the Catholic far-right links opposition to gender ideology with nationalism and capitalism (<https://journal.equinoxpub.com/GL/article/view/18548>) to express their opposition to feminism and LGBTQI+ rights. This perspective elevates gender ideology as a symbol of the liberal worldview and advocates for a return to traditional gender roles – associated with affluence, ease and order. Far-right activists in Poland reinforce this standpoint, portraying the country as the last bastion for protecting children against the so-called 'rainbow plague' (<https://dukespace.lib.duke.edu/dspace/handle/10161/26691>), positioning it as at the centre of the West. Switzerland, on the other hand, has witnessed the rise of a more openly anti-feminist and anti-gender discourse, aligning with the far-right populist ideology of the Swiss People's Party (<https://www.politico.eu/article/switzerland-anti-immigrant-party-projected-make-record-showing-election/>) which dominated recent elections. They target institutions ([https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-07-29/ubs-targeted-by-swiss-populist-party-for-woke-culture?in\\_source=embedded-checkout-banner](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-07-29/ubs-targeted-by-swiss-populist-party-for-woke-culture?in_source=embedded-checkout-banner)) such as banks for being too 'woke' – an unsettling appropriation of anti-capitalist rhetoric to uphold postwar gender norms. These examples show how anti-gender discourses intertwine with various ideologies such as capitalism, nationalism and feminism to promote traditional family values.

In the UK context, femonationalism (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv11sn2fp>) blends with the family in anti-gender ideology discourses. What is unique about this context is that while the discourses mentioned above occur on the right, the rise of anti-genderism in the UK evolved from the 'Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist (TERF)' (<https://read.dukeupress.edu/tsq/article/9/3/311/319375/IntroductionTERFs-Gender-Critical-Movements-and>) movement, which now refers to itself as 'gender critical'. Proponents of this movement reframe calls to eliminate trans rights (<https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/cpac-speaker-transgender-people-eradicated-1234690924/>) and the erasure of gender as a social construct as 'protecting' women and children. As Maureen Kossee points out in an article forthcoming in January 2024, while this may appear feminist, it borrows the same discourses and logic as the far right to justify violence against trans people. All these diverse examples show how anti-gender discourses allow a host of other ideologies – capital, nation, even feminism itself – to be brought into this seemingly innocuous framing of protecting the traditional family.

### Reframing Feminism as Misandry

The final key element of the anti-genderism movement frames gender equality as an attack on men; this has become a prevalent discourse in mainstream politics around the world. For example, the major conservative candidate in Korea, Yoon Seouk-yul, campaigned explicitly against gender equality as a "fixation on a pro-woman agenda" (<https://www.theglobalist.com/south-korea-anti-feminist-young-men-presidential-election-lee-jun-seok/>) and pledged to destroy the Ministry of Equality and Family, which he argued treats men as criminals – a tactic which led 70% of young Korean men to support his party. These discourses of male oppression are


highly mediated and draw on popular culture to spread (there is even a K-Pop song with the lyric "feminist no you're a mental illness"). (<https://thediplomat.com/2021/07/how-feminism-became-a-dirty-word-in-south-korea/>) These discourses of male oppression don't reflect reality: Korea ranks as the worst country for working women in the OECD. (<https://www.npr.org/2022/12/03/1135162927/women-feminism-south-korea-sexism-protest-haeil-yoon>)

In the US, ex-Fox News host Tucker Carlson released a documentary entitled 'The End of Men' (<https://www.menshealth.com/health/a42026957/tucker-carlson-end-of-men-review/>), which frames social change as an attack on white masculinity. Anti-gender discourses are often conspiratorial and reframe the pursuit search for equality as a nefarious force targeting 'our boys' – and it works. Indeed, you might argue that anti-LGBTQ+ hate and conspiracy theories have become one of the US's main exports (<https://www.wired.com/story/the-us-is-exporting-anti-lgbtq-hate-online/>). Across social media, from QAnon to health influencers, and far-right bodybuilders (<https://gnet-research.org/2022/10/10/the-emerging-raw-food-movement-and-the-great-reset/>) a toxic blend of ideologies presents progressivism as a global threat.

## Conclusion

Practitioners and tech companies need to recognise that mainstream and seemingly innocuous concerns about parental rights or school curricula can serve as a gateway to the dangerous realm of 'anti-gender ideology' – a highly nationalist discourse with a global reach. It is crucial to recognise the importance of misogynist content within the broader far-right online ecosystem; gender has been shown to have an important mainstreaming effect on far-right content. (<https://gnet-research.org/2022/12/07/influential-moms-examining-extremist-influencer-mothers/>) Research has illustrated how both far-right and mainstream conservative movements blame economic instability and inequality on feminism while characterising progressive movements as threats to the institution of the family. This contrasting narrative of progressive gender ideology versus traditional masculinity or femininity finds a home in various media outlets, from influencers promoting virile masculinity to pastors advocating for traditional family values. As we witness increasing opposition to the 'grooming' of children through the outing of gay teachers or protesting against Drag Queen Story Hour, it is imperative to stay vigilant about the growing number of assaults on women's and LGBTQ+ rights. These issues serve as intersection points for a multitude of far-right discourses spanning national boundaries.

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## Catherine Tebaldi

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