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**A Comparative Analysis of Populist Party  
discourses and party programs : Evaluating  
Women's Rights and Gender Equality in Hungary  
vs Poland and the Netherlands.**

Populist Parties and Gender: A Human Rights Approach

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**Thesis Title:**

*A Comparative Analysis of Populist Party discourses and party programs : Evaluating Women's Rights and Gender Equality in Hungary vs Poland and the Netherlands.*

*Populist Parties and Gender: A Human Rights Approach*

**Abstract:**

*This paper analysis how the far-right populist parties construct women's rights and gender equality in Hungary, compared to Poland and the Netherlands. By analyzing party rhetoric, law amendments, cultural and political contexts, this study highlights how far-right populist parties shape women's issues to further their political agendas. The study discusses the anti-feminist and strategies of Hungary's Fidesz and Poland's Law and Justice party, contrasting them with the more progressive yet still far-right populist approach of the Netherlands' PVV. The analysis reveal that while the far-right parties in Hungary and Poland utilize traditional gender roles to forward their agenda at women's rights and gender equality, the Dutch far-right exploits women's rights discourse to justify their anti-immigrant sentiments.*

## Table of Content:

I.	Introduction.....	3
	A. Background: The Rise of the Far-Right in Europe	
	B. Women’s Rights, Gender Equality and CEDAW	
	C. State Selection Relevance for Comparison	
II.	Methodology.....	9
III.	Literature Review.....	10
IV.	The Far-Right Landscape for Women’s Rights and Gender Equality in Hungary.....	12
	A. Introduction	
	B. Background	
	C. Speech Analysis	
	D. Framework	
	1. Law Amendments	
	2. Family Protection Acts	
	3. Gender Equality Index	
	4. Istanbul Convention Stance	
	5. Gender-Based Violence	
	6. Reproductive Rights: Abortion Limitations	
	7. Hate Speech	
	8. Place for Gender Equality Advocacy	
	9. Education	
	E. Analysis	
	1. Power Consolidation	
	2. Anti-Immigration Sentiment	
	3. Eurosceptic Agenda	
	4. Conclusions	
V.	The Far-Right Landscape for Women’s Rights and Gender Equality in Poland.....	46
	A. Rhetoric Analysis	
	B. Patriarchal Gender Norms	
	C. Law Amendments: Abortion Limitations	
	D. Istanbul Convention Stance	

VI. The Far-Right Landscape for Women’s Rights and Gender Equality in the Netherlands.....53

VII. Conclusion.....55

VIII. Bibliography.....57

## I. Introduction

Far-right populism has been on the rise in Europe, as shown by the latest European Parliament elections, where 185 of the 720 seats now belong to the right-wing. National elections in different countries reflect this trend, such as in France, where Marine Le Pen gained 31.5% of the vote—double that of Macron's popular support. Similarly, the AfD in Germany has become the second-largest political power in the Reichstag (Al Jazeera, 2024). With anti-democratic ideas, the surge of the far-right raises questions about the future direction of the European Union and its various member states.

The narrative, rhetoric, and political agenda of these parties display many hyper-traditionalist, homophobic, and anti-migrant traits. These attitudes reflect most parties' views on gender, portraying an old-school “traditional” patriarchal system and values. This could be a threat to gender equality and women’s rights as it could hinder the success that feminist organizations have achieved during the last decades by promoting the old lifestyle and gender roles they have been trying to set free from. However, it would be remiss of this essay not to point out that the constructed narrative of the party is closer to an ideal, rather than the truth.

This paper explores the discourses and programs of right-wing populist parties in Hungary, Poland and the Netherlands, focusing on how the parties Fidesz, Law and Justice (PiS) and The Party for Freedom (PVV) address gender and women's rights within their ideological frameworks. By analyzing party manifestos, speeches, and legislative actions, the research investigates how populist narratives shape policies impacting women's rights and gender equality. The study employs a human rights approach, utilizing the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) as a benchmark to evaluate the extent to which populist parties uphold or undermine gender equality principles.

Using a framework from the Global Human Rights Defence (GHRD), each case is examined in separate sections to identify which aspects of women's rights are well-maintained and which are neglected under populist governance. The research then performs a comparative analysis of these

findings against the standards set by CEDAW. This structured approach provides a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between populist rhetoric and women's rights, highlighting the implications for gender equality in different European political contexts. The findings aim to contribute to the broader discourse on the impact of populist movements on human rights and democratic values, offering critical insights into the far right's structure of women's rights and gender equality in their rhetoric and programs and their implication on state legislation.

### 1. Background: The Rise of the Far-Right in Europe

The ideological stance of far-right parties is rooted in nationalistic views. Nationalism refers to “a political doctrine that strives for the congruence of the cultural and the political unit, i.e., the nation and the state, respectively. In other words, the core goal of the nationalist is to achieve a monocultural state” (Mudde, 2007:16).

Populism, as defined by the renowned political scientist Cas Mudde, refers to a “thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonte générale* (general will) of the people” (Mudde, 2007:23). In this case, the thin-center of populism is intertwined with nationalism to produce the discourse of the party, appealing to the population. Another typical tool of populism for gaining voter support is utilized commonly by the far-right: the formation of a common enemy. The concept of the common enemy lies within the basis of dimensions of identity politics, based on the distinction of “us vs. them” (Mudde, 2007:23). As Mudde (2007) stresses, it's necessary for the construction of a “native identity” to create clear boundaries with other identities, or as he explains, “to construct the ingroup ('us'), one needs to construct the outgroup(s) ('them').” He brings out how social psychologists have identified this process of “ingroup-outgroup differentiation” as “standard” in group identity building, which is crucial for the success of the

right-wing populists through pointing out and exaggerating the difference between the “native” groups and the “other” group. This is achieved through establishing a Manichaeian worldview, where the world is divided between “good” and “bad,” positioning the ways of the “native” group as the only good or correct ones and any alternatives as wrong and threatening to the established accepted order, thus “demonizing” the “other” (Abts & Rummens, 2005). One of the main ways of building the identity of the “native group” has been said to be through differentiating them from the anti-group. This is done by providing “vague” characteristics of the internal group and explicitly defining the external ones, thus resulting in defining the insider group as “ex negativo: the mirror image of the outgroup and their external characteristics” (Mudde, 2007:23). As “every country has its own favorite enemy” (Von Beyme, 1996:438), each populist radical right party also sports its own particular list of enemies, largely dependent upon its national context and ideological particularities (Mudde, 2007:64).

The enemy could vary depending on the cultural and societal context of a state; however, there are some more common ones. Gender roles being an omnipresent issue for all are present in most right-wing discourses to unite people with a common denominator. The emancipation of women is presented as the ruin of the traditional family, their new role in society is presented by Hungarian and Polish populists as threatening to their core identity and as externally imposed values corresponding to their own. The position of children is vulnerable, and the future of the states and their connection with women is further contributing to the sensitivity of the issue and why it is so powerful to mobilize the masses against a common enemy. Thus, this study chose to look at gender as it is evident in the programs of all four parties, however, as the analysis will present, it is approached differently.

## 2. Women’s Rights, Gender Equality, and CEDAW

As Hilary Clinton stated in her 1995 Remarks to the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, Plenary Session held in Beijing, China, “human rights are women's rights—and

women's rights are human rights,” their fulfillment represents fundamental freedoms, equality, and democracy (Academy Myatt The Lakes, 1995). With the anti-democratic views of the far-right, concerns are raised regarding their potential impact on the human rights of women. Thus, this study will show how the party program of the right-wing has addressed women’s rights so far in their discourse and legislature to reach conclusions about what it would mean for broader implications.

For the purpose of this paper, the term “gender” shall refer to the definition offered by the Istanbul Convention: “socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for women and men” (The Council of Europe, 2014). Violence against women refers to “violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women and shall mean all acts of gender-based violence that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological, or economic harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life” (The Council of Europe, 2014). Gender equality is a crucial part of women’s rights, ensuring the fulfillment of many of the rights. The main international convention outlining women’s rights is The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), adopted in 1979 by the United Nations General Assembly and ratified by 189 states (United Nations, 2009). The convention defines discrimination against women as “any distinction, exclusion, or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field,” bounding each ratified state to: “1) incorporate the principle of equality of men and women in their legal system, abolish all discriminatory laws and adopt appropriate ones prohibiting discrimination against women; 2) establish tribunals and other public institutions to ensure the effective protection of women against discrimination; and 3) ensure the elimination of all acts of discrimination against women by persons, organizations or enterprises” (CEDAW). Thus, a state's compliance with CEDAW serves as a good benchmark to measure the right-wing parties' attitudes towards women’s rights.

As the right-wing movements incorporate notions of the “traditional orthodox family” into their populist strategies, the messages they are spreading could result in actions against the progress made to fight discrimination against women and for equal rights. Messages such as that women should stay home reinforce inequality between men and women. If such discourses are implemented into policies, equal rights could be negatively impacted. Nevertheless, there is a gap between speaking and acting, and much of the party's discourses do not make it into the legislature. That is not to say it is not impactful on the attitudes of men and women towards their societal roles.

“This argument relies on the observation that our societies are highly gendered, whereby gender and sexuality are core markers of our social identities (see Buikema/Plate/Van der Tuin 2009; Sandfort et al. 2000; Walby 2009) and central to ongoing political struggles (see Paternotte/Kuhar 2018; Verloo 20018; Wal

by 2011) and to significant demographic and economic shifts (e.g. Inglehart 1997; Inglehart/Norris 2003). Importantly, these latter developments contest the entitlements and privileges as captured in existing gender and sexuality norms and structures. Given this context, gender may not be a defining quality of PRR ideology (Mudde 2007; Mudde/Kaltwasser 2015), but it is nonetheless near to the PRR core as it brings together and highlights every element of PRR ideology, tapping into fundamental parts of people’s identity. In this sense, gender is ‘trivotal’—i.e., a combination of trivial, meaning that it is not at the PRR’s ideological core, and pivotal, meaning a core social relation that is instrumentalized to center and emphasize the PRR ideology” (Spierings, 2020:42).

The term gender refers to “(a) assumptions about the ‘natural’ capacities and qualities of women and men and (b) traditional rules of submission of women towards men” (Meyer, 2002). Gender equality in society serves as a good measure for the state’s justice and human rights as it represents its protection of vulnerable groups (Meyer, 2002). Feminism is defined as advocacy of women’s rights on the basic premise of equality of the sexes” and it seeks the “political, economic, and social equality of the sexes by means of activities on behalf of women’s rights and interests, identifying all kinds of discrimination and exploitation of women in the private and

public sector” (Meyer, 2002). Thus, anti-gender equality sentiments result in a step back from the feminist movements to establish equal women’s rights. The term “gender ideology” was first used by Fidesz in Hungary in 2008 but became a strong tool for mobilization in 2017 used against all progressive values, including women’s rights and gender equality (Di Meco and Sarah Hesterman, 2023:4). Since then, it has turned into a “symbolic glue” used by the far-right populists to consolidate their power at the expense of “democracy, women’s rights and minority rights” through a weaponization of the Hungarian people’s fear of globalization and conservative values (Di Meco and Sarah Hesterman, 2023:4).

### 3. States Selection Relevance for Comparison

The states chosen for the comparison study are carefully selected due to several reasons. Hungary serves as the main case study due to the leading party Fidesz’s outspoken narrative against gender equality and policies going against international women’s rights standards. As the party has been in power since 2010, it offers a unique opportunity to study their construction of women’s rights over time with a wide range of materials available. Then the study on Poland, and the Netherlands will offer an understanding of how women’s rights and gender equality are constructed in different right-wing populist parties' elements across the EU, offering a valuable comparison. Poland is chosen because, similarly to Hungary, the party PiS has gained international attention for its illiberal nature and anti-gender equality sentiments. Their similar geographical locations, history, and cultures build for a good comparison of similarities, building off the Most Similar Systems Design of Research comparison, leaving out their approach to women’s rights as the dependent variable (Halperin and Heath, 2020:239). Although comparing similar cases is useful, it is not self-sufficient to build a thorough and fair analysis of the far-right position on gender in Europe. On the other hand, the Netherlands—coming again from a different region of Europe—presents a contrasting case, representing that not all populist strategies use the same notions and that the far-right isn’t united on a number of issues but their views vary—as the Netherlands hold views of strong gender equality and protection of women’s freedoms and rights but channels their messages towards migrants. All four states with their

unique similarities and different backgrounds result in a well-researched analysis of gender the far-right in Europe through a human rights lens.

## II.Methodology

The methodology incorporated in this paper is desk research, primary sources content analysis of party manifestos, speeches, and any relevant appearances and statements, combined with secondary sources analysis of papers discussing the primary documents and applicable concepts. A limitation of the scope of the study is the fact that the primary sources are translated, rather than read in their respective original languages, which could result in some minor errors or loss of authenticity and understanding in speeches. Nevertheless, since there are official translations available for the majority of sources, the resources remain reliable. The analysis method is a comparative study between Hungary and Poland and the Netherlands, with a first section of detailed analysis of Fidesz and then a comparison to the respective right-wing parties in the other three states. The framework applied to the individual analysis of Hungary is structured by the GHRD to assess the far-right's discourse and party programs to assess the construction and implications of women's rights and gender equality through looking at: 1) Law Amendments; 2) Family Protection Acts; 3) Istanbul Convention Stance; 4) Gender Equality Index; 5) Education; 6) Reproductive Rights: Abortion Limitations; 7) Gender-Based Violence; 8) Hate Speech; 9) Place for Gender Equality Advocacy. In the comparative section, the most appropriate points of the framework will be looked at for Poland and the Netherlands, depending on the national and cultural context impacting the narrative of the populist far-right.

