

Francesca Scrinzi

Marie Skłodowska-Curie Research Fellow, European University Institute

Senior Lecturer, University of Glasgow, UK

Francesca.Scrinzi@EUI.eu

Gender and women in the *Front National* discourse and policy.

From ‘mothers of the nation’ to ‘working mothers’?

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Abstract

This article explores the gendered dimensions of the populist radical right discourse and policy by considering the *Front national* in France. The article shows how the *Front national* has progressively moved from a ‘traditional’ to a ‘modern traditional’ approach to issues of gender, women’s work, and the family. The core of the *Front national* policy and ideology has remained stable over time, with regard to the interconnected issues of gender and of immigration. However, there is a significant move from the celebration of women as ‘mothers of the nation’, prevalent in the party until the 1990s, to an emphasis on ‘working mothers’ in Marine Le Pen’s discourse. The article also analyses the ambivalence of Marine Le Pen’s party discourse on gender, as well as the discrepancies between the party discourse and its political programme. This ambivalence mirrors the internal conflicts between the leadership and the conservative Catholic faction. This evolution of the *Front national* discourse on

gender is linked to the party history and internal politics as well as to broader long-term social changes in French society.

The French populist radical right party¹ (henceforth PRR), the *Front national* (henceforth FN), is undergoing a major transition, as shown by intense media visibility and growing scholarly literature². Marine Le Pen, who took over from her father Jean-Marie Le Pen as FN president in 2011, has engaged in an enterprise of ‘modernisation’ and ‘de-demonisation’ (*dédiabolisation*) of its public image, with the acknowledged objective of enlarging its electoral support and transforming the FN into a large mainstream party capable of achieving political office. In striking contrast to the anti-egalitarian political culture of the French far right, the FN has appropriated the issue of secularism and republican values, which are traditionally employed by the left wing and which constitute a powerful resource for legitimacy in French politics. The FN anti-immigration agenda has been reformulated to focus on the defence of republican secularism, the necessity of a ‘French Islam’ and of a policy of assimilation into the Republic. Le Pen has distanced herself from her father’s controversial declarations on WW2 and colonialism, and Jean-Marie Le Pen was expelled from the party in 2015. Under its new leader, the FN has also moderated its (once highly conservative) positions on issues of gender, sexuality and the family. Through this new discourse, the leadership aims at securing the support of categories of voters who are traditionally less represented in the FN electorate, such as women and young people as well as the ethnic minorities. In particular, women voters are the last obstacle on the road to power for the party, as they count for more than half of the electorate. In the 2014 municipal elections, the FN consolidated its position as the third party in France. In the European elections of the same year, it was the most voted-for political formation, before the conservative right. In the first round of 2017 presidential elections too, the FN was the second most voted for party but was overwhelmingly defeated in the run-off round. In the legislative elections of the same year, the results were very deceiving for its leader: the FN secured 13.2 per cent of the votes, dropping below its 2012 performance. Thus, under Marine Le Pen, the FN has achieved significant electoral successes, although it remains an ‘outsider party’ incapable of establishing alliances with mainstream parties.

Yet as various scholars have noted, today more than ever the challenge for the FN is to manage the tension between its anti-establishment extremism and the ambition to gain democratic credibility and secure institutional positions³. Stigmatisation, linked to its ‘anti-

immigration' positions as well as its anti-democratic and misogynist image, constitutes the core of its politics, providing a powerful resource for rallying activists and voters; at the same time, the radicalisation of its agenda can lead to electoral decrease. This article analyses the gendered dimension of this enterprise of 'modernisation' of the FN by exploring the tension - which has long characterised the FN discourse and policy on immigration - between the search for democratic respectability and the maintenance of radical positions. It does so through a comparison, based on documentary data⁴, between the FN discourse and policy on gender issues under Jean-Marie Le Pen, and under Marine Le Pen. The significance of the FN in European populist politics, and its long history, make it a significant case for examining the PRR gendered strategies and the evolution of PRR discourse on gender over time. Founded in 1972, the FN is one of the oldest and most successful political forces in this party family; as such, it has been largely studied and taken as a model by other such parties.

The article begins with an introductory section discussing existing studies of gender and the PRR. The second section takes stock of the scholarly literature focusing on gender and the FN ideology as well as on women's participation in the party under the former leader Jean-Marie Le Pen. The article then moves on to analyse how, under its current leader, ideas of gender are played out in the party discourse in order to correct its traditionally misogynist image. This section also presents the FN's current ideology and policy on gender, sexuality, and the family as well as women's current involvement in the party. The conclusion presents the key research findings.

