

Introduction: The contestation of gender equality in Europe

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Gender equality has become one of the most visible and debated issues in European politics and society over the past decades. Issues ranging from violence against women and reproductive rights to LGBTQI+ rights and sexist discourses about women’s political leadership have become increasingly salient topics of public and political debate. Scholarly work highlights this increasing politicization of gender equality issues in public discourses, societal attitudes, as well as in political debates (Abou-Chadi et al., 2021; Off et al., 2025; Otteni, 2025; Wallaschek et al., 2024; Weeks et al., 2025). As a result, gender equality has become a key arena of political and societal contestation.

These contestations unfold in multiple arenas. Anti-gender actors and anti-feminist movements have gained visibility in electoral politics, public debates, and digital media environments, often linking opposition to gender equality with broader authoritarian, nationalist, or anti-liberal projects (Alexander & Off, 2025; Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Kantola & Lombardo, 2019; Luxton et al., 2025; Volk, 2025). At the same time, gender-related conflicts are increasingly intertwined with other societal tensions, including debates over migration, climate change, national identity, and democratic legitimacy (de Lange & Mügge, 2015; Indelicato & Magalhães Lopes, 2024; Off, 2024; Roth & Sauer, 2022; Vida, 2022). Social media platforms in particular have intensified the visibility, emotionalization, and polarization of these conflicts, enabling both progressive and anti-gender actors to mobilize transnationally and challenge existing social norms and national institutions (Reinhardt et al., 2024; Righetti et al., 2025; Tronina, 2024; Wallaschek et al., 2022).

Against this backdrop, the special issue starts from the premise that contestations over gender equality should be understood through a multi-dimensional perspective. These contestations unfold across interconnected institutional, discursive, and societal dimensions. Political actors and institutions shape the boundaries of gender equality policies; discursive struggles construct competing meanings, identities,

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and symbolic boundaries around gender; and public attitudes and political behavior reflect broader processes of polarization, resentment, and democratic conflict. Bringing together contributions from political science, sociology and anthropology, this special issue examines how gender equality is currently being contested and transformed across Europe.

Gender equality contestation as multi-dimensional process

This special issue conceptualizes gender equality contestation as a multidimensional and dynamic political process and thereby moves beyond general claims about a ‘cultural backlash’ (Norris & Inglehart, 2019) or singular questions of resistance and opposition in one specific area such as a focus on LGBTQI issues or the politicization of the abortion issue (Ayoub, 2013; Ferree et al., 2002). The cultural backlash approach by Norris and Inglehart (2019) argues that the rise of authoritarian values, anti-gender discourses, and right-wing populist movements can largely be understood as a reaction of older generations to the progressive value changes and post-material transformations of recent decades. Anti-gender politics are hence understood as a defensive response to perceived threats against traditional values and long-standing social (and power) structures. While this structural approach captures the long-term social dynamics, the framing of anti-gender mobilizations as reactive processes overlooks the active, transnational and strategic dimensions inherent to anti-gender politics and discourses (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2018). The backlash approach views gender equality as one issue among many. However, this perspective does not account for the fact that gender has become a highly politicized battleground on which far broader political, social, and cultural conflicts are played out.

While gender equality has always been a contested issue that has been stretched, bent and shrunk by different actors to fit their goals and wider ideas (Lombardo et al., 2009), in recent years, the politicization and polarization surrounding gender equality and even the term “gender” itself has sharply intensified (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). Gender increasingly functions as a central cultural cleavage that structures political competition and public attitudes (Dietz & Roßteutscher, 2024; Otteni, 2025; Wallaschek et al., 2024). Current contestations of gender equality unfold across different arenas – from politics over (digital) media and civil society – and should be understood as a symptom of broader conflicts over democracy and political community in Europe. Understanding contestation as a constitutive element of politics and social relations allows us to move beyond a narrow focus on explicit anti-feminist or anti-gender mobilization. It also directs attention to broader processes of identity formation, democratic representation, and social transformation.