## III.Literature Review

Since the rise of the far-right is an increasingly relevant phenomenon, it has garnered a lot of attention as of late, with many scholars researching the topic concurrently. Cas Mudde is one of

the main scholars for theorizing populism and the far-right, and as was mentioned in the preceding paragraphs, his definitions serve as a basis for the theoretical framework of the study and much of other papers concerning the topic. The general consensus is that while a variety of sources on populism exist, research is not as extensive on its relation with gender and women's rights, as agreed upon by the majority of scholars (Hassan, 2017:426). Thus, this paper aims to contribute to the literature by offering analysis to fill this gap.

Hassan (2017) offers an interesting analysis on populism and the role that women's issues play in academic articles or political programs. He suggests that definitions of populism "ignore the substantive and symbolic elements" that form due to the populist gendered narrative and the effects they have on societal perception of gender roles and equality. Similar to the comparison in this paper, he discusses how populism and gender have varying nature in their relationship in different states. This depends on the political context and cultural norms—resulting in some places, such as the Netherlands, where populist parties could be associated with women's rights protection, rather than their opposition, because different issues are highlighted by the parties. Thus presenting to what extent there are differences in the way populists may frame women's issues and the necessity to take into account the context when discussing the topic. Hassan (2017) stresses how "only a few studies have made a comprehensive contribution to our understanding of the relationship between gender and populism" and identifies that in many cases the use of gender issues has been "opportunistic" with the goal to "recruit a greater number of supporters to advance the populist cause," which can also be suggested for the number of parties analyzed in the paper.

Dutta and Abbas (2024) recently published a valuable discourse analysis of the speeches of Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi and Prime Minister of Hungary Viktor Orbán, providing insight into the discourse of right-wing populist parties internationally. Their study is particularly interesting because it compares two very different states culturally, religiously, and geographically, and still identifies similarities between their strategies, offering new analytical perspectives for the cases within the European Union. They follow a method created by Austrian linguist Ruth Wodak, which focuses on four levels of speech analysis: 1) the language of the text or the text-internal context; 2) the intertextual and interdiscursive relationship between texts, genres, and discourse; 3) social variables and institutional frames pertaining to a specific

situation; and 4) the broader socio-political and historical contexts in which discursive practices take shape (Dutta and Abbas, 2024:3). Furthermore, they discuss how the two party heads “draw upon and mobilize” gender relations (Dutta and Abbas, 2024:3). Dutta and Abbas’s study is an integral part of this paper’s literature review because it provides a unique analysis of Fidesz, looking at the rhetorical aspects of the party programs, which is an aspect of policy frequently overlooked, especially with such recency. Their research offers some meaningful insights, such as how the thematic tools and vocabulary of the leader’s speeches under which gender falls are effective in mobilizing their voters and an analysis of the original language newspapers publications of the reactions following politicians’ speeches and interviews. Dutta and Abbas mostly focus on how societal matters are securitized to mobilize the people behind their agenda and discuss gender as a strong and effective example. They point out a distinction between populist rhetorical discourse and performance, which corresponds to the distinction made in this paper and presents the importance of speech (Dutta and Abbas, 2024:3). They discuss how populists build their reality by a “construction of enmity, crisis, and existential threat to the people” through “the mobilization of a range of performances, rhetorical styles, and aesthetics linked to security,” which applies to their phrasing of gender equality as a threat not only to Hungary but to

the other case studies as well (Dutta and Abbas, 2024:2). They also discuss the “masculine construction of gender ideology” that Victor Orban utilizes to sell the party’s ideas (Dutta and Abbas, 2024:2). Nevertheless, the main focus of the issue is not gender equality but the construction of terrorism threats; although the papers offer valuable insights, it leaves space for further research to be conducted.

This gap is remedied by another interesting contribution—Kovats (2020), who analyzes gender as an academic discipline, critiquing that gender studies scholars looking from a perspective of cultural studies and “frequently ignore knowledge produced in political science or they attempt to understand these complex political systems through the prism of sexism and racism only” (Kovats, 2020:76). Thus, this study aims to create a bridge between the two disciplines and consider the issues of gender equality and women’s rights through an interdisciplinary human rights approach.

Another gap in the literature is the limited availability of secondary academic sources analyzing PVV's discourse and programs in the Netherlands in relation to the short time they entered parliament. Furthermore, the study being conducted in English also limits the literature available on each of the country cases.

De Lange and Mügge identify a further limitation in the available literature—a lack of “more systematic understanding of how PRR parties differ from one another in terms of gender,” stating how “there have been few attempts to explain such variations related to gender across the ideology of right-wing populist parties” (De Lange and Mügge, 2015:66). Building on Mudde's (2007) contribution, they argue that the populist right-wing parties' understanding of gender ideology is connected to their definition of crucial aspects of their ideology: populism, nativism, and authoritarianism. This paper offers exactly such structured comparative analyses that De Lange and Mügge identify to be missing.

To summarize the scope of the literature, regardless of the extensive options on the broader topic, there is a lack of resources on the specific focus of this study. The relationship between women's rights and right-wing populist party programs has been under-analyzed compared to other issues such as populism and migrants. Thus, this study contributes to the existing literature by providing a structured analysis of it. Although there are analyses of different states and their role in the issue, such a comprehensive comparison of four states, all with differing perspectives and focus points, has not been done, thus contributing to a broader picture on the matter.

#### IV. The Far-Right Landscape for Women's Rights and Gender Equality in Hungary

##### **Introduction**

The right-wing conservative party Fidesz - Hungarian Civic Alliance, governing Hungary, has raised several questions and concerns both on the European and international political scene. The positions of the party on issues such as immigration, LGBTQ+ rights, and anti-EU skepticism have brought the party and its leader, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, to the center of numerous discussions about the future of human rights in the state and the challenges some people might face due to the party's attitudes (Grzebalska & Pető, 2017). One relevant topic to explore is to what extent the party has contributed to undermining women's rights. As such, this chapter will examine the meaning of gender equality to Hungary's leading party, after which it will examine several factors analyzing how women's rights might have or have not been impacted by the party's narrative and actions, offer an analysis of how gender equality has been used in their party program and what it would mean for the protection of women's rights.

Since entering into power, Orbán has been described as using strategic tools of nationalism, appealing to "traditional family values" to consolidate his power, however "at the expense of democracy, women's rights and minority rights" (Lucina di Meco and Sarah Hsterman, 2023). According to an analysis by The Guardian, it is popular across right-wing populist parties to incorporate "misogynist language" in their public discourse and "demand women conform to traditional gender roles," as could be observed in Hungary (The Guardian, 2018). The chapter addresses such concerns about women's rights sparked by Orbán's discourse and policies. It will begin by looking at primary sources in the form of extracts from Viktor Orbán's speeches where he addresses issues relevant to women's rights, then look at GHRD's framework on the party's actions on: 1) Law Amendments; 2) Family Protection Acts; 3) Gender Equality Index; 4) Istanbul Convention Stance; 5) Gender-based Violence; 6) Reproductive Rights: Abortion Limitations; 7) Hate Speech; 8) Place for Gender Equality Advocacy; 9) Education

## **Background**

The chapter will begin by providing some context behind the nature and success of Fidesz to understand the country's climate for gender equality and build a thorough picture of the factors analyzed in the following section. Fidesz - Hungarian Civic Alliance was founded in the early 1990s as a liberal youth organization transformed into a far-right party in a decade (Dutta and Abbas, 2024:3). The party's success dates back to the 2010 elections when the ruling coalition

Fidesz-KDNP (Christian Democratic People's Party) won two-thirds of the votes for the first time and has since achieved a majority in each election (Koenen, 2023). The support for the party formed in the vulnerable post-communist state of the country. The far-right agenda of the party offered a "powerful force" promising the resurgence of "greater Hungary" - a tale of the national myth, often present in nationalistic discourse (Dutta and Abbas, 2024:3). The party discourse utilized the nation's "historic independence struggle" against the occupation of the Ottoman Empire in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the rule of the Habsburgs, the loss of Transylvania and other territories in the South and North of the country following the First World War (Dutta and Abbas, 2024:3). Those historical motives were used by Orbán and his fellow party members to present the European Union in a similar light, as a foreign invader and a threat to the integrity of the Hungarian nation and to mobilize support for his anti-EU agenda (Dutta and Abbas, 2024:3). In this process, Viktor Orbán has established himself as a protector of the nation and its "pure values," therefore becoming the ruling figure in leading the country and nation in labeling phenomena as right or wrong. This applies to the current situation with women's rights, as the ruling party, with the scope and influence it has established, is in a position to influence the people with their speech. In 2014, Viktor Orbán himself stated that "the era of transnational hegemony of liberal democracy was over and Hungary is building "illiberal democracy" instead" (Website of the Hungarian Government, 2014). From the outside, the political process in Hungary has been described as "democratic backsliding in the European Union" (Grzebalska & Pető, 2017).

Since Fidesz-KDNP won a majority in their first elections, they have "deeply changed" the legal and constitutional essence of the Hungarian state. The party changed the Constitution without consulting the opposition, reduced the Constitutional Court's rights, filled institutional positions with their party members, changed the voting system to benefit the leading party, and gained control over multiple media platforms, presumably used to spread disinformation and "government propaganda" (Kovats, 2020: 75). The size of their changes and lack of cooperation with other political actors presents the extent of their "absolute power" has turned Orbán into the "primary author of Hungarian public discourse" and gained him "ultimate say in any policy matter" (Sata, 2022). The power he and his party enjoy allows them the opportunity to pursue

their illiberal policies with little opposition. As one of the ‘problems’ within their umbrella, women’s rights could end up on an unfavorable side of their power and suffer an unopposed fall.

During his time in power, Fidesz has politicized ‘gender’ as ‘gender ideology’ and described it as a threat to “traditional families, children’s identity and the future of Europe” (Kovats, 2020: 76). The term “gender ideology” is present daily in the state-funded media outlets and, according to Kovats (2020), aims to “polarize society and maintain a wartime narrative.” The party’s discourse use of the negatively connoted term ‘gender ideology’ impacts fits a broader agenda of reinforcing traditional gender norms, endangering gender equality, which could be seen in their refusal to ratify the Council of Europe Convention on Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, also known as the Istanbul Convention, resulting in the women in the country not being protected by its bounds. Gender has served another central role in Orbán’s emphasis on the demographic crisis and the need for women to fulfill their role as child-bearers of Hungarian children which further problematizes the issue in regard to equal rights (Kovats, 2020: 76).

### **Speech Analysis**

The following section will look at speeches given by Viktor Orbán to gain an understanding of his and his party’s attitude towards women’s rights and gender equality. In a study of Orbán’s speeches during his 2010-2014 mandate, Sata (2022) translates his speeches and identifies the patterns within. He observes that Orbán’s discourse uses a lot of “populist discourse” such as 398 referrals to ‘crisis’, 29 referrals to ‘threat’ and 48 referrals to ‘lack of security’ (Sata, 2022). Another discursive strategy evident in Orbán’s speeches is his use of “othering”, often using “us”, “our” in contrast to “them” to create a clear distinction between the favorable and unfavorable by his party groups in the country (Sata, 2022). These groups are structured on the basis of societal identity either following or going against the standard set by Fidesz that refer to the former group as the “true people” (Sata, 2022). Populist discourse in Orbán’s speeches is also observed through his way of speaking as one of the nation, not as a politician ‘above’ them. Statements such as “I am familiar with our kind” and “We felt that we had been cheated” distance him from the villainized elite in populism and strengthen his position as the one

speaking for the people (Sata, 2022). This discourse can be seen in relation to any groups or individuals that present behavior different from the one his party encourages, in which category fall women wishing not to have children, women with different sexual orientations, and human rights defenders openly criticizing his rule (Lucina di Meco and Sarah Hsterman, 2023). Orbán also refers to “Christianity” and “Christian roots” 175 times as the main distinguishing factor of “Hungarianness” (Sata, 2022). As he often preaches about the importance of the “traditional family,” women’s role in society as mothers and justifying it through the use of the church, he is further reinforcing gender stereotypes, creating prejudice against non-compliant people, portraying them as not “true-Hungarians” and therefore as a threat to their identity, thus preventing women that do not choose to conform to those boundaries to pursue individual freedoms in society. His strong connection to the church has been suggested to be not honest beliefs and basis for morality but a “source of legitimacy” before the nation for the changes he envisions for the state (Sata, 2022). He shifts the responsibility of Hungary’s economic crisis to the declining belief in Christianity throughout Europe, which he blames the European Union for. He stated that the EU “neglects our [the Hungarian] Christian roots along with our moral and cultural traditions.” This way, he not only shifts the blame for Hungary’s efforts from himself to a foreign entity but also further consolidates his power through successful storytelling, gender equality issues ignored by the church becoming victims in the process. His narrative based on Christian principles identifies several priorities for the Hungarian nation: “work, credit, family, nation” (Sata, 2022). In his discourse on family, he mentions how “dissolved from the moral foundations that Christianity provided to us” the modern family has become, thus identifying the concept of a family strictly as a marriage between a man and a woman, taking away the freedom of decision-making and sexual expression from the people (Sata, 2022). In this picture, he also paints a clear picture of women’s role in his vision of Hungary, as Saba suggested made on his speeches, Orbán’s ideal female citizen should contribute to the state by staying home as giving birth to “enough children to form a strong Hungarian nation” (Sata, 2022). A main issue in Hungary that Orbán addresses is the demographics crisis, he labels the Hungarian nation as “an endangered species” and positions families, particularly women as the ones responsible for ensuring a change in the demographics through giving birth to more children (Sata, 2022). This unfair allocation of responsibility diminishes women from individuals to solely mothers and promotes a lack of gender equality. As this is the truth spread by the government, the population

would become likely to repeat such attitudes and even informally discourage women from taking advantage of their rights that exist legally. He blames the European Union and its “gender equality norms” for having the family under “constant attack, and many view raising a family as something that is in the way of self-fulfillment (Sata 2022).