Gender and women in the European PRR

Women are largely underrepresented as voters, members and elected representatives in European PRR parties⁵, which tend to champion the family as the fundamental basis of the social order. An established body of feminist scholarship has shown that essentialist views of gender and cultural difference are central to the ideology of nationalist and rightist movements and organisations across the world - including the European PRR⁶. More specifically, the naturalisation of the public/private divide is closely interconnected with processes of racialisation: anti-immigration and nationalist discourses are highly gendered, creating gender-specific roles for men (caring fathers, protectors of the nation's mothers, brothers in arms) and women (caring mothers of the nation) in the national community⁷. Feminist studies of nationalism have shown that women are mobilised as biological as well as

cultural reproducers of the national community, being assigned the role of embodying the national honour and the integrity of the nation's boundaries⁸. Thus the naturalisation of gender and of national belonging are intertwined discourses in the European PRR, which explains its overarching family-centred imagination.

Nonetheless, there is significant variation in the positions of different PRR parties on issues of gender, the family, and sexuality. Scholars have questioned the view of these parties as monolithically sexist, pointing that there is an overstatement of sexism as a specificity of the PRR. Cas Mudde⁹ suggests that the same positions on gender and the family may characterise both the PRR and the mainstream right; he also reminds us that, in terms of women's underrepresentation as members, voters and representatives, PRR parties are similar to right-wing parties. Others call for further research to compare the PRR with the mainstream right, to investigate similarities and differences with regard to their gender conservatism and women's participation¹⁰. Further, European PRR parties' views on gender are diverse, ranging from 'traditional' to 'modern traditional' positions¹¹. Parties holding 'traditional' views on gender hold women exclusively as mothers, claiming that they should return to the home to fill their 'natural' role; parties holding 'modern traditional' positions on gender tolerate women's work, while considering women as primarily responsible for social reproductive work. Regional differences have also been noted, as overall the Northern European PRR is more clearly shifting towards 'modern traditional' positions on gender than PRR parties in Southern, Central and Eastern Europe¹². For example, the Dutch Party for Freedom and the Danish People's Party do not regard abortion as a major concern and do not emphasise the role of women as 'mothers of the nation'¹³. Instead, in Germany, Alternative For Germany celebrates the hetero-normative family composed by a male breadwinner and an housewife, and has been active in so-called mobilisations against gender equality policies and against gay and reproductive rights¹⁴. In Italy, the Northern league holds a pragmatic position on women's work and occasionally displays ambivalence on homosexuality; albeit with erratic developments, traditional family issues hold decreasing significance in the Northern league party discourse¹⁵. All this conflicts with the strong family policy of the PRR in Central and Eastern Europe, which emphasises the need for defending traditional family roles from the so-called 'gender ideology' imported by the European Union political élites¹⁶. PRR positions on gender vary not only in different national contexts but also over time: it seems that in the West European PRR, gender-wise conservative positions and discourses on the family have become less salient than in the past¹⁷.

One major development in the gendered discourse of the PRR in recent years has been the ‘racialisation of sexism’¹⁸. While overall the emphasis on the traditional family and the gendered division of work seems to have decreased in the West European PRR party family, issues of gender and sexuality have become more salient when it comes to debating immigration, integration and multiculturalism¹⁹. In this discourse, gender equality is posited as a positive achievement of so-called Western civilisation which should be defended from the threat constituted by the migrants’ culture, which is portrayed as patriarchal. The national community is described as a place where gender equality has been achieved while ‘pre-modern’ models of gender are ascribed to the racialised Other –migrants, and, more specifically, those coming from Muslim countries. However, this new emphasis on gender equality only applies to the context of multiculturalism and immigration. For example, in the Swedish Democrats party, a double-gendered discourse is used which relates to two forms of cultural reproduction of the nation: inter-generational and boundary-producing²⁰. In terms of the inter-generational reproduction, in the matter of work/family balance, care work, and women’s work, the party naturalises gender differences; conversely, when creating boundaries with the non-Swedish Other (such as in the matter of the Islamic headscarf, genital mutilation, and ‘honour killings’), the party relies on the instrumental mobilisation of gender equality. While presenting themselves as defenders of gender equality, against the threat of Muslim immigration, PRR parties - including those that hold ‘modern traditional’ positions on gender - still consider the gendered division of work and related issues (pay gap, division of unpaid care and domestic work in the family, reconciliation of domestic responsibilities and work, and positive discrimination) as ‘natural’ individual choices that politics should not tamper with²¹.

Gender and the FN under Jean-Marie Le Pen

Under Jean-Marie Le Pen, the FN held highly conservative positions on gender, sexuality, and the family. This is expressed in the positions of the conservative Catholic fraction led by Bernard Antony, who was a prominent member of the party under Le Pen father. However, the FN has always maintained a complex relationship to the Catholic world and never supported a Catholic agenda, mobilising instead Catholicism as a symbol of the French nation, based on a neo-Maurassianist approach. While mainstream Catholic churchgoers have traditionally been marginal among the FN voters, due in large part to the

critical approach of the Catholic Church vis-à-vis the FN anti-immigration agenda, conservative Catholics have long been represented in the party under Jean-Marie Le Pen, alongside and in conflict with the secular neo-pagan strand of the French extreme right²².