To capture these contestation dynamics, the contributions to this special issue can be situated across three interconnected analytical dimensions. First, contestation

unfolds through political actors and institutional arenas, including political elites, parties, governments, and European institutions, which shape both the implementation and the politicization of gender equality (Ahrens & Meier, 2026; Kroeber & Dingler, 2026; Kugelmeier López, 2026). Second, contestation operates through discourses, frames, and identity constructions that structure how gender-related issues are publicly communicated, emotionally charged, and linked to societal conflicts (Kaushik, 2026; Wilhelmsen, 2026). Third, contestation becomes visible in public attitudes and political behavior, reflecting how gender equality increasingly functions as a marker of political, social and cultural division across European societies (Dietz & Otteni, 2026; Wallaschek & Minkus, 2026).

Importantly, the special issue shall enable readers to understand these dimensions in connection with each other. Institutional conflicts shape public discourse, discursive struggles influence political identities and attitudes, while societal polarization and attitudinal change feeds back into electoral politics and policy debates. While the single articles do not investigate all three levels, the special issue is able to highlight these dimensions across the seven articles. By doing so, we aim to spur the debate on a more integrated understanding of how gender equality is currently contested across Europe.

Studying gender equality contestation across dimensions

As argued above, the contributions to this special issue examine these contestations across three interconnected analytical dimensions: political elite actors (1), discursive struggles and identity constructions (2), and public attitudes and political behavior (3).

The first set of contributions focuses on how political actors and institutions shape and contest gender equality within European governance structures. Ahrens and Meier (2026) examine the European Parliament (EP) as a contested institutional arena and question its resilience against anti-gender and anti-LGBTQI+ mobilization. To analyze the representation of LGBTQI+ people in the EP, they expand the framework of Gender Sensitive Parliaments to include a LGBTQI+-sensitive perspective. Their contribution demonstrates how institutional mechanisms originally designed to advance equality and inclusion can also be used by increasingly influential conservative and radical-right actors to challenge these very principles.

Focusing on political leadership and elite discourse at the EU level, Kugelmeier López (2026) analyzes Ursula von der Leyen's rhetoric on gender equality during her first term as President of the European Commission (2019–2024), combining a quantitative dictionary-based approach with subsequent manual, qualitative coding. While gender equality becomes more visible in von der Leyen's speeches, the contribution highlights the persistence of rather traditional equal opportunity framings and the absence of more transformative concepts such as intersectionality or gender mainstreaming (Kugelmeier López, 2026). This renders visible the indirect

forms of contestation at the EU even as gender equality is formally endorsed. The contribution highlights that the contestation of gender equality occurs not only through open opposition, but also through the selective institutionalization and depoliticization of equality.

Moving from institutional discourse to elite perceptions, Kroeber and Dingler (2026) explore how political elites in Western Europe conceptualize ideal political leadership. Based on interviews with 31 members of parliament across five countries, their findings point toward a growing acceptance of integrative leadership styles traditionally associated with femininity, thereby complicating assumptions about persistent masculine leadership norms among mainstream political actors. The contribution moreover demonstrates that anti-gender discourses have so far had little impact on mainstream political elites' leadership ideals.

The second dimension addresses discourses, frames, and identity struggles surrounding gender equality and broader societal transformation. The two contributions demonstrate how gender-related conflicts are increasingly embedded in emotionally charged narratives about belonging, morality, crisis, and social order. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Southern Norway, Wilhelmsen (2026) examines how climate change scepticism becomes intertwined with anti-feminist resentment and threatened masculinity. Her contribution demonstrates how climate scepticism functions less as scientific doubt than as a form of identity work through which participants defend patriarchal privilege, express rebellious masculinity, and reject perceived "feminized" and moralizing forms of progressive politics. Contestation over gender equality thus becomes linked to broader anti-woke and anti-elitist narratives surrounding cultural change and social transformation.