According to Viktor Orbán, the matters of the demographic crisis are the most important item on the European agenda and European citizens are most interested in “establishing families, how to create safe homes and how they can raise their children in peace and security,” said in his speech published on the official government’s website (Orban , 2023). Orbán opposes the value of the individual, “the West” sees as “despotism” his vision of the family which in turn he frames as follows: “living together as a family, too, represents a barrier of some kind, but without it, there is no freedom; freedom takes a minimum of two individuals, and those who are on their own are lonely, not free,” framing the liberal understandings and policies of the European Union as unreasonable, and undermining them in the eyes of his supporters, alongside with undermining the respect for individuals, including women who may follow them (Orban , 2023). Orbán stated how “the duty of the Hungarian government [is] to create conditions in which a family-friendly Hungary greets the birth of children and shows the greatest respect to women who decide to have children,” showing his respect to women is limited to their capacity as mothers (Saba, 2022). He went as far to refer to women who do not conform to this role, such as feminist activists and liberal thinkers, as “traitors of the national cause” who are “ridiculing faith, and they regard families as redundant, and nations as obsolete,” thus causing societal tension against them (Sata, 2022). Orbán’s rhetoric could be defined as “authoritarian populism” a phenomenon that transpires in times crisis, which he is constantly upkeeping (Morelock 2018)

Throughout Orbán’s discourse, the dismissal of women can also be observed, which would reveal a lot about his position on gender equality and women’s rights. A particularly clear example is when in 2017 he stated: “We don’t deal with female issues,” explaining the unexpected dismissal of the female ambassador of Hungary to the United States, Réka Szemerkényi, subsequently replaced with a man (Zoltan, 2015) (Rutai, 2023). However, the action of replacement might have been malignantly motivated; his explanation of the matter is an

example of gender-based discrimination. On a further note, upon being questioned why the ambassador was replaced exactly by a man, he responded: "There are a few talented women, who could maybe work out, but I'm not surprised they didn't apply for the role," which once again presents his view of women as incapable of occupying high positions (Zoltan, 2015) (Rutai, 2023). This is a dangerous view for a country leader to foster as it could result in discourse and policies discouraging or even preventing women from aiming to occupy high positions both in the public and private sector which would indirectly or indirectly make it more difficult for them to make use of their human rights. Similar and even more offensive discourse has been used by fellow members of his party as well as a large amount of the population (Rutai, 2023). A female member of the opposition party and a European Parliament deputy received the following message: "I certainly wouldn't vote for you, but I would come on your face. At some point, you get desensitized to it, to protect yourself," presenting to what extent the discourse of Fidesz perpetuates existing gender stereotypes in the country and causes disagreement towards women occupying positions of power, pursuing a career and diminishes them from an equally to men capable adult purely to a sexual object. Katalin Cseh, who received the message, explains how this is not a one-time occasion but a constant, in her words "multiple times a day people wish [female politicians] dead or raped, their genitalia mutilated, their parents attacked, and are getting sent unwanted sexual content" (Rutai, 2023). As a woman in politics, Cseh identifies from first-hand experience that there has been a "growing anti-women sentiment" in Hungary, to an extent attributed to the leadership of Fidesz and their position towards women (Rutai, 2023).

When it comes to Fidesz's approach to women's rights and gender equality, there are some repetitive patterns and characteristics to be noted that shape the way the party sees them. In 2018, The Guardian points out that Orbán's rhetoric has often been "dismissive and insulting" towards women and focused almost solely on their roles as "child-bearers and homemakers" (The Guardian, 2018). In 2015, answering the question of why there aren't more women in his cabinet, he responded that "few women could deal with the stress of politics." Pivarnik (2018) suggests that through promoting such "sexist" views on women, Orbán and his party "reinforce the archaic belief that women belong at home and that their role in society should not go beyond cleaning, cooking, giving birth to children, and tending them" (Pivarnik, 2018). Orbán defines

the most important conclusion of the Family policy of Hungary to be “if you want a future for your country, you must support mothers,” sounding almost as a justification that women deserve support or respect due to them being mothers rather than people, which once again builds a discriminatory anti-gender equality narrative.

## **Framework**

Under the leadership of Viktor Orbán and the Fidesz party in Hungary, there have been several developments that raise concerns about the state of women’s rights. The following section will analyze them accordingly.

### 1. Law Amendments

Although Hungary’s constitution explicitly recognizes equal rights for men and women, the Fidesz government has made several legal amendments that, both indirectly and directly, impact women’s rights (Parlament, 2011). Such is the 2020 Amendment to the Fundamental Law of Hungary. The government-sponsored amendment was approved while the Covid-19 lockdown was still in place, covering marriage, family, sexual orientation, child-raising, and gender identity. The law amendment reinforced the party’s “gender-normative rhetoric” through stating that “mother shall be a woman, the father shall be a man” and strengthened their mainstream policies of family through defining it as “the basis of the survival of the nation,” as well as restructured individual self-determination and reproductive rights under the idea of normative demand of the reproduction of the nation (Venice Commission, 2021) (Grzebalska & Pető, 2017) (GHRD). A report from the Hate Speech, Gender, Social Networks, and Political Parties (GENHA) concluded that since Fidesz came to power in 2010, the party has introduced “a number of legislative changes that directly or indirectly diminish the rights of women and gender equality achievements and question the rights and dignity of non-binary gender identity, and all kinds of gender equality advocates who are not in support of the ideological underpinnings of the regime.” On January 1, 2012, soon after coming into power, Fidesz and the Christian Democratic People’s Party drafted and entered into force Hungary’s new Constitution - the Fundamental Law without coordinating with opposition parties, presenting the party’s “pro-family stance” and

“commitment to traditional heterosexual relationships” through including points on it in the new law (GHRD). Such is the preamble of the document, the “National Avowal,” a part of which is the following excerpt: “We hold that the family and the nation constitute the principal framework of our coexistence and that our fundamental cohesive values are fidelity, faith, and love.” (Ministry of Justice, 2021). The Fundamental Law stresses that family is the “basis of the survival of the nation” and defines it as a “marriage and/or the relationship between parents and children.” The notion of marriage protected by the state, though, is strictly limited to “the union of a man and a woman established by voluntary decision.” The constitution also states that “Hungary shall encourage the commitment to have children,” and that “the protection of families shall be regulated by a cardinal Act” (Pivarnik, 2018). Although the right to marry is a human right protected by Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and “entitled to protection by the state,” and Hungary’s law notion of how it is a “voluntary decision” even offers protection to women from involuntary marriages, the limitation of the union to a heteronormative one and the strong “encouragement” to have children could strip women of access to equal opportunities to practice fundamental freedoms, outside of the bond of marriage. Including this understanding as part of Hungary’s Constitution shows that Orbán’s views of women’s main role in society as mothers are not purely rhetoric but transfers to policies and legal actions (UDHR) (Parlament, 2011). Further legal action that diminishes women’s rights from individuals to as their role as mothers is the government’s reformulation of “gender policy” to “family policy” or a demographic policy that emphasizes how the state is in a demographic crisis and women have a duty to put efforts into giving birth to more children to help solve it (Kovats, 2020: 76). Such a manipulative tactic indirectly keeps women out of the workforce and from realizing their right to gender equality to the full extent.

A law amendment introduced by Fidesz that protects women’s rights is the 2013 Penal Code, Article 212/2, that for the first time defined ‘domestic violence’ as a category punishable by law (European Parliament, 2013). Until then, domestic violence was addressed as any other violence, categorized by the levels of severity, with those that result in wounds healing under eight days perceived as ‘minor’ and requiring no legal action to be undertaken by the police but by the victim (European Parliament, 2013) (Human Rights Watch). This would put women in a position where a large number of their injuries are ignored by the authorities unless they begin a legal battle against their husband, which considering both the financial and societal complexities and

prejudices against it, interfered with women fighting for their rights. In this regard, Fidesz had abided by international human rights protective standards and Article 2 of CEDAW (2023) “a) To embody the principle of the equality of men and women in their national constitutions or other appropriate legislation if not yet incorporated therein and to ensure, through law and other appropriate means, the practical realization of this principle”. Nevertheless, where the issue comes is that while domestic abuse was recognized as a specific criminal offense, the “realization of this principle” was not fully and fairly implemented. The 2013 law amendment offers protection only after two separate occasions of domestic violence and leaves out of its protection women who do not live with the person who inflicted the abuse, unless they have a child together, nor does it protect women in same-sex relationships, leaving a lot more to be done that has not been addressed by Fidesz in the 11 years since the amendment (Human Rights Watch) (European Parliament, 2013).

Even the newly introduced program by Fidesz for preferential women’s retirement, according to Sata (2022), “only reinforces gender inequality” as it is based on their default role in his government role as family-caretaker. Orbán states that: “Women can now retire after 40 years of registered employment. This, in addition to the fact that they obviously deserve it, is also an opportunity for them to spend more time with their families, and especially with their children and grandchildren. And so I think that this enables an important opportunity to strengthen family ties” (Sata, 2022). Although the government offering women earlier retirement does not go against their human rights, the reasons behind the decision are rooted in gender inequality, thus the policy becomes one of the ways Fidesz is changing the Hungarian system in a gender-biased manner, showing no interest in gender equality.

Another legal action undertaken by Fidesz that goes against principles of gender equality and this time directly poses a threat to women's rights is their 2020 abolition of Hungary’s Equal Treatment Authority, described as “Hungary’s most important equality body” (GHRD, 2023). The abolition of the institution both presents the party’s attitude towards equal rights but also leaves vulnerable groups, such as women of minorities and different sexual orientations, without

a place to actively protect their rights. The Constitution of Hungary does not recognize intersections forms of discrimination, thus showing the legally unfavorable position of such individuals (Parlament, 2011). The functions of Hungary's former main equality mode EAuth had been transferred to the Commissioner for Fundamental Rights of Hungary, which has been identified by the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions as a “B status” institution that “lacks effective enforcement of the rights of vulnerable groups” and is “less likely to pay sufficient attention to discrimination” (GANHRI, 2021) (GHRD, 2023).

## 2. Family Protection Acts

The Hungarian government has introduced numerous family protection measures to increase birth rates and support families, such as generous tax breaks and subsidies for families with multiple children. While these policies are beneficial for families, critics argue that they reinforce traditional gender roles and do not sufficiently support women's participation in the workforce or single-parent families. The Family Protection Act came into force in 2012 and has been described to favor “familialism”, a form of “biopolitics which views the traditional family as a foundation of the nation and strengthens deep-rooted discriminatory stereotypes about the roles and responsibilities of women and men in the family and society” (Grzebalska & Petó, 2017). Furthermore, the state has introduced a number of pro-family policies rooted in gender discrimination. Such is observed by the Committee on the Elimination against Women (CEDAW) which raised a number of concerns on the measures of the Family Protections Acts, such as “credits for joint property purchases, tax exemptions for women with four or more children, and the preferential credits for women under 40 on the first marriage”. According to the Committee, those measures “overemphasize women’s responsibilities as mothers and wives, thereby undermining women’s social status, autonomy, educational opportunities, and professional careers, as well as possibly forcing women to stay in abusive relationships”, presenting the international concern for Fidesz’s attitudes and policies effect on women’s rights. Furthermore, the Committee raised concerns regarding the 2022 decision to charge the Ministry of Culture and Innovation with the responsibility for matters of women’s well-being, as it could “reinforce a focus shift from gender equality to women’s traditional stereotypical roles in the family” and could reduce the state’s capacity to guarantee gender equality and implement the appropriate policy as the power is concentrated within one institution (CEDAW, 2023) (GHRD).