According to the party's gendered ideology under its former leader, nature and religion are the foundations of the social order²³. In the FN rhetoric, essentialist representations of the family and the nation were closely intertwined. In 1996, Jean-Marie Le Pen declared that women do not have the 'property of their person' and do not hold control over their own bodies, as these belong to the 'Nation' and to 'Nature'²⁴. He also defined homosexuality as a 'biological and social anomaly'²⁵. Le Pen regularly used the domestic metaphor to legitimise the principle of the 'national preference'²⁶, likening the society to a family and contractual links to blood ties; the party too is represented as a cohesive group based on this domestic metaphor²⁷. Le Pen's discourse has been analysed as revolving around gendered and hierarchical dualisms based on nature that oppose Us (the inside, the private) to the racialised Other looming large on the outside²⁸.

These views were reflected by party policy. The political programmes of the FN were distinctive in that one could not find any entries for 'women' or 'gender equality', as is the case for the programmes of other French parties. Instead, women were referred to only in the sections concerning the family. In their review of the FN electoral programmes from its origins to 1997, Nonna Mayer and Mariette Sineau²⁹ note that, in comparison with the pages devoted to the issue of immigration, those concerning family policy are quite limited. Women, nonetheless, are central to FN policy: the traditional family, and the status of women as mothers, are seen as key to the promotion of national demographics and to counter a multicultural society. The political programme for the 1984 European elections proposed a 'maternal salary' and the abrogation of the Veil law granting the right to abortion³⁰. The 1985 programme explicitly referred to the Vichy regime legislation as a model for family policy and was critical of the public provision of childcare³¹. The connection between family-oriented policies and immigration policies was expressed by the two principles of 'family preference' and of 'national preference', as formulated in the 1993 political programme. Over the years, the FN policy has advocated pro-natality measures benefiting families with many children and financial measures encouraging women to devote themselves full-time to motherhood and care/domestic work, such as the 'maternal income'. Such family allowances and benefits were reserved for French (or European) citizens. Further recurrent measures have included the creation of an official status for non-working mothers and the familial vote

(meaning that parents are entitled to vote as many times as they have children), as well as control of sex education in schools, and of pornography, with the objective of protecting the youth and defending morality. However, over the 1990s, the party came to somewhat amend these ‘traditional’ positions on gender, and in 1993 the ‘maternal income’ was renamed ‘parental income’³². Nonetheless, in 2007, the FN programme still maintained a strong focus on pro-natalist measures, focusing on financial support for large families, claiming that the French family is in crisis, calling for increasing the birth rate and condemning abortion³³.

The participation of women in the FN under its former leader reflected these ‘traditional’ views of gender. In line with the ideology of the party, the division of tasks and responsibilities between female and male activists and elected officials tended to assign women to the political work connected with social issues such as education and the family, viewed as typically carried out by women. The activity of the now-defunct FN women’s sub-organisation National Circle of European Women (CNFE, *Cercle National des femmes d’Europe*), founded in 1985, is exemplary of the ‘traditional’ view of gender which marked the former leadership. Many CNFE members, belonging to the Catholic fraction, quit the party in overt criticism of Marine Le Pen’s pragmatic positions on abortion and homosexuality: this feminine organisation no longer exists. Its official objective was to defend the ‘French family’, considered as the central unit of the so-called ‘natural’ social order. Martine Lehideux, who has been vice-president of the FN and a leading member of CNFE, stated that the family is the ‘keystone of the natural order (...), the vital cell of our society’³⁴. The CNFE core activities concerned anti-abortion and pro-natality campaigning, involvement in charitable work, the defence of morality against pornography and homosexuality, and the protection of youth, supposedly threatened by drugs and Marxism. Catholic female members of the FN were also involved in the pro-life associations close to the party³⁵.

However, reflecting the evolving positions of the party on gender, and to accommodate the experiences of younger generations of French women, the CNFE came to recognise that women may find fulfilment in paid work. In the 1990s, the organisation advocated ‘parental income’ or ‘family income’ and declared that its objective was to help women to ‘choose’ between work and family, and to reconcile domestic responsibilities with employment³⁶. Qualitative studies of women’s participation in the party, carried out in the 1990s, shed light on the tension between the FN’s overtly sexist ideology and the aspirations of working women and single women without children who were party members. These studies

distinguish between different generations of female activists involved in the CNFE and in the party youth organisation, the FNJ (*Front National de la Jeunesse*). On the one hand, they suggest that women were attracted to the party by Jean-Marie Le Pen's hyper-masculine figure and that their main concern and motivation for joining the party was the defence of the traditional family³⁷. On the other, some FN female members contradicted the traditional models of gender promoted by the party in their own lives³⁸. For instance, while refusing the label 'feminist', younger female activists were critical of some of the party's positions (such as those on homosexuality and abortion), and they saw maternity as a choice rather than as a destiny³⁹.