Focusing on digital public spheres during the Covid-19 pandemic, Kaushik (2026) examines how feminist and anti-gender actors mobilize competing identity narratives under conditions of crisis and uncertainty. Combining feminist political theory, relational sociology, and digital communication research, the contribution distinguishes between exclusionary "control narratives" and inclusive "care narratives" grounded in solidarity and shared vulnerability. While exclusionary narratives generally benefit more strongly from platform logics and engagement dynamics, the findings also show that inclusive narratives gain traction during periods of heightened societal vulnerability. The contribution therefore shifts analytical attention from democracy-eroding dynamics alone toward the conditions under which inclusive forms of democratic resilience may emerge within digital environments.

The final set of contributions examines how contestations over gender equality are reflected in public attitudes, political behavior, and societal polarization. Together, the two articles demonstrate that gender-related issues increasingly function as markers of political alignment and societal conflict across European democracies. Drawing on original survey data from ten European countries, Dietz and Otteni (2026) examine how attitudes toward gender equality and LGBTQIQ+ rights shape

voting behavior. Their findings demonstrate that opposition to gender equality and especially LGBTQIQ+ rights constitute strong predictors of far-right voting, while progressive attitudes are linked more strongly to support for Green parties. At the same time, the contribution shows that LGBTQIQ+ rights are considerably more polarized and contested than support for women's equality, pointing toward differentiated dynamics within contemporary gender conflicts.

Wallaschek and Minkus (2026) similarly investigate how gender-related attitudes are embedded within broader cultural and communicative divides across Europe. Using cross-national survey data from six European countries, the contribution distinguishes between rights-based support for gender equality and affective anti-feminist resentment. The findings reveal that higher levels of social media use intensity are consistently associated with more regressive attitudes across both dimensions, even when controlling for political orientations. The article therefore highlights how digitally mediated communication environments increasingly structure cultural positioning and polarization surrounding gender equality.

Gender equality: Societal, affective and institutional contestation

Taken together, the contributions to this special issue point toward several broader dynamics shaping the contemporary contestation of gender equality in Europe.

First, the articles demonstrate how gender equality increasingly functions as a broader political and societal cleavage rather than merely a policy field. Conflicts over gender-related issues are closely intertwined with wider struggles over democracy, identity, representation, and social change. As several contributions show, contestations surrounding gender equality increasingly structure political behavior, institutional conflicts, and public discourse in the EU and across European societies.

Second, the contributions highlight the central role of affective, identity-based, and emotionally charged narratives in contemporary gender conflicts. Contestation is not only articulated through explicit policy disagreements, but also through symbolic struggles over masculinity, belonging, morality, and cultural change. Particularly in digital environments, anti-gender and anti-feminist narratives are often embedded in discourses that frame progressive social transformation as a threat to established identities and hierarchies. At the same time, the contributions also illustrate how crises create opportunities for both exclusionary and inclusionary mobilization around gender-related issues.

Third, the special issue points to persistent tensions between formal commitments to gender equality and the fragility of substantive transformation. While gender equality has become institutionalized within European governance structures and broadly accepted at the level of formal rights within societies, several contributions reveal the limits and vulnerabilities of this progress. Institutional support for gender

equality often remains dependent on political majorities and elite commitment, so that different forms of contestation operate not solely against institutions, but precisely through them. At the same time, public support for formal equality coexists with resentment, polarization, and resistance toward feminist politics and LGBTQI+ inclusion. Taken together, the contributions therefore suggest that gender equality in Europe is simultaneously normalized and contested.

Outlook

The special issue contains seven articles that, taken together, underline the necessity to analyze contestations over gender equality as multi-dimensional processes. The articles demonstrate how these dynamics mutually reinforce and reshape one another across different political and social arenas.

At the same time, the special issue also highlights several important directions for future research. First, more comparative and longitudinal approaches are needed to better understand how contestations over gender equality evolve across different national, institutional, and political contexts over time. Second, future studies should further integrate macro-, meso-, and micro-level perspectives in order to capture the complex interactions between political actors, mediated discourses, and societal attitudes. Finally, the contributions point toward the growing importance of digital media environments, affective polarization, and identity-based conflicts in shaping contemporary struggles over gender equality across Europe.

Overall, we hope that the special issue will not only be of interest to a wide readership but also shows that contestations over gender equality are not peripheral conflicts, but increasingly central to understanding contemporary democratic transformations in Europe.

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