In 2018, a Fidesz-sponsored nation-wide conclusion of family and children protection aired aiming to promote their conservative family ideas and increase birth rates by presenting women as “productive citizens of the nation” against the demographic crisis (GHRD). The campaign had been accompanied by a “major media campaign, including forums, TV and radio appearances, online and paper advertising, and billboards” to reach as many people as possible, presenting the populist communication strategies of the party, presenting mothers as saviors of the nation and the vast outreach of Orbán’s grasp

In the first national radio interview following his 2018 third and consecutive elections majority victory, Orbán stated that in the next thirty years he plans to make a “comprehensive deal” with women, positioning women in the center of his party program surprised a number of people due to their typical dismissal in his speech (Sata, 2022). Viktor Orbán offers women under forty years old and married with four or more children extra government funds and preferential credit and life-long personal tax exemption, “in exchange” for them bearing children. The party offers 30 EUR monthly support for families with one child and increases the amount ten times after three children (Pivarnik, 2018) (Orban , 2023). Although increasing the support for families with more children is fitting due to the higher cost associated with them, Sata (2022) suggests that his offer “reaffirms denial of women’s equality and autonomy”, as single women or those not married to a man are discriminated against by the support system. Another borderline coercive strategy of Orbán to achieve his demographic ideal is offering \$30,000 to families with more than three children or support to buy a large vehicle (Sata, 2022) (Orban , 2023). Although programs supporting the well-being of families are important and helpful, Orbán’s incentive and the role he dedicated to women in the discourse surrounding those programs reveal traces of gender inequality infusing traces in them. His strong encouragement and “extremely conservative views on gender” take away the personal choice of women and families through financial and rhetorically coercive means, stressing the importance of the mother to the survival of the nation in the so-called “Islamization of Europe Crisis” (Pivarnik, 2018) (Sata, 2022). As Christianity is a main identifier of the Hungarian identity, social pressure would compel women to accept his deal, perpetuating his “extremely conservative views on gender” (Pivarnik, 2018). Fidesz’s tax exemption policy, however useful to families, also poses challenges to gender equality. The exemption can only be applied to one income in a household, thus only one partner can use it, as male salaries are on average higher than the female ones, together with the woman taking the

motherly role in the marriage, results in women staying home, while men work and claim the exemption (Pivarnik, 2018). In the event where a couple separates, the exemption then remains for the men's salary, leaving women in a "financially vulnerable situation" (Pivarnik, 2018). Thus, a policy that is supposedly made to support women reveals to be purely instrumental for Orbán's demographic plans, leaving unaddressed gaps that position women in disproportionately vulnerable situations (Pivarnik, 2018). Pivarnik (2018) states that one of the most "problematic aspects" of Fidesz's rule is his focus on increasing the birth rate. Nevertheless, he explains that Fidesz's "obsession" with the demographic situation is not a new phenomenon but lies deep within Hungarian history. Pivarnik (2018) clarifies how even during the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Hungarian people were presenting lower birth rates than the Austrians

producing a fear of "the death of the nation" leading to politicians approaching the issue in the discourse even then. Furthermore, he stresses how the issues of demographics are not solely a Hungarian phenomenon but a trend across many countries in Europe, nevertheless Orbán chooses to securitize it and shift the responsibility of it to women, disregarding gender equality and reinforcing discrimination in the process. Furthermore, as his sole focus on family policies is increasing the birth rate he leaves a number of other family-related issues unaddressed, many of which disproportionately affect women who are often the main caretakers of children in the family. Pivarnik comments on how Orbán's focus on birth rates hints at how he identifies women "first and foremost with their reproductive organs", going against gender-equality principles and at the expense of women's equal development and opportunities (Pivarnik, 2018). Kovats (2020:86) states that "Gender policies of the Hungarian government are in essence reduced to family policies" and family is decreased to demographics, leaving issues such as birth-increase policies, leading issues such as "the education system for existing children, the issue of child poverty, the legal situation of gay and lesbian couples, or care for the elderly" out of sight. The policies further lack gender equality as he aims to increase the children not of all women but of "upper or middle class, non-Roma women" that perpetuates cross-group discrimination and further, as not all groups are encouraged to access governmental help (Kovats, 2020: 86).

A contrast between the party's narrative and rhetoric on gender equality can, however, also be

observed in Fidesz's Family Protection programs. The party introduced extended parental leave and promised support for working mothers, such as community kindergartens and nurseries (Sata, 2022). Nevertheless, Sata (2022) states that "it would be wrong to assume Orbán supports the emancipation of women". He stresses that Orbán's "sexism" has become clear when in one of his speeches he states that "the Creator was aware of the fact that it was not good for man on his own, and so he created man and woman, and as such practically speaking he created the family", revealing his discriminatory perception of gender roles and hinting how women were created to make sure of "the good for the man". Kovats (2020) further discusses the discrepancy between the party's "deeply conservative rhetoric centered on motherhood" and the policy support that it offers women, thus calling for a distinction between policy and ideology. He analyses how even though Fidesz's Family Protection Acts prioritize motherhood as a woman's primary role in society, their support system for working mothers stimulates women to remain in the labor force. Kovats describes Fidesz's accusations that they are "sending women back to the kitchen" as "clearly misplaced" and focused on criticizing the rhetoric rather than the following actions (Kovats, 2020: 86). Although Kovats's distinction is important to keep in mind when looking at Fidesz's role in gender equality in Hungary, this research shows that while it is true that a large amount of Orbán's attention to women's rights is purely rhetoric, this for one leaves a mark on society and two a number of his rhetoric beliefs are later on reflected in policy changes.

### 3. Gender Equality Index

Hungary ranks relatively low on the EU Gender Equality Index, reflecting significant gaps in gender equality. According to the most recent report by the European Institute for Gender Equality, Hungary has failed to significantly improve its gender equality index, being 25th out of the 27 analyzed countries, presenting the insufficient gender-equality efforts of Fidesz in the 14 years it has been in power (EIGE, 2024). Women's representation in politics is particularly low, one of the lowest in the European Union, with only 10.01% of parliamentary seats held by women, compared to a 33% EU average (GHRD). The low number of women in politics could be a concern for women's right protection and gender equality, as fewer women are represented, therefore their issues would be less likely to be brought up and paid the necessary attention, as

can be seen by the Family Protection acts focusing only on fertility policies in relation to women's issues (GHRD, 2024) (Sata, 2023). The appointment of Katalin Novák in 2022 as the first female president of Hungary would have served as an example and anchor for female emancipation, however, the former Minister for Family Affairs position on matters of gender equality aligned with Orbán's, expressing anti-abortion, pro-natalist views, and "actively propagating and introducing views that have hindered equalities for women" such as the Family Protection Act, which have "granted women incentives to be full-time housewives" (Rutai, 2023) (Strzyżyńska and Kumar, 2023) (GHRD). The sexist environment in Hungary's politics and society has its impact on women, contributing to the concerning low number of women in parliament. Orbán's 2015 comment that this is because women "cannot stand the stress" of politics confirmed the level of sexism in state structures (Lucina di Meco and Sarah Hesterman, 2023:9). Furthermore, he and his party have been accused of "gender washing" through positioning a few women party members under the spotlight in an attempt to combat the sexism critiques and appeal to female voters (Lucina di Meco and Sarah Hesterman, 2023:9). Nevertheless, the presence of those women in politics does not necessarily mean that they speak for women's issues, rights, and equality, as they are "profoundly aligned" with Fidesz "anti-gender ideology" and preach for "traditional" society and gender roles, suggesting that the number of women in politics isn't a direct correlation to their representation (Lucina di Meco and Sarah Hesterman, 2023:9). In the period 2012 to 2015, only 9.7% of Fidesz's MPs in the Hungarian National Assembly have been women, while the second government of Orbán had one female minister and in the third (2014-2018) decreased to none, with currently only the minister of justice being the only active female minister in Orbán's government (Pivarnik, 2018). While the undersecretarial level was better compared to the cabinet, the percentage of women undersecretaries still remained below 15%, compared to an EU average of 26.8%, presenting inequality at all levels of state governance (Pivarnik, 2018). In an interview by Rutai (2023), Reka Safirny of the Hungarian Women's Lobby - the national branch of the European Women's Lobby suggests gender quotas as a response to unequal statistics, nevertheless discussing how as they were the standard during communism, the current politicians and people are weary of them. In this manner, the number of women in politics from communist to post-communism decreased rapidly in Hungary, with only 7% of parliament seats occupied by women (Rutai, 2023). Comparing those statistics to the current ones, an extremely small increase is seen in the last

decades, showing that the Fidesz government has done little to address the issue of equal access to opportunities for women in politics. Regardless, Safnny states how gender quotas are implemented successfully in some form in most EU countries and the increase of women in the European Parliament is largely due to them, as they are legal obligations leaving “no loopholes” for those who may not wish to enforce gender equality (Rutai, 2023). Rutai (2023) observes how the only few women that have reached the higher ranks of Fidesz’s structure are “Fidesz women through and through”. Both the former President and the Minister of Justice are mothers of three children and advocated for the Christian, heterosexual family with several children (Rutai, 2023). Safnny comments that “The more power a position has, the smaller the chance that a woman will get it. Women are more likely to stay in local politics,” demonstrating the governing party’s discriminatory attitudes towards power, deeming them inadequate to occupy positions of power (Rutai, 2022). Even the presidential position that was held by Novák serves mostly a ceremonial purpose in Hungary with little decision-making power, appropriate for the party’s “gender washing” practices (Lucina di Meco and Sarah Hesterman, 2023:9). In an advertisement for the Fidesz-sponsored Family Magic non-profit organization, Novák poses in a kitchen next to her husband's children saying "In seven days, I will probably bake five times" (Rutai, 2023). When even the President of the country is presented not as a nation-leader but as a mother, one can build an understanding of how deeply rooted Fidesz’s sexist vision of women is. The recent resignation of Novák as president raised additional concerns about the protection of human rights in Hungary, as she was asked to resign following massive protests for her decision to grant a pardon to a man imprisoned for “forcing children to retract sexual abuse claims against a director of a state-run children's home,” revealing the party’s supposed care for children to be mostly an instrumental part of their populist discourse, as well as their disregard to human rights (BBC, 2024).

When it comes to gender employment and gender pay gaps, the picture is better than in the political sector, yet still behind the EU average. Data from a 2017 EU public opinion research across the member states on different matters of societal interest show that 78% of the respondents in Hungary agree with the statement that “the most important role of a woman is to take care of her home and family,” showing that the public opinion corresponds to the party’s rhetoric and both of them overall reinforce gender inequality (Eurobarometer, 2017) (GHRD, 2023). The employment rate in Hungary varies drastically between different groups of women,

showing that mothers of young children and mothers of three to four children rarely participate in the workforce, largely due to the financial benefits offered by the Family Protection Acts (GHRD, 2023). While the benefits offered by the governments are supporting families in raising children, they are also encouraging the patriarchal family unit, where a woman is financially dependent on her husband, making her more likely to suffer from domestic abuse and discouraging gender equality, creating a more challenging environment for women to practice their full human rights, which goes against the standard set by Article 3 of CEDAW: “States Parties shall take in all fields, in particular in the political, social, economic and cultural fields, all appropriate measures, including legislation, to ensure the full development and advancement of women, for the purpose of guaranteeing them the exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms on a basis of equality with men” (CEDAW) (GHRD, 2023). In such a “toxically misogynist atmosphere” the low political and workforce participation of women is to be expected and the environment is preventing them from the same opportunities as men to compete in the workforce, due to their designated duties as mothers, thus resulting Hungary to rank only above Greece in the EU Member States on the Gender Equality Index and last on the gender-equality power index measuring “gender equality in decision-making positions across the political, economic and social spheres” (GHRD, 2023) (EIGE, 2024).