Based on a review of existing studies, this section has discussed the gendered dimension of the FN ideology, policy and membership, indicating that, under its former leader, the party was a highly 'masculinised' PRR political organisation: it expressed overtly sexist views and supported highly conservative ('traditional') policies in the matter of gender - even if its positions softened over the years. The article will now consider how, under its new leader, the FN has come to present its propositions in a more 'modern' manner, particularly on the issue of women's work, and has further modified its policy on gender and the family.

The FN under Marine Le Pen: a 'masculine' party in transition

The strategy of 'modernisation' of the FN under Marine le Pen has been supported by the novelty of having a woman as leader of the party: dominant assumptions about women as naturally caring and less violent than men have softened the perception of a party which has traditionally been stigmatised for the sulphurous statements of its former leader on colonialism and WW2, and for its aggressive anti-immigration rhetoric. More specifically, the 'modernisation' of the FN discourse under Marine Le Pen involves mobilising ideas of gender and addressing the issue of working women to appeal to female voters, thus creating distance from the overtly sexist declarations of her father.

To begin with, Marine Le Pen aims at conveying a modern image of herself as a working woman. She is a professional and twice-divorced mother who lives unmarried with her current partner. In her autobiography she stresses her experience as a working mother and describes herself as 'almost a feminist', recalling the period when, after her divorce, she struggled to combine her job and political role with caring for her three children⁴⁰. Several pages of the autobiography are devoted to commenting on the hardship suffered by working

mothers and on the ‘double burden’ of work and family responsibilities to which women are subject. In addition, the FN aims at associating itself with gender equality and ‘sexual modernity’⁴¹, while discrediting its political opponents. Sexism is attributed to the enemies of the FN as gender equality appears as an important resource which is used by the party to establish its legitimacy in the political arena. For instance, Le Pen stated that the FN is the least sexist party in France⁴². In her autobiography, she refers to male politicians of the French Socialist Party as old machos (*‘éléphants machos du PS’*)⁴³. She also says that women are one of the social groups which the left wing has betrayed by giving up the struggle of gender equality: she speaks about the value of the ‘defence of women’ (rather than women’s rights). She continues by declaring to be enraged by the falsehood of those who describe the FN as a party that would like to send the women back to the kitchen. The racialised Other is attacked on the same ground: referring to the suburbs inhabited by working class racialised French and migrants (*banlieues*), Marine Le Pen said: ‘In some neighbourhoods it is not convenient to be a woman, gay, Jew, or even French or white’⁴⁴.

Furthermore, Marine Le Pen has repeatedly claimed to stand by working mothers, who are primarily affected by economic globalisation and neoliberal policies. She declared that today women are the first victims of the economic crisis and that female workers are used as an adjustment variable; she also insists that she knows how these women workers feel because of her own experience as a working mother⁴⁵. In this respect, gender is relevant to the anti-liberal and anti-capitalist tone of the FN current discourse. This partly diverges from the neoliberal claims initially made by Jean-Marie Le Pen before the FN ‘social turn’ of the 1990s⁴⁶. Marine Le Pen systematically accords a central role to the (exclusionary) welfare state, appealing to working-class voters who tend to be in favour of redistributive policies⁴⁷. The FN traditionally receives votes from all social classes, but there is evidence that Marine Le Pen has attracted growing support from manual workers, the traditional stronghold of the left⁴⁸. The FN presented itself as defender of the hard-working and tax-paying ‘forgotten of France’ (*la France des oubliés*), protecting the members of the national community from the attacks perpetrated by the ‘double enemy’ of the people: the migrants and the political élites⁴⁹. It should be noted however that during the course of the 2012 campaign the new prominence of economic issues progressively diminished to the advantage of the traditional issues of immigration and ‘law and order’⁵⁰.

This focus on issues such as social protection and the expansion of public services against economic globalisation can be particularly appealing for women. PRR studies argue

that women are traditionally underrepresented among the voters of these parties because, compared with men, they benefit more from welfare state services and are more often employed in public sector jobs: they are thus more likely to be affected by and more adverse to the neoliberal policies traditionally supported by PRR parties⁵¹. Working-class men instead would be more likely to vote for PRR parties because, compared with women, they are overrepresented in industrial jobs threatened by economic globalisation and migrant labour⁵². The 2012 presidential elections saw the narrowing of the traditional ‘gender gap’⁵³ between the number of men and women voting for the FN to 2%: Nonna Mayer⁵⁴ has advanced some possible explanations for this growth of women’s votes based on the economic recession, which has negatively affected employment in feminised precarious service sector jobs. Just like men in industrial jobs hit by the recession, women, too, can perceive themselves as economically disadvantaged by globalisation. Furthermore, the appeal of Le Pen’s ‘modern’ femininity may have attracted younger female voters. In the past, cultural explanations have been applied to account for the ‘gender gap’ in PRR support: it was argued that women voted less for Jean-Marie Le Pen’s party because they were attached to their established rights (such as access to paid work)⁵⁵. Today, however, according to polls, Le Pen’s female voters have a more positive image of their chosen candidate than the men who voted for her at the 2012 presidential elections: 74% of female voters versus 56% of the male voters declared that they would like to see her elected⁵⁶. Other recent survey-based studies show that the feminisation of the FN vote is not simply associated with recent ideological or leadership changes in the party, or with the current economic crisis; rather, it is an on-going process which has progressed from the 1990s onwards⁵⁷. Finally, while the recent erosion of the ‘gender gap’ in PRR vote in France is a remarkable exception, in other respects the FN has merely amplified its past electoral trends: it still obtains its best results among less-educated voters and relies on growing support from the working class. The attitudes of Marine Le Pen’s voters, dominated by ethnocentrism and authoritarianism, are very similar to those of the voters who supported her father⁵⁸.

The ‘modernisation’ of the FN discourse on gender is accompanied by some changes in the party political programmes. Under Marine Le Pen, the FN has softened its positions on the family, sexuality, and women’s work, moving towards a more progressive agenda which is likely to appeal to the younger generation. The 2012 political programme expresses tolerance of same-sex civil partnerships but is against same-sex marriage and the adoption of children by gay couples. Le Pen has tended to abstain from intervening in recent debates on

same-sex marriage and has not taken part in the mobilisations against the law which has made this possible in 2013: unlike immigration and security, issues of the family and sexuality are not the most profitable in electoral terms from the point of view of the FN leadership. Le Pen has a similarly pragmatic position on abortion. Instead of proposing the abrogation of the Veil law, as her father did, the FN proposes that abortion no longer be paid for by the national health system⁵⁹. The 2017 presidential programme states that a national plan for equal pay for men and women will be implemented: interestingly, this is included in the section on ‘Rebuilding France as a country of freedom’⁶⁰.

These tolerant positions on abortion, homosexuality, and women’s work, combined with Le Pen’s attempt to reframe FN politics to make it compatible with republican values, have produced discontent among conservative Catholics and ‘historical’ party members - including Bernard Antony and Martine Lehideux⁶¹. Today the FN is internally divided between two ‘souls’ of the party⁶²: the secularist neo-Gaullist line embodied by the leadership, on the one hand, and on the other, the liberal-conservative faction which has linkages with the conservative Catholic milieu. The latter is represented by some leading party members. Marion Maréchal-Le Pen, a member of the French parliament, holds same-sex marriage and abortion at the core of her agenda and has taken part in the demonstrations against gay marriage. Aymeric Chauprade, a member of the European Parliament, while commenting on the report on abortion and contraception presented by the Parliament gender equality commission, declared that this was ‘a mass destruction weapon against European demography’⁶³. Dominique Martin, also a member of the European Parliament, declared that returning to the maternal role in the home would constitute true liberation for working women; in addition to liberating jobs for others in the context of massive unemployment, this would rescue the children of these women from drugs and other threats of which they are victims because they are left on their own by their working mothers⁶⁴.

These changes in the ideology and policy of the FN combine with new developments in terms of its membership. It appears that FN female members have increased in recent years⁶⁵. Nonetheless, women’s participation in the FN as party members and elected representatives remains limited. According to the party’s official figures, there were 74,000 members in 2013 of which 39% were women; scholars estimate that there were 42,130 party members in 2014⁶⁶. Very few qualitative studies of FN activists have been conducted after the new leader took over from her father. My analysis of gender relations in PRR activism⁶⁷ is unique in that I have systematically compared male and female members of FN: women join the FN for a

variety of reasons which do not simply reflect their concerns as ‘mothers of the nation’ and are not only based on their attachment to traditional family values. Indeed, many newly recruited FN female activists are attracted to the party because they can identify with the ‘modern’ femininity of Marine Le Pen: they claim that they did not approve of the sexist declarations and ‘macho’ style of the FN former leader. Conversely, some male FN members use ‘modern’ gender models to explain their affiliation, to racialise migrants and construct their national and political belonging. For example, some men identify with anti-immigration mobilisations through ‘modern’ models of masculinity and fatherhood, describing migrants as ‘bad fathers’. The new generation of FN party members display a pragmatic attitude vis-à-vis abortion, contraception and homosexuality.

Yet these remarkable changes in the FN outlook and policy on gender, as well as the feminisation of the party membership, are accompanied by a systematic ambivalence, expressed in Le Pen’s ambiguous use of the argument of women’s freedom of choice. In her autobiography, after claiming that women are victims of the ‘double burden’ of domestic and professional work, she criticises those male politicians who call for women workers’ rights, raising the question whether women still have the choice of not working. Thus, rather than calling for the need for a more equitable gendered division of work, she suggests that women lack the freedom to choose not to work⁶⁸. In the same pages, she states that the FN economic policy and its family policy, through ‘parental income’, would enable women to make a ‘real choice’ when it comes to working. She also declared that, for precarious female workers, real progress would be to return to the home⁶⁹. She also claims that those politicians and feminists who advocate gender equality in employment are disconnected from the reality of French women’s lives and aspirations⁷⁰. The same narrative is used with regard to abortion. Here the FN uses the arguments of anti-abortion movements, which have dismissed the ‘outdated’ religious repertoire to present themselves as the defenders of women’s rights, questioning whether women’s movements of the 1970s were truly ‘feminist’⁷¹. Le Pen writes that the problem is that many women today don’t have the choice not to get an abortion; for this she blames the feminist movement which, she claims, presented it ‘as the summit of freedom’ for women⁷². Thus while the FN no longer holds the anti-abortion struggle as a priority, it puts an emphasis on enabling women to be free to choose not to abort. The 2012 presidential programme states that women must have a ‘real choice’ that includes not getting an abortion, and aims at promoting campaigns of information and prevention as well as pre-natal