#### 4. Istanbul Convention Stance

In 2014, Hungary signed the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, commonly known as the Istanbul Convention, but has not ratified it since (Kovats, 2020: 91). The Fidesz government has expressed strong opposition to the convention, claiming it promotes ‘gender ideology’ and undermines traditional family values. This stance raises significant concerns about the government's commitment to combating violence against women and providing adequate support for victims, leaving them insufficiently in front of the openly-misogynistic government system. In May 2020, the government of Hungary adopted a declaration refusing to ratify the Convention, raising concerns about the effective protection of women’s rights (Europa, 2020). The following year, Orbán

issued the removal of the term “gender equality” from a regional social cohesion declaration on the basis of similar claims that gender is an “ideologically motivated expression”, once again strengthening gender inequality in Hungary and refusing to accept international standards and measures against it (Europa, 2020) (Lucina di Meco and Sarah Hesterman, 2023:9) (Margolis, 2020). The so-called Istanbul Convention states that “Recognising the structural nature of violence against women as gender-based violence, and that violence against women is one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position compared with men” (The Council of Europe, 2004). Through refusing to ratify the Convention because of ideological anti-LGBTQ+ attitudes, the Fidesz government is also refusing to recognize the systematic violence that women become victims of based on their gender. Nevertheless, as Orbán himself openly speaks about women as a subordinate group, this refusal serves his policies and makes sure that women remain in such a dependent situation (Kovats, 2020: 91) (Sata, 2022). In the Preamble of the Convention, it is stated that the Member States of the Council of Europe recognize “with grave concern, that women and girls are often exposed to serious forms of violence such as domestic violence, sexual harassment, rape, forced marriage, crimes committed in the name of so-called “honour” and genital mutilation, which constitute a serious violation of the human rights of women and girls and a major obstacle to the achievement of equality between women and men; the ongoing human rights violations during armed conflicts that affect the civilian population, especially women in the form of widespread or systematic rape and sexual violence and the potential for increased gender-based violence both during and after conflicts; Recognising that women and girls are exposed to a higher risk of gender-based violence than men; that domestic violence affects women disproportionately, and that men may also be victims of domestic violence” (The Council of Europe, 2014). The refusal of Hungary to recognize the human rights violations and challenges that women are facing listed above presents that they do not accept them to be true. Due to that, it is not unfair to assume that there is more space open in Hungary for the doing of such discriminatory illicit activities, therefore endangering women, as the government has refused to accept the proposed measures against them. The refusal of Hungary to ratify the Convention is based on Fidesz’s claim that it promotes “gender ideology” - a term used commonly by the right to claim that it undermines “traditional family values” and promotes homosexuality (Margolis, 2020). Fidesz also claims that the protection that the Convention offers to migrant women encourages more immigration in the

country which the party strongly opposes (Margolis, 2020). The Hungarian government under Fidesz's rule has "launched persistent attacks," as well as on LGBTQ+ and migrant rights, all representing the democratic backsliding of the country, creating space for further disregard to human rights. Hungary's minister of justice Judit Varga argued that the national laws of Hungary sufficiently protect "women victims of violence" but women's rights protection groups have spoken for the ineffective service and insufficient police response to domestic violence in the country (Margolis, 2020). Hungary's signing of the Istanbul Convention was a response to the inquiries by such women's rights organizations Fidesz followed a strategy stating that they would ratify the Convention and then suspending further actions on it (Kovats, 2020: 91). The Hungarian Centre for Fundamental Rights, the institution entrusted with the duties of EAuth, issued a resolution on the Convention entitled "No to the Gender Convention" and advised the government not to submit its text for voting in the Parliament because "despite its alleged goal to fight violence against women, its real purpose is to break down the traditional family model in every European country" (Kovats, 2020: 91) (Center for Fundamental Rights, 2021). This stance taken by the Center for Fundamental Rights, a body that is supposed to protect equal rights and gender equality presents the vile state of their protection in Hungary. Such rhetoric takes the focus away from the victims of violence in need of protective mechanisms and weaponizes it as a populist rhetoric tool for electorate mobilization. During the 2018 electoral campaign, Fidesz often stated that if they lost and the opposition came to power, they would ratify the "Gender Convention", showing how Orbán's party prioritized political interests at the expense of women's rights (Kovats, 2020: 91). In their populist rhetoric against the Istanbul Convention, Fidesz created an image of 'gender' as an enemy identity that they can protect the nation from. Fidesz maintains a feeling across the population that Hungary is under a "constant threat" from this "foreign enemy" resulting in attacks on pro-gender equality activism in the country (Kovats, 2020: 92). Kovats (2020) argues that due to this "war-time-like" narrative construction, "a new form of anti-human rights movement, antifeminism and homophobia" will form. Through their rejection of the Council of Europe's Convention on Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence Hungary has taken a step back on women's rights protection not only on domestic but on European level by refusing to abide by the document's "golden rule of inclusion" of all to "live free from violence, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, immigration status, or other characteristics" (Grzebalska & Petó, 2017).

## 5. Gender-Based Violence:

Addressing gender-based violence remains a critical issue. Hungary has measures in place to combat domestic violence, but the lack of ratification of the Istanbul Convention and insufficient funding for support services hinder effective protection and support for victims. Over 20% of women in the European Union have reported experiencing domestic violence. In many member states, over 50% of women murdered have been killed by their partner or a male family member. During the Covid-19 lockdowns, reports of domestic abuse increased rapidly across the EU (European Parliament, 2020). These statistics stress the need for government resources for gender-based violence and domestic abuse prevention, as well as protective support systems for the victims. As the European Parliament (2020) describes it, “they can save lives and the victims can’t wait” (European Parliament, 2019).

With the misogynistic attitudes of the leading party Fidesz, the abolition of ETAeth, and their refusal to ratify the Istanbul Convention, Orbán’s government shows insufficient measures in protecting women from domestic abuse and gender-based violence, thus violating their human rights. The situation in Hungary is even worse than the EU average. The report by Human Rights Watch, “Unless Blood Flows: Lack of Protection from Domestic Violence in Hungary,” documents “brutal” violence against women by their romantic partners and the significant challenges they face (Human Rights Watch, 2013). The report identifies gaps in Hungary’s policy and legal framework and the “failure of authorities” to protect women from domestic violence by presenting interviews with 29 female victims of domestic abuse, as well as with “lawyers, judges, women’s organizations, shelter workers, government officials, and other experts” (Human Rights Watch, 2013).

A number of the interviewees reported being “stabbed and chopped at with knives, axes, and swords; kicked and punched in the abdomen while pregnant; raped; beaten with sticks, baby carriages, iron rods, and thick cables to the point of broken bones and skull fractures; locked in

sheds without clothes in winter; thrown off balconies; dumped in remote areas in the middle of the night; and subjected to severe psychological violence,” speaking to the severity of the struggle (Human Rights Watch, 2013). Nevertheless, Fidesz’s response as a governing party appears insufficient. According to the author of the report Lydia Gall, a researcher from HRW specializing in Eastern Europe, “The very people who should help – police, doctors, prosecutors, and social workers – often leave victims with no choice but to go back to the abusers, exposing them to further violence,” revealing the high levels of gender-based discrimination in the institutions supposed to protect women equally to men (Human Rights Watch, 2013).

The ineffective institutional services violate Article 2, Part 1 of CEDAW: “(c) To establish legal protection of the rights of women on an equal basis with men and to ensure through competent national tribunals and other public institutions the effective protection of women against any act of discrimination; (d) To refrain from engaging in any act or practice of discrimination against women and to ensure that public authorities and institutions shall act in conformity with this obligation,” as the public authorities clearly present a discriminatory attitude against women by not offering the needed protection. Hungarian victims have reported “victim-blaming attitudes among social workers and doctors when they sought protection” (Human Rights Watch) (CEDAW, 2023). Human Rights Watch emphasizes how Hungary has precise obligations to act in accordance with international standards to “protect women’s human rights to live free from violence, to non-discrimination, and to effective judicial remedies” but is not fulfilling them (Human Rights Watch). Human Rights Watch advised the Hungarian government to improve its “training for police, prosecutors, judges, social workers, and doctors, and increase the capacity of shelters for victims of domestic violence” (Human Rights Watch).

The HRW report revealed that police officials commonly “discourage women from reporting domestic abuse and fail to use their authority effectively to issue temporary restraining orders under a 2009 law,” revealing the failure of Fidesz to successfully implement protective laws and effective institutions. The Criminal Procedure Act for reporting domestic abuse allows the victim thirty days to file a complaint against the abuser and requires the victim to participate actively in the criminal proceedings by making a private motion or statement that she wishes to punish the

abuser or engage in private prosecution (GHRD, 2023). Such procedures discourage the victim from taking legal actions due to difficulties or reliving a traumatic experience and facing their abuser. By not taking measures to create a more appropriate Criminal Procedure, Orbán's government demonstrates a lack of concern for women and girls who are victims of domestic abuse and fails to adequately protect their human rights.

Furthermore, the absence of "rape crisis" or "sexual violence referral centres," let alone "adequate training, competence and protocols for properly handling violence against women cases," further presents Fidesz's lack of care for women's experiences. The populist strategies of Fidesz regarding women become clear even in the violence against women area, as although they have taken minimal efforts to prevent it, they have named 2020 (GHRD, 2023). As this is the same year that Orbán refused to ratify the Istanbul Convention, the instrumental purpose of their rhetoric to gain women's votes support and international acceptance is revealed (GHRD).

Gender-biased discrimination prejudices are noticeable in the police's response as some women have reported the police asking them if they wish to press charges against the abuser in front of the abusers themselves, suggesting a dismissive approach to their situations that led many of them to not use their rights and even suffer additional violence (Human Rights Watch, 2013). According to a report by the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, Hungary "does not have a policy foundation on preventing and combating VAW" except in the case of human trafficking, and even the post-Covid-19 Recovery and Resilience plan did not address violence against women, regardless of its peak during the lockdown (CEDAW, 2023). The Committee also reports being "alarmed by the inadequate protection" from gender-based violence of women and girls that face intersecting forms of discrimination, such as "women and girls belonging to religious and ethnic minorities, those with disabilities and LBTQI+ women," whose problems are often left unaddressed (CEDAW, 2023) (GHRD). Lastly, the Committee requested before the Family Court the repealing of mandatory mediation where a case of child visitation or custody disputes include gender-based violence (CEDAW, 2023). The report identifies several crucial points where the governing rightwing party is failing to eliminate the discrimination against women through insufficient policy-making, thus failing to protect their rights and to meet the state's international obligations in front of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

In relation to intersectional discrimination, Romani women in Hungary are disproportionately affected, becoming one of the most vulnerable groups. Far-right populist rhetoric often involves anti-minority attitudes, which is also the case in Hungary, describing the Roma minority as an enemy to the ‘pure Hungarian nation’ (Mudde, 2007) (ERRC, 2024). Because of this rhetoric, Romani women face discrimination both on the basis of their gender and ethnicity, leaving them mostly unable to access the state support offered to ethnically Hungarian women (ERRC, 2024). In a study undertaken by the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC, 2024), Roma women interviewed reported being abused physically during childbirth in hospitals, including “instances included being slapped on the face and beaten on the thighs” (ERRC, 2024). Many others reported “racist and disparaging verbal abuse” (ERRC, 2024). A precedent case from 2017 follows a Hungarian Romani woman who won her case as a victim of “harassment and racist abuse by hospital staff while she was giving birth” before the Budapest Equality body (ERRC, 2024). The woman reported being alone in the hospital and being threatened by the hospital staff that they would “put a pillow over her face to silence her, and to take her child away,” she reported them shouting to her, “you gypsies give birth only for the money!” (ERRC, 2024). This is just one example of the many cases of violence and abuse against Romani women that do not make it to the court or to the public eye, as according to the ERRC (2024), no country in Europe has criminalized specifically discriminatory violence against Roma women, ignoring their intersectional struggle and discouraging them from seeking human rights protection. Fidesz’s government not only does not take any measures to limit the intersectional discrimination against women but perpetuates it through their anti-minority discourse, preventing Roma women from fully enjoying their human rights both on an institutional and societal level.

## 6. Reproductive Rights: Abortion Limitations

Abortion is legal in Hungary, but the Fidesz government has implemented measures that make access more difficult. For example, a 2022 law requires women to listen to the fetal heartbeat before obtaining an abortion. These restrictions, along with the government's pro-natalist rhetoric, raise concerns about future limitations on reproductive rights. Judging by Fidesz’s

Family Protection Act, focus on the demographic crisis, and the encouragement of motherhood as women's primary goal in life, it comes as no surprise that the party "actively attacks women's sexual and reproductive health and rights" (SRHR, 2023). In 2012, the government passed an amendment to the Fundamental Law that includes a sentence for the protection of the fetus stating, "the life of the fetus shall be protected from the moment of conception," later further reinforced by the new Family Protection Act additionally stressing the protection of the fetus from the moment of conception (Ministry of Justice, 2021). These amendments positioned abortions as a sensitive topic, introducing new challenges to women to access one.

Even though abortion is legal in Hungary, Fidesz has gradually decreased access to pregnancy termination services. In 2012, the government banned the medical abortion pill, which was a widespread contraceptive method in Europe, backed by the EU, therefore leaving the only alternative as surgical abortion, which is a more painful and risky alternative that Fidesz has also made more difficult to access (GHRD, 2023). The party has also implemented compulsory two rounds of counseling, a waiting period of three days before abortion to discourage people from proceeding with it, and in September 2022 issued a decree requiring women to deliver a gynecological report confirming that they had heard the heartbeat of the baby before finalizing the decision to terminate the pregnancy (GHRD, 2023). Today, according to Act Article LXXIX of the 1992 fetal life protection law, pregnancy is legal up until the 12th week in Hungary, however, only in the events that: "the pregnancy is the result of a crime (sexual violence), the pregnancy is dangerous to the health of the pregnant woman, the fetus is likely to suffer from a serious disability or impairment, and the pregnant woman is in a serious crisis situation" (GHRD) (Parliament, 2011). The abortion limitations in Hungary have raised concern about "reproductive justice addressing issues of population control, bodily self-determination," and limits on women's individual freedoms, as well as provoked an international backlash from human rights activists and NGOs (Amnesty International, 2024) (Kovats, 2020:81).

## 7. Hate Speech:

The Fidesz government has been accused of using divisive rhetoric, particularly against LGBTQ+ communities and immigrants, which can create an environment where hate speech,

including gender-based hate speech, is more prevalent. The United Nations Strategy and Plan on Action on Hate Speech defines it as “any kind of communication in speech, writing or behavior, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, color, descent, gender or other identity factor” (United Nations, 2020). Combating hate speech and promoting a culture of respect and inclusion is essential to gender equality and human rights. The lack of measures against hate speech against women in Hungary is a major concern identified by the Global Human Rights Defence (GHRD, 2023). The Constitution and civil law address only hate speech based on ethnicity, race, nationality, and religion, leaving insufficient tools against sexist speech (Parliament, 2011).