adoption. In 2012 Louis Aliot, vice-president of the FN and partner of Marine Le Pen, echoed these ideas by criticising the use of abortion as a form of contraception⁷³.

The pragmatic positions of Le Pen on abortion and same-sex partnerships co-exist with a strong emphasis of the party programmes on pro-natalist policies, in line with the FN tradition. To begin with, in the 2012 presidential manifesto, women are referred to only in the sections concerning issues related to the family, in direct continuity with the previous leadership. This programme advocates improving allowances for large families and a 'parental income' which ensures the possibility of choosing freely between professional work and childrearing for both mothers and fathers. It also states that the family, intended as 'exclusively based on the union of a man and a woman with the view to welcoming children born from a father and a mother', is a vital institution and the base of society⁷⁴. The party also advocates supporting French women and men to combine work and family responsibilities. However not one reference to childcare services is made. Furthermore, the formally gender-neutral approach to 'parental salary' in the programme conflicts with Le Pen's declarations in the press, where she speaks about a 'maternal salary'⁷⁵. The 2012 programme also condemns the birth decline in France, alongside the traditional nationalist discourse: 'out of 832,799 children born in 2010, only 667,707 were the children of two French citizens'. In addition, the traditional association between defence of nation and defence of the family through pro-natality measures persists in the FN today. The principle of the 'national preference', renamed 'national priority' or 'citizens' priority', remains the guiding principle of the 2012 presidential programme. This includes the traditional proposal of granting family allowances and the 'parental income' to only those families where at least one of the parents is French. Similarly, the 2017 presidential programme advocates pro-natalist measures for French families and states that the 'national priority' principle should be included in the French Constitution; furthermore, while the manifesto states that an national equal pay programme is needed, there is no information on how the party intends to set this up. In discontinuity with the previous presidential programme, however, the 2017 manifesto does not mention either abortion or the 'parental salary' and does not includes a section focusing specifically on the family: unlike in the past, the family does not seem to be singled-out as one field of intervention of the FN.

This discussion shows that the FN has transformed its gendered discourse. It has done this by mobilising the figure of working women who embody a model of modern femininity: this then serves as a counterbalance to the representation of Muslim women as 'pre-modern'

subaltern victims. Yet, despite this reference to working mothers and a pragmatic approach to abortion, a strong ambiguity characterises the leader's approach. This can be seen in her use of the argument of women's choice in relation to these matters. Also, despite a move towards a more liberal programme in the matter of the family and sexuality and, in the most recent elections, the conspicuous absence of issues of abortion and of the family as one specific field of intervention, the FN policy is characterised by a strong continuity: this materialises in the significant pro-natality measures and in the connection between, on the one hand, the defence of the family and, on the other, the anti-immigration struggle, expressed by the principle of 'national priority'.

Conclusion

The analysis has indicated that, over time, the FN has shifted from 'traditional' to 'modern-traditional' discourses and policies on gender. Some liberalisation of the party positions on the family could already be observed in the 1990s, under Jean-Marie Le Pen. The partial liberalisation of the FN discourse and policy on gender under the former leader can be partly attributed to Marine Le Pen, who was involved in the direction of her father's electoral campaigns. The new gendered discourse of the FN aims at accommodating the widespread expectations and practices of gender in contemporary France and at challenging the perception of the party as misogynist, by attributing sexism to its political opponents (and to the racialised Other). The new emphasis of the FN on issues of employment, social protection and the (exclusionary) welfare state combines with a focus on working women/mothers. This indicates a significant shift from a discourse celebrating traditional models of gender (embodied by the 'mothers of the nation') to a focus on 'modern' femininity (embodied by 'working women/mothers'). These changes in the party discourse have been accompanied by a partial modification of its programmatic positions on issues of gender, sexuality and the family, towards a more pragmatic policy on abortion and same-sex civil unions. Indeed, the most recent 2017 FN political programme seems to indicate a decreasing emphasis on family and abortion issues compared with the previous Marine Le Pen's electoral manifesto.

This article has suggested, however, that the inclusion of new ideological elements, such as the mobilisation of the theme of gender equality and the emphasis on 'working women', does not invalidate the analyses associating the FN as well as other PRR parties' discourse

with the naturalisation of social relations of gender and ethnicity⁷⁶. Essentialist views of gender and the ethno-pluralist defence of national identity remain crucially intertwined in the FN discourse. Despite adjustments and reformulations, the gendered core of the FN policy and ideology has remained stable, echoing studies of other PRR parties which simultaneously celebrate the gendered ‘difference in the family’ and ‘sameness in the nation’⁷⁷. This emerges for instance from Marine Le Pen’s declarations decrying the declining French demographics. Further, the new leader’s declarations advocating women’s ‘freedom of choice’ of not having an abortion and of not working obscure the structural and hierarchical dimension of gender relations in which women’s lives are inscribed. In the same vein, recent scholarship has examined the recent ‘republican turn’ in the FN ideology to conclude that the ‘second FN’⁷⁸ is in strong continuity with the FN under Jean-Marie Le Pen with regard to its nativist core. The FN ‘republican’ discourse on secularism has been considered merely as a lexical innovation which retains an exclusionary dimension to stigmatise migrants and Muslims⁷⁹. The ‘republicanisation’ of the FN ideology thus coexists with the traditional ethno-pluralism of the party ideology: secularism is presented by the FN as an inherently Christian value and as a feature par excellence of the French culture⁸⁰.

The article also pointed to the ambivalence of Marine Le Pen’s discourse on women’s work and abortion as well as to tensions between the leader’s discourse and the party programmes. Women’s work and abortion are accepted but at the same time those women who get an abortion are stigmatised, and feminists advocating equal rights for men and women workers are dismissed as elitist. Women are celebrated as working mothers, rather than as housewives; same-sex partnerships are tolerated (while the primacy of the ‘natural’ heterosexual family is not questioned); the right to abortion is also tolerated (albeit implicitly and powerfully challenged). The unequal gendered division of unpaid care and domestic work is never explicitly addressed as an issue by the FN party programmes; similarly, there are no policy proposals which aim at encouraging men to participate in a more equitable division of work, and there is no mention of childcare services. This suggests a strong association between women and the home, which combines with the acceptance of the inclusion of women into the labour market. Thus the party discourse maintains a certain essentialism but also loosens the ‘natural’ links between home and women, condoning women’s work. In this view, women *must* reconcile paid work and the family, while men are absent from this scenario and *can*, if they choose, devote themselves to unpaid care work.

The ideological changes analysed in the article are inscribed in a view of society from which gendered social hierarchies are evacuated.

This ambivalence also mirrors the different take – more or less conservative - of the secular and the Catholic ‘souls’ of the FN on issues of gender, which the leadership has to accommodate. In her attempts to negotiate this internal tension, Le Pen strategically moves from more pragmatic to more radical positions on gender in her discourse. The liberalisation of the FN views on gender has gained momentum since Marine Le Pen took over as president of the party and started an enterprise of ‘modernisation’ of the party, making ‘secularism’ her trademark. The neo-pagan secular component and the nationalist Catholic faction have disappeared from the party under the new leadership, and the celebration of France as a Catholic nation has been replaced by a secularist approach. In 2004, together with other younger members of the party, Marine Le Pen pushed the conservative Catholic representatives to quit the party⁸¹. However, as discussed in the article, there remains a liberal-conservative faction hostile to the leader’s pragmatic approach to gender and morality issues, which benefits from significant visibility. This tension can ultimately be understood as an outcome of the long-standing broader tension existing between the strategy of ‘demonisation’ on the one hand, and the leaders’ effort to maintain FN’s appeal to the most radical fringes and voters. This echoes existing analyses of the ‘tactical variations’ in the FN agenda on immigration, which has been amended, re-formulated, and subsequently re-radicalised depending on phases of expansion or contraction of the electoral base⁸².

Furthermore, such changes and tensions in the FN discourse on gender can be placed in the context of wider processes of secularisation, and linked to the recent appropriation, by the West European PRR, of religion and secularism issues. PRR parties increasingly mobilise the references to Christianity as a symbol of national belonging to attack the Muslims: Christianity is defined in terms of national identity and not as a set of normative social and moral values. The PRR claims to defend so-called Judeo-Christian civilisation against Muslim migrants, and associates it with liberal values such as secularism, religious freedom and women’s rights⁸³. PRR parties are secular and have more liberal positions on the family and sexuality than the Catholic Church and hard-core Catholic believers; practicing Catholics are underrepresented among PRR voters. Marine Le Pen’s voters are younger and more secular than her father’s, and those of the French conservative right party⁸⁴. Thus the move of the FN towards ‘modern traditional’ positions on gender is linked, in ways which have yet to be researched, with its changing approach towards religion and Catholic morals.