An analysis by the global #She Persisted initiative against gender-based discrimination and online attacks against women in politics was published in 2023, providing a detailed overview of the commonness of “gendered disinformation campaigns” and “defamation” of female politicians aiming to dismiss their position and arguments. The most widespread narrative of disinformation about women in politics in Hungary is framing them as being “untrustworthy,” usually through unfairly accusing them of being “foreign agents” or having embezzled public funds (Di Meco & Hesterman, 2023) (GHRD). Furthermore, female politicians often suffer discrimination through hate speech in the form of Fidesz downplaying their capacity to occupy a position of power solely based on the fact they are women, by undermining their professional and educational qualifications, painting them as “unintelligent, superficial, or mere puppets manipulated by influential male leaders on the left,” or discouraging them from pursuing a position in politics and thus reinforcing gender inequality (Di Meco & Hesterman, 2023) (GHRD).

Since, as reported in 2021, over 90% of Hungarians are actively using the internet, the gender-biased disinformation campaigns reach the majority of the population (Lucina di Meco and Sarah Hesterman, 2023:22) (Medve, 2020). Online social media platforms have been used by women’s rights activists as an equal free outlet of expression. Nevertheless, #ShePersisted found out that in the last years Fidesz has increasingly utilized social media to “track down,

silence and even arrest” people who oppose their actions on the internet (Lucina di Meco and Sarah Hesterman, 2023:22) (Medve, 2020). In the last six years, Fidesz has consolidated 475 media outlets under the Central European Press and Media Foundation, which is a “pro-government media-conglomerate,” headed by a former leader of Fidesz, actively undermining media freedom, spreading gender-biased hate speech, and promoting the party’s discriminatory women’s agenda (Lucina di Meco and Sarah Hesterman, 2023:11) (Batorfy, 2020). Di Meco analyzes how the government has an “undeniable” role in women’s rights erosion in Hungary through the biased media landscape they have created (Lucina di Meco and Sarah Hesterman, 2023:11).

According to a study by the Mertek Media Monitor, "the pro-Fidesz media portfolio... encompasses 77.8% of the entire news and public affairs segments in the Hungarian media," therefore establishing their narrative as the most popular perspective in the country, as some people are “quite a significant chunk of the population is exposed to government propaganda” on a number of women-related issues (Mertek, 2019). According to a report from the GENHA projection on hate speech, gender, social networks, and political parties, women are “targeted most viciously” by the state propaganda outlets, mostly attacking feminists, women occupying public roles, and female politicians from the opposition through the use of false evidence, distorting interpretations of their statements, and presenting them as attacking conservative values (Bladini et al., 2021:44). Fidesz’s campaigns make significant use of sexist adjectives to dismiss the authority of female politicians and the validity of their points, such as “mean,” “hysterical,” and “stupid,” and thus similar attitudes and rhetoric towards women across the people (Bladini et al., 2021:44). Fidesz’s attacks show that they do not support gender equality as they ruthlessly pursue their personal political benefits at the expense of women, attacking them with gender-biased hate speech which has larger implications on the role of women in society and their access to equal opportunities. This is also seen when observing Fidesz’s online promotion posts of their “traditional family” ideal while harshly reacting to policies, rhetoric, and governmental actions aimed at women’s empowerment, describing them as betraying the “Hungarian people” (Bladini et al., 2021:44). Female politicians are attacked as they “dare to deviate from the norm” of “conservative roles for women,” set by Orbán, and encourage similar behavior in other women, which questions Fidesz’s narrative and endangers their stability (Lucina di Meco and Sarah Hesterman, 2023:12) (Bladini et al., 2021:44). Due to this narrative,

deeply rooted in misogynistic beliefs, portraying women as “incapable, unintelligent, unlikeable,” and even as “sexual objects,” women are discredited in the public eye and disproportionately become the target of “avalanches of online hate, threats, and abuse” in the Hungarian public space (Lucina di Meco and Sarah Hesterman, 2023:15). This not only results in discrimination-based violations of gender equality but also leads to shrinking representation of women in politics and thus less space to improve matters of women’s interest because no one would wish to be subjected to such public abuse.

#### 8. Place for Gender Equality Advocacy:

The space for gender equality advocacy in Hungary has been increasingly restricted under the Fidesz government. NGOs and advocacy groups face challenges, including reduced funding, increased regulatory scrutiny, and a hostile political environment. Ensuring that these organizations can operate freely and effectively is critical for the promotion of women's rights. An inherent aspect of illiberal governance is the shrinking space for human rights advocacy and NGOs as a consequence of widespread nationalism (GHRD, 2023). Parties with liberal views such as Fidesz exploit the “general will” of the people to impose their agenda on society (GHRD, 2023). The government describes most human rights advocates as a “threat to the Hungarian people,” thus justifying their actions against them and silencing any opposition under the pretense that they are protecting the nation (Lucina di Meco and Sarah Hesterman, 2023:12).

In 2014, Fidesz orchestrated an attack on human rights NGOs through critiquing the European Economic Area and Norway Grants for “promoting foreign interests” and accusing the Hungarian-American businessman and philanthropist George Soros of using the funds of his Open Society Foundation supporting justice and human rights to promote opposition against the government and their values (Grzebalska & Pető, 2017). A law passed in 2017 required that any Hungarian-based foundation receiving more than 24,000 EUR in foreign funding must register (Dempsey, 2017). The following year, Fidesz passed a legislative package labeled “Stop Soros” requiring NGOs that receive more funding from abroad than from citizens of Hungary to pay

25% tax to the government (GHRD, 2023). These governmental actions impose challenges to the work of NGOs and human rights organizations, decreasing their budget and therefore their outreach, as well as creating more complex bureaucratic procedures, discouraging the creation of NGOs and foreign investors. Furthermore, as the government has expressed a clear anti-gender equality stance, international support becomes crucial and by limiting it F

Fidesz is imposing their views on the existing NGOs in the country. This way, the access of female Hungarian citizens to NGOs that offer protection or other services they might need is limited, leaving them to the insufficient and biased state system for support.

The activities of human rights activists and NGOs are also severely restricted through discouraging those actors from speaking against the government. Such an occasion was in April 2022 when over a dozen civil society organizations in Hungary were fined by the National Election Commission for “illegally interfering with Orbán’s referendum to ‘protect’ children from LGBTQI+ propaganda” held on election day (Uitz, 2022a) (Uitz, 2022b). The Venice Commission concluded in the referendum’s title that a number of law provisions violate international and European human rights standards (Venice Commission, 2021). In response to the number of human rights NGOs partook in a one-month-long campaign, convincing 1.7M people to cast “invalid ballots” in Orbán’s referendum resulting in its failure (Uitz, 2022a). However, as the campaign organizers, Amnesty International and Background Society, were each fined 8000 EUR (Uitz, 2022a). The fines represent Fidesz’s willingness to oppose human rights advocacy in the process of consolidating their power.

Fidesz’s efforts to shrink human rights advocacy are prominent in preventing women’s rights activists and organizations from completing their work. The party utilizes gender-based disinformation to put an end to debates around reproductive rights, describing how abortion is against the Christian values of the state and silences women who advocate for them, resulting in fewer people choosing and being able to do so and ultimately less representation of women’s equality (Di Meo and Sarah Hesterman, 2023:12). One of the interviewees of #ShePersisted, Anna Fejós, a sociological researcher on women’s rights, reported that activists on such issues “not being heard” has become so common, it has become “absolutely normalized” (Di Meo and Sarah Hesterman, 2023:12). A female member of the Hungarian Socialist party - Fidesz’s

opposition has been an active voice of criticism to Orbán's policies and participant in a number of protests against him, due to which she has also become a victim of constant disinformation attacks and verbal abuse (Lucina di Meco and Sarah Hesterman, 2023:17). In 2016, Ms. Kunhalmi started laughing during a press conference and was immediately accused by the Fidesz-sponsored media Ripost of being under the influence of substances of alcohol (Di Meco and Sarah Hesterman, 2023:17). Two years later, a cartoon depicting her naked was published, presenting the sexist and borderline abusive attitude towards women in Hungary (Di Meco and Sarah Hesterman, 2023:17). Fidesz's actions portray the party's orchestrated silencing of women who do not follow Orbán's ideology and reveal the lack of proper space for gender equality advocacy.

In 2004, as part of Hungary's accession procedure to the European Union, a number of institutional mechanisms to protect gender equality and establish a dialogue between civil society and the government were created (Kovats, 2020:84). After Fidesz gained power in 2010, those institutions were "dismantled, downsized, subsumed under other governmental bodies," or their staff was replaced with party members of Fidesz perpetuating the party's anti-feminist conservative ideologies on the mechanisms supposed to fight for gender equality (Kovats, 2020:84). Most of the NGOs and civil society organizations that have been formed after 2010 have been reported to be "ignored," have lost their funding, or newly established, loyal entities, in part founded and maintained by people or organizations associated directly with the government," causing the disappearance of many organizations and severe consequences to the success of the feminist movement in Hungary (Kovats, 2020:84). The dismantlement of those institutions, the misogynist widespread government propaganda, together with the complex environment established for NGOs, created a severely challenging environment for any women's rights and gender equality advocacy to succeed in Hungary (Kovats, 2020:88).

For example, mothers of disabled children have successfully "pressured" the government to significantly increase the financial support for parents of disabled children (Safe in Hungary, 2023). Although some feminist scholars and activists have critiqued this initiative, comparing it to the Family Protection Act, since it is not state-imposed, it represents the success of women's issues activists in their efforts to make sure their voices are heard (Kovats, 2020). Such single-issue initiatives have presented good tools in an otherwise unfavorable environment for

women's issues advocacy. Nevertheless, it remains a challenge for women's rights and gender equality movements to broaden their impact and establish beneficial relationships with the government, which puts efforts into discounting support for them and even "demonizing" such actors (Kovats, 2020:88). Social work is a main protector of gender equality and human rights through looking out and offering services to vulnerable groups where the institutions fail, nevertheless a cooperation with the institution and state is valuable for the successful. The lack of a stable relationship between the right-wing government and the civil society organizations positions gender equality, justice and women's rights under threat (Meyer 71).

## 9. Education:

Access to education for women and girls in Hungary is relatively strong, with women often outperforming men in higher education (EIGE, 2019). However, women remain underrepresented in STEM fields, and efforts to encourage gender balance in these areas are necessary. The government's focus on traditional values may impact the promotion of gender equality in educational settings. In its 2023 report on women's discrimination in Hungary, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women reported concerns about Fidesz's "Pink Education" program due to its "sexist language that reinforces gender stereotypes" (CEDAW, 2023). Based on a survey that asked 700 teachers and parents, most of the respondents agreed that "girl qualities," such as "emotional and social maturity, diligence, listening skills, tolerance of monotony, good oral and written expression," are more important to be taught to women in schools than technical skills and mathematics, which were expressed to be more desired for boys (CEDAW, 2023) (GHRD). Such separation reinforces traditional gender norms from early ages, strengthening the division between men and women and stimulating them to pursue different interests.

In summary, the policies and ideological stance of Viktor Orbán's Fidesz government present significant risks to women's rights in Hungary. Legislative changes, particularly regarding

reproductive rights and opposition to the Istanbul Convention, alongside a focus on traditional family values, have raised serious concerns. Monitoring the government's actions and policies in these areas will be crucial to assess the ongoing impact on women's rights in Hungary.

## **Analysis**

To summarize the main points from the nine different areas of focus, one can see that Fidesz has conducted a “politicization” of women’s rights and gender equality in their discourse (Sata 2020). Orbán’s illiberal democracy” has been in the European spotlight for “attacks” on feminism and gender equality because of their far-right populist discourse promoting an “anti-establishment, anti-elite or anti-Europe increasingly ethnocentric” and anti-migrant society, rooted in conservative Christian values, supporting “traditional family models and pro-natalist preferences” which increases gender equality opposition and reduces women’s purpose to the “the nation’s biological reproduction” jeopardizing their rights (Sata 2022).

Based on that analysis, one could argue that women’s rights are constructed in Fidesz’s party policy in discourse instrumentally to push forward the party’s agenda. From the discussion above it could be deduced that Orbán’s construction of women’s rights serves the party’s program in a few additional ways: 1) Secure Power Consolidation; and 2) Support Anti-Immigrant sentiment; 3) Push forwards Eurosceptics agenda.

### 1. Power Consolidation

In Fidesz’s discourse and party programmes women rights and gender equality were constructed in a way to secure the power consolidation of the party. This is done through presenting gender equality as a threat to the security of the traditional family, which lies at the core of the Hungarian nation. Fidesz presents themselves as the only savior of the people from this supposed threat, eliminating any opposition and ensuring they remain in power (Dutta and Abbas 2024:5). Therefore anything different the established conservative norm is phrased in Fidesz’s discourse as a threat to the ontological security of the nation including gender. Dutta and Abba (2024) analyze that a number of rhetorical devices, performanes and styles. Ontological security is

defined as the “te anxieties and dangers that arise when one’s identity and autonomy appear under threat” and is based on a person’s “sense of place” in a constantly changing world (Dutta and Abbas 2024:5). Orban is making use of people’s need of sense of self in the everchanging contemporary world to push forward a traditional narrative that provides a feeling of safety, sheltering them from the unknown. He describes feminism, women’s rights and gender equality and foreign entities unfamiliar and different from the culture and underestimates of the Hungarian people, therefore justifying why they should be stopped and how he is the only one capable of doing it, therefore securing his position as a leader at the expense of women’s rights. Traditional gender norms are intertwined with a discourse on national security to establish a clear “hierarchical” gender relations (Dutta and Abbas 2024:2). Kovats has described Orbans’s use of gender as a “fear-mobilizing tool”, describing it as an “enemy of the state” through public “hate campaigns”.

## 2. Anti-Immigration Sentiment

Another crucial aspect of Orban’s gendered discourse serves to promote his anti-immigration agenda. Fidesz’s constant refer to the “demographic crisis” and narrative on how incoming migrants would replace the “white, ethnically Hungarian” nation creates an interception between women’s rights and Fidesz’s anti-migration agenda (Dutta and Abbas 2024:14). According to Orbans’s narrative theHungarian nation is threatened by mass wave of migrants, bringing along different lifestyle and infectious diseases, therefore his solution was to increase the birth rates as a “solution to the problem of demographic invasion by Muslims and terrorism” (Dutta and Abbas 2024:14). In this efforts, Orban utilized the far-right populist “white replacement theory” which claims that Europe, in that case Hungary would be overtaken by migrants unless Europeans procreate (Dutta and Abbas 2024:14). Furthermore, Orban asserted the Christian faith as “the key to survival of the Hungarian nation” that would bring “ ‘a strong country, a flourishing culture, a loving home,and a happy family” (Dutta and Abbas 2024:14). Nevertheless his identification of Christianity as a main traits of Hungarians reinforced the heterosexual patriarchal family as the norm and in the process excluded anyone not abiding to the norm including migrants practicing Islam or different faiths (Dutta and Abbas 2024:14). He went as

further as to describe the “traditional family” as endangered by Muslim migrants, using the gendered discourse on family to justify his refusal to accept migrants in Hungary. In 2022 Orban “we shall continue to defend our borders, we shall not dismantle the fence and we shall not let in migrants. We shall protect our families, we shall not let gender activists into our schools, and in Hungary a father shall be a man, a mother a woman, and our children shall be left alone”(About Hungary 2022). Orban refers to the migrants as “Muslim Invasion” as a threat to national security and stresses the need to protect the Christian identity and shifts the responsibility to women to protect the future of the “pure nation” by giving birth to more children (Dutta and Abbas 2024:4). The combination of those two forms of discrimination positions migrant women in a particularly vulnerable place because they are discriminated not only because they are women but also of their ethnicity, nationality and religion, making it more difficult to seek state help in case of need, ultimately establishing their “unequal status”(Dutta and Abbas 2024:14).

### 3. Eurosceptic Agenda

Orban's perception of women's rights is also structured in a way to push forward his Eurosceptic agenda. By portraying women's emancipation as foreign value imprinted on Hungary by Brussels and threatening the nation's core Orban is using women's rights to villainize the European Union, establishing it as a different foreign actor. Fidesz has made skillful use of “anti-gender ideology” campaigns to argue against the European Union, blaming it for the spread of “gender madness”. Orban's Eurosceptic sentiments and how gender is used to forward them is evident in his speeches. He describes EU's policies as “suicidal” and “leaving behind” Christian families of the traditional family, which in his narrative hold Hungary together (About Hungary 2022). Therefore the instrumental role of women's role in Fidesz's agenda becomes evident as discussed to justify party policies.

### **Conclusions:**

Fidesz's misogynist discourse has occupied a substantial part of their discourse, strengthening

anti- gender equality attitudes across the Hungarian population. Some part of their narrative remains purely rhetoric as it serves to justify certain pro-natalist, anti-migrant and anti-EU policies in front of the nation. Nevertheless, a substantial amount of aspects from their speech has transferred to their legislation, amending Hungary's Constitution to include the traditional family as a core component of the Hungarian identity to be protected by the law, and has shrunk women's issues solely to the family policy, thus setting in stone their views of women's purpose to be mothers. Since coming to power in 2010 Fidesz has abolished a number of state institutions such as the ETTAeth protecting women's equality and introduced challenges to the function of human rights NGOs, raising international concerns about women's rights in Hungary. Sata (2022) describes the right-wing populist governmental system as a "new patriarchy with state-sponsored anti-feminism". Nevertheless, how impactful Orban's policies have been in some regards remains questionable. Regardless of the party's campaigns and efforts to increase the birth rates, since they came to power they have increased only from 11% to 16% , presenting that even under governmental pressure women still practice bodily self-determination (Sata 2022). Furthermore, the question to what extent will gender roles, impacting women's rights remain a central part of his discourse in the future remains a question. Recently a shift in his speeches has been noticeable from the "traditional discourse" to anti-immigrant sentiments, representing that the party's construction of women's rights changes in relation to their political priorities of the day (Sata 2022). Recently, with the war in Ukraine the focus for Orban and Fidesz and shifted slightly from women and the demographic crisis to questions of military support for question and larger issues and Hungary's support of NATO and the EU "This is especially true in light of the fact that the most important issue under consideration in the European Parliament election a few days ago was the question of war and peace. In this the citizens of Hungary issued a mandate – a mandate to the Hungarian Government – that Hungary should not participate in military action outside NATO territory, in wars outside NATO territory, and that Hungary should follow what it sees as the shortest route to peace."(Orban 2024). Nevertheless, as the EU is the protector of most women's rights and gender equality principles, turning away from its value and mechanisms takes away the ensuring of their protection and leaves the control regarding its future in a seemingly misogynistic government (Sata 2022). Fidesz remain a strong opposer of liberal values resulting in a mobilization against all things that represent progressive politics, such as human rights and gender equality activists, intellectuals, liberals and migrants and the

construction of women's rights in their discourse serves to consolidate their power at the expense of gender equality

## V. The Far-Right Landscape for Women's Rights and Gender Equality in Poland

Since coming to power in 2015, the "national-conservative" "Christian-democratic party" Law and Justice, headed by Jarosław Kaczyński (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość), commonly known as PiS, has been a ruling player in Polish politics (ERC Group, 2024). The party possesses a populist and authoritarian program, criticizing European integration and presenting values deeply rooted in conservative Christianity (Avar, 2024). Similar to Fidesz in Hungary, Law and Justice has been described as a phenomenon of "contemporary authoritarian populism," identified with anti-liberal values disregarding international human rights norms, creating an environment endangering women's equality (Fomina and Kucharczyk, 2016). In an analysis of the human rights situation in Poland in 2023, Human Rights Watch (2023) concluded that the PiS government "undermines the rule of law through attacks on judicial independence, independent media, and critical civil society and activist voices," in addition to launching constant attacks on women's reproductive rights and LGBTQ+ people in the form of hate speech and restrictive policies (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Since coming into power, the Law and Justice party has "limited the scope of feminist policies," withdrawn in-vitro fertilization, limited access to emergency contraception, and reduced funding for fighting domestic abuse (Korolczuk, 2017). The party sees women primarily as mothers, offering generous child benefits to women with several children through the Family 500+ program, reinforcing gender stereotypes, societal, and workplace inequalities (Gwiazda, 2020: 581). There are numerous similarities between Fidesz's and Law and Justice's beliefs; this section will analyze and compare the construction of women's rights in the discourse and party programs under the two different parties by focusing on the main similarities and differences.

### 1. Rhetoric Analysis:

Kaczyński makes use of many populist tools in his rhetoric. Similar to Orban, he uses the notion of the nation's enemy to consolidate his power. In a speech given in 2020, he stated how the Polish people "have to learn how to say no" to "all that can destroy them," in reference to the European Union's support for the LGBTQ+ community (Kaczyński, 2022). He ends his speech with the phrase "Let us defend Poland!", painting himself as one with the people and creating a feeling of being under attack by the EU's liberal values through the use of the term "defend" (Kaczyński, 2022). Like Orban, he presents himself as the only defender of the nation. As the European Union is a "main proponent of gender equality," making it a central part of its agenda, Poland's turn away from it shrinks the space for gender equality in the country.

Kaczyński constructs the picture of women's rights and gender equality through a perspective rooted in conservative Christian beliefs and misogynistic values. A prominent example of his sexist rhetoric towards women is when, in an interview, he hinted that birth rates in Poland are low because women have started drinking as much as men: "if it continues to be the case that, by the age of 25, girls, young women, drink as much as their male peers, there won't be children" (Kaczyński, 2022). His statement, not backed up by any medical sources, relies on and reinforces patriarchal, unequal gender norms. He states that "to develop alcoholism, a man must drink excessively on average for 20 years...but a woman only two," (Kaczyński, 2022). His statements create a biased distinction between men and women, implying that women are more susceptible to becoming alcoholic and offering his unsolicited advice to women on whether they should consume alcohol, addressing them in a patronizing manner. He continues by saying that although he is in favor of equality between men and women, "this does not mean that women have to pretend to be men and men to be women," again imprinting his biased views of societal gender roles and strengthening inequalities (Kaczyński, 2022). Kaczyński's rhetoric amplifies a gender bias going against the standard set by Article 5 of CEDAW: "States Parties shall take all appropriate measures: (a) To modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women;" instead of modifying discriminatory cultural patterns, he is defending them by establishing prejudice against women's equal treatment as the accepted norm in Poland (CEDAW, 2003). In both Fidesz's and Law and Justice's discourse, Christianity

plays a central role in establishing national identity and gender norms. Nevertheless, the Hungarian government's relationship with the church has been described as more "pragmatic" to establish support for illiberal changes compared to Poland, where it is described as rather "emotional" (Drinózi and Bień-Kacała, 2018:1141). Regardless of that difference, the result is no different, as Christianity is utilized as a justification factor for anti-gender equality rhetoric and policies (Drinózi and Bień-Kacała, 2018:1141). Kaczyński's rhetoric can be described as "anti-feminist," a term that refers to opposition to feminism by denying its three main principles: "first, that social arrangements among men and women are neither natural nor divinely determined; second, that these arrangements favor men; and third, that collective action should be taken in order to transform them into just and equitable arrangements (Clatterbaugh, 2018). Judging by the unequal distinction that the leader of PiS creates in his discourse, and the biased attitudes of the party, one can conclude that they present little care for women's rights.

## 2. Patriarchal Gender Norms:

Law and Justice uses traditional gender norms and discrimination in rhetoric and programs towards women to mobilize electoral support for the party and consolidate its power. This becomes evident when looking at the majority of their electorate: "Catholic believers who go to church at least once a week; other supporters include voters with primary and vocational education, farmers and rural residents, people over 50 years old, pensioners, and workers" (Gwiazda, 2020:584). In fact, the Polish church has been a main supporter of PiS during its electoral campaign, maintaining a clear connection between the value systems of the two (Gwiazda, 2020:584). Therefore, the party presents a rhetoric that appeals to its electorate and preaches the beliefs of the church that commonly do not correspond to contemporary ideas of gender equality but establish a hierarchical system between men and women where the latter is put in a subordinate position (Gwiazda, 2020:584). Any individuals or groups of people that do not abide by those ideas and advocate for liberal policies, including women's rights, are labeled as the "outgroups," verbally attacked, and discredited, thus shrinking the place for women's representation and equality advocacy (Gwiazda, 2020:585). In their efforts to establish this vision as the norm, Law and Justice have introduced various policies. Like Fidesz in Hungary, they have decreased the female retirement age to 60 and introduced the 500+ Family program of

financial support to mothers of more than three children to boost the birth rates (Gwiazda, 2020:585). Another similarity between Fidesz and Law and Justice is their downgrading of women's policies to family policies. This becomes evident when looking at PiS's chairman's comment on critiques that the party does not support women's equality: "The PiS government is pro-women, but I prefer talking about what we do for all Poles, both men and women. We have introduced pro-family solutions, such as the Family 500+ program." His comment presents women's issues only through the prism of motherhood, ignoring the number of other challenges they face. In the traditional vision of PiS, the value of women is popularly measured by their "fertility and self-sacrifice," voicing anti-feminist beliefs that reject the existence of gender discrimination and the need to address it (Hall, 2019) (Gwiazda, 2020:586). The comment of a female deputy of Law and Justice confirms the anti-feminist party program: "Women were given the right to vote in 1918. Women have equal rights to men. We do not need to fight for women's rights anymore." This labels the movement for women's rights as completed regardless of the various gaps in Poland's legislative and society regarding successful women's rights implementation (Gwiazda, 2020:586). The analysis presents that Law and Justice is reluctant to implement any feminist policies that contradict their conservative Christian views, therefore not taking the necessary measures to tackle issues such as domestic violence and lack of access to abortions (Gwiazda, 2020:589). The analysis presents how the Law and Justice government prioritizes its conservative views of women at the expense of women's rights. Some scholars argue that due to such heavily gendered discourse and policies, female emancipation in Poland and Hungary has not been fully achieved (Grzebalska and Kováts, 2018).

### 3.Law Amendments: Abortion Limitations:

In the area of reproductive rights, the key issues are reproductive technologies and abortion. In January 2016, PiS cut state funding for IVF treatment. Until then, there was an IVF reimbursement program, introduced in 2013 by the Civic Platform Minister of Health, which stipulated that the state would cover the expenses of up to three IVF cycles for women under the age of 40 (married or co-habiting) who had already been treated for infertility for at least one year prior to joining the program (Korolczuk, 2017). After the PiS decision, numerous local governments decided to fund the IVF treatment program (Gwiazda, 2020:589).

A similarity between Fidesz and Law and Justice is noted in the legal changes they have implemented regarding women's rights, especially in abortion limitations which both governments have supported on the basis of Christian "traditional family values," delegating women as mothers first and foremost. However, the pregnancy termination limitations of PiS have proved even more restrictive and controversial than those in Hungary. Poland's abortion law is one of the strictest in Europe, allowing it only in cases of rape, incest, or if the pregnancy endangers the mother's life (Politico, 2023). With a 2020 provision of the Polish Constitutional Tribunal, initiated by Law and Justice, declared pregnancy termination in case of fetal malformation to be unconstitutional under statute K1/20 (TRYBUNAŁU KONSTYTUCYJNEGO, 2021). The next year, the Constitutional Tribunal declared Article 6 of the European Convention of Human Rights "unconditional," stripping women away from its protection in the case of trials related to illegal abortions (TRYBUNAŁU KONSTYTUCYJNEGO, 2021).

Freedom of abortion occupies a significant role within the human rights framework, and its violation breaches women's rights principles. A Council of Europe report on Women's sexual and reproductive health and rights in Europe stresses that abortion law references several human rights in its formations: "the right to life, the right to be free from torture and ill-treatment, the right to health, the right to privacy and bodily integrity, the right to education, and the prohibition of discrimination" (Council of Europe, 2017). The concept of reproductive rights originates from the right to life, as it references sexual reproduction health, and has been recognized in United Nations practice since the 1990s (Metwally, 2019). Although it is not included in the UN Covenant or the majority of the regional covenants, it is mentioned in Article 14 of the 2003 Maputo Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa of the African Union (AU, 2003). Furthermore, since the 1990s, organizations of the United Nations, including the United Nations Population Fund and the World Health Organization, have incorporated in their conceptual framework reproductive justice, sexual and sexual health rights, and reproductive rights. The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 2023) has on numerous occasions expressed views that access to legal and safe abortion, together with all the related information and services, are

crucial for women's reproductive health and are thus included in human rights protection (Cook, 1991; Buclohc, 2022). The United Nations Human Rights Committee concluded that "the prohibition of torture and other forms of ill-treatment contained in Article 7 of the Covenant allows for a right to abortion in circumstances of fatal fetal abnormality" in *Mellet v. Ireland*, 2021, confirmed in *Whelan v. Ireland*, 2021 (Centre for Reproductive Rights, 2021). The decision of the Committee established a precedent in the case law of reproductive rights, and the PiS's law amendment K1/20 clearly goes against it as it delegitimizes abortion in cases of fetal abnormality. Previous cases on abortion have successfully presented the lack of access to abortion as a violation of women's rights to "freedom from cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment and to privacy" (Buclohc, 2022). Article 6 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights declares that the parties to the Covenant are obliged to "provide safe, legal, and effective access to abortion where the life and health of the pregnant woman or girl are at risk, or where carrying a pregnancy to term would cause the pregnant woman or girl substantial pain or suffering, most notably where the pregnancy is the result of rape or incest or where the pregnancy is not viable" and prohibits state parties from "regulating pregnancy or abortion in all other cases in a manner that runs contrary to their duty to ensure that women and girls do not have to resort to unsafe abortions" (UN Human Rights Committee, 2019). Nevertheless, not all party states choose to follow Article 6 as exemplified by Poland's abortion ban (Buclohc, 2022). References to international human rights stances on abortion have been crucial in establishing fair and free access to it and serve to present how Law and Justice is taking Poland backward from the international efforts, going against women's rights standards and raising concern about the party's implementation of a number of human rights. Their abortion reforms present how the party's discriminatory views have entered into legislation and not remained solely a populist rhetoric tool, impacting millions of women's human rights in the process.

The abortion ban of Law and Justice has a significant impact on women's rights. Before PiS's law amendment, 98% of the conducted abortions were on the basis of "fetal indication," which they declared unconstitutional (ASN, 2022). In 2022, the year after the abortion ban came into power, only 107 pregnancies were legally terminated in Poland, compared to a population of 40 million people (Tilles, 2022). The year before the limitation was introduced, 1,087 were carried out, resulting in a 90% decrease in the number of abortions, painting a picture of the large

number of women stripped of the right to it. In 2022, the NGO Abortion Without Borders reported to have been contacted by 32,888 Polish women that year seeking help with abortion, five times more than previously (ASN, 2022). Furthermore, due to Law and Justice misinformation campaigns, a substantial number of women have been left under the false impression that it is illegal to undergo an abortion procedure abroad or bring and take abortion pills in Poland, resulting in making abortion less accessible even within its legal boundaries (ASN, 2022). The abortion limitations have even had fatal consequences as in 2022, three women in Poland lost their lives on account of being refused necessary life-saving abortion, one of them dying of septic shock because the doctor had refused to terminate the pregnancy before the fetus had died (ASN, 2022). A resolution adopted by the European Parliament and supported by 372 MEPs called on the government of Poland to make sure no more women die on behalf of their restrictive abortion law (European Parliament, 2021). The above discussion presents how the actions of the Polish far-right Law and Justice party have jeopardized women's rights.

#### 4. Istanbul Convention Stance:

While Orbán's government has refused to ratify the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (known as the Istanbul Convention), the Law and Justice government has expressed wishes to withdraw from it and from the European Convention on Human Rights (BBC, 2020). The Polish government asked Poland's Constitutional Tribunal Court in 2020 and 2021 to rule on whether the Istanbul Convention and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) - the treaty that protects human rights within the party states to the Council of Europe - are compatible with the constitution of the country, aiming to gain justification to withdraw from the former and "ignore binding rules" of the latter (Human Rights Watch, 2022; Council of Europe, 2020). The Constitutional Tribunal ruled the ECHR to be "partially incompatible" with the Constitution of Poland (Council of Europe, 2020). Similar to the situation in Hungary, the Polish government prioritizes its political agenda at the expense of women's rights. Law and Justice justifies their actions by claiming that Poland has sufficiently effective institutions and mechanisms to combat violence against women and to guarantee human rights, which presents anti-feminist sentiments

through perpetuating the idea that enough systems are in use to secure gender equality and no more efforts are needed (Anderson, 2014).

In conclusion, there are numerous similarities between the construction of women's rights and gender equality under Fidesz and Law and Justice rule in Hungary and Poland. Both parties preach traditional family values, rooted in patriarchal discriminatory roots, using them to mobilize their electorate at the expense of women's rights. Their gender-biased views are realized in the form of hate speech, abortion restrictions, lack of proper anti-domestic violence mechanisms, and various other policies reinforcing gender-based discrimination.

## VII. The Far-Right Landscape for Women's Rights and Gender Equality The Netherlands

The Netherlands serves as a contrasting case to Hungary and Poland, as the far-right populist party there uses a different construction of women's rights and gender equality in their discourse and policy-making. The Netherlands case suggests that though gender is a commonly used concept in the popular far-right, it is not a defining feature of it (Spriering, 2020:42). The country is a "global champion of gender equality and women's rights," having one of the highest scores on the Gender Equality Index in Europe and one of the "world's biggest funds for the promotion of equal rights for women and girls, gender equality and sexual and reproductive health and rights," amounting to almost €500 million for the period of 2021-2025 (SRHR) (EIGE). Unlike the previous cases, the Netherlands takes a progressive stance on gender-related issues with its leading party advocating for women's rights and maintaining a high level of gender equality in the country. Nevertheless, similar to the cases of Fidesz and Poland, the Party for Freedom (PVV) that won the majority in the parliament in 2023, headed by Geert Wilders, still presents a number of populist techniques in their rhetoric.

In his speeches, Wilders utilizes a heavy anti-immigrant sentiment and brings up questions about women's rights to push forward his anti-Islam policies (BBC, 2023). Wilders only mentions women's issues together with Islam, stating how the Muslim immigrants entering the Netherlands are a threat to women's safety and rights, and even did not mention them in the 2017

elections campaign (De Lange & Mügge, 2015). His rhetoric is a different example of how women's rights are constructed to serve the party's agenda, not through protecting them but through presenting them as threatened by an external factor that they are fighting against (De Lange & Mügge, 2015). Similar to Fidesz and Law and Justice, PVV is utilizing the populist technique of creating a foreign enemy with different values that threaten the ontological security of the nation (Dutta & Abbas, 2024:5).

The utilization of women's rights for support mobilization became evident when in 2016 the PVV carried out a campaign in Spijkenisse, where they handed out 'verzet spray' (defiance spray) to women, telling them to use it to defend themselves from what Wilders described as 'Islamitische testosteronbommen' ('Islamic testosterone bombs') (Lowie, 2016). The spray was made of a dye that paints the face of the attacker since pepper spray is illegal in the Netherlands (Moffitt, 2017). The campaign was carried on in Spijkenisse because of the talks about establishing a refugee center there, which Wilders was trying to discourage with his campaign and talks about how "dangerous it is if we take in large groups of men from the barbaric, women-unfriendly culture of Islam" (Moffitt, 2017:115). The campaign received divided public support, with counter-protests stating "Wilders is a racist, not a feminist" due to the focus on anti-immigration instead of women's protection in the campaign (Lowie, 2016). Moffitt (2017) stresses that while in their discourse the PVV supports women's rights, in practice the party more often votes against gender equality policies, presenting the discrepancies between their rhetoric and policies. Nevertheless, as the party has recently entered into power, there is not enough available data yet to give a thorough analysis of how they construct women's rights issues in their legislation.

Regardless of the vast differences in regards to women's roles in politics and the parties' positions on equal rights, there are significant similarities in their views of migrants, which results in disproportionate discrimination against migrant women. Both Fidesz and PVV use the image of the "woman in danger" to sell a narrative about how migrants are a threat to local women, causing insecurities among the population and justifying anti-migrant policies and anti-Muslim attitudes (Sata, 2022). In this narrative, women are constructed as "vulnerable women and children that need protection" while migrants are depicted as "an army of young

men” (Sata, 2022). This discourse reinforces gender-based divisions and takes advantage of women’s issues to push forward the party’s agenda without presenting any valid care for them.

## VII. Conclusion

The comparative analysis of far-right populism in Hungary, Poland, and the Netherlands reveals the complex and varied ways these movements address gender and women’s rights in their discourse, party programs and legislation. Although each country’s context shapes the specifics of their rhetoric and policies, common threads and significant differences emerge, highlighting the intricate relationship between populism and gender.

In Hungary and Poland, the far-right parties Fidesz and Law and Justice (PiS) respectively, emphasize traditional family values rooted in conservative Christian beliefs. They construct women’s roles primarily within the framework of motherhood and the heteronormative family structure, reinforcing patriarchal norms and often undermining gender equality. These parties deploy anti-feminist rhetoric and implement policies that restrict reproductive rights and fail to adequately address gender-based violence. Both Fidesz and PiS utilize gendered narratives to mobilize support, portraying women as needing protection from external threats, such as migrants, to consolidate their political power (Santos, 2021). This approach aligns with the broader trend of femonationalism, which seeks to maintain the role of women in the reproduction of a White Christian nation.

The Netherlands presents a contrasting case where the far-right Party for Freedom (PVV), led by Geert Wilders, incorporates gender issues primarily as a tool to advance anti-immigrant and anti-Islamic agendas. Unlike Fidesz and PiS, PVV does not deeply engage with traditional gender roles or family values in its policy-making. Instead, it frames Muslim immigrants as a threat to Dutch women’s safety and rights, using this narrative to justify stringent immigration policies. This strategic use of gender issues highlights how far-right populist parties adopt different stances depending on their political and cultural context, while still serving their overarching populist and nativist ideologies (Sprierings, 2020).

Despite these differences, there are significant similarities across these far-right movements. All these parties use gender issues instrumentally to support their broader political agendas. Whether through promoting traditional family structures or framing gender equality in opposition to external threats, these movements exploit societal anxieties to gain and maintain power. As noted in the Oxford Handbook of Populism (2020), populist leaders adapt gender issues to fit their political struggle, influenced by their cultural and historical contexts.

In conclusion, the relationship between far-right populism and gender is multifaceted and context-dependent. While gender issues may not be central to the ideological core of these movements, they play a pivotal role in their political strategies. The far-right's approach to gender and women's rights varies significantly across countries but consistently serves to reinforce their broader populist and nationalist objectives. This analysis offers an analysis of Hungary's party Fidesz's construction of women's rights and gender equality, compared to PiS' construction in Poland and the PVV's in the Netherlands to establish a thorough comparison of populism on gender equality and women's rights in those countries and suggest larger human rights implications of the increasing presence of illiberal far-right parties in European governments.

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