Finally, in exploring the evolving positions and views on gender of the FN, the article responds to a call for further research investigating how the gendered appeals and positions of PRR parties vary across countries as well as over time: this could contribute to providing a more accurate conceptual definition of this party family, which systematically incorporates gender, a dimension which has been largely overlooked in PRR studies⁸⁵. In this respect, the article contributes to the recent scholarship on gender and the PRR, challenging dominant views of this party as monolithically sexist. The article provides new empirical evidence on the most recent developments of the FN discourse and policy. In so doing it concurs with existing studies to indicate that traditional family issues have been downplayed by the FN since the late 1990s, even if, in the context of Western Europe, this party can be placed among the most conservative PRR parties on issues of gender⁸⁶. In this respect, the FN follows the wider trend in the decreasing salience of gender issues which affect the West European PRR. As discussed, in the case of the FN, these ideological changes are largely instrumental but also linked to the party's history and internal politics as well as to broader, long-term social changes in society. It remains to be seen whether the FN's new outlook on gender will further evolve towards more liberal policy proposals and towards a lesser emphasis on family issues, or whether it will move back to more traditional positions on gender due to contingent political contexts and strategies.

¹ I follow Mudde's scholarship and use the category of 'populist radical right' to define this family of parties in Europe, based on nativism, populism and authoritarianism as the core elements of their ideology. See Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007.

² Sylvain Crépon, Alexandre Dézé and Nonna Mayer (eds), *Les faux-semblants du Front national. Sociologie d'un parti politique*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2015; Michel Wieviorka, *Le Front national entre extrémisme, populisme et démocratie*, Paris, Éditions de la maison des sciences de l'homme, 2012; James Shields, 'Marine Le Pen and the "New" FN', *Parliamentary Affairs* 66, 1 (2013), 179-196; Nonna Mayer, 'From Jean-Marie to Marine Le Pen', *Parliamentary Affairs* 66, 1 (2013), 160-178.

³ Alexandre Dézé, 'La 'dédiabolisation': une nouvelle stratégie?', in S. Crépon, A. Dézé and N. Mayer (eds), *Les faux-semblants du Front national. Sociologie d'un parti politique*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2015, pp27-50; Michel Wieviorka, *Le Front national entre extrémisme, populisme et démocratie*, Paris, Éditions de la maison des sciences de l'homme, 2012.

⁴ While the section discussing the gendered dimension of the FN discourse and policy under Jean-Marie Le Pen is based on existing scholarly work, the section on Marine Le Pen relies on documentary sources, collected through three research projects: 'Gendering activism in populist radical right parties. A comparative study of women's and men's participation in the Northern League (Italy) and the National Front (France)', European Research Council Starting Grant, 2012-2014; 'Gendering the study of anti-immigration movements in Europe: women and men activists in the Northern League party in Italy', British Academy Small Grant, 2010; and 'Women's associations and representations of gender in the Northern League party: a study of documentary sources', Adam Smith Research Foundation grant, 2010. These sources include the official FN electoral manifestos since 2011, when Marine Le Pen took over as president of the party, Marine Le Pen's autobiography and her unauthorised biography. To complement these documentary sources, the article relies on articles reporting relevant declarations of the FN leader, published from 2010 onwards on the main French newspapers and magazines, and on *NationsPresse.info*, an online magazine which is not official party press but overtly supports Marine Le Pen. In 2010 Le Pen announced her intention to run as candidate for president of the party, which boosted her visibility on the media. While the political programmes, leader's declarations as well as her autobiography are to be considered as core textual expressions of the party ideology, the article also considers some declarations of other leading party members which are representative of the minority party faction. A qualitative textual analysis of all these documents was conducted looking for those passages of the documents which made reference to gender, women, sexism, feminism, the family, abortion, women's work, reconciling family/work, and domestic and care work, with the objective of examining which kind of relationship is established between the family and the nation, and which models of femininity are deployed in this discourses.

⁵ Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007; Hans-Georg Betz, *Radical Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe*, New York, St Martin's Press, 1994.

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- ⁶ Paola Bacchetta and Margaret Power (eds), *Right-wing women*, New York, Routledge, 2002; Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*, London, Sage, 1997; Eleonore Kofman, 'When society was simple', in N. Charles and H. Hintjens (eds), *Gender, ethnicity and political ideologies*, London and New York, Routledge, 1998, pp91-106.
- ⁷ Ann Towns, Erika Karlsson and Joshua Eyre, 'The equality conundrum', *Party Politics* 20, 2 (2014), 237-247.
- ⁸ Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*, Sage, London, 1997.
- ⁹ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, 'Vox populi or vox masculini? Populism and gender in Northern Europe and South America', *Patterns of Prejudice*, 49,1-2 (2015), 16-36.
- ¹⁰ Tjitske Akkerman, 'Gender and the radical right in Western Europe: a comparative analysis of policy agendas', *Patterns of Prejudice*, 49, 1-2 (2015), 37-60.
- ¹¹ Helga Amesberger and Brigitte Halbmayr (eds), *Rechtsextreme Parteien – eine mögliche Heimat für Frauen?*, Opladen, Leske + Budrich, 2002, quoted in Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p93.
- ¹² Siim, Birte, Andrea Krizsán, Dominika Gruziel and Anita Nissen, *Report of Case Studies on Gender Equality as a Focus Point of National and Nativist Discourses*, EU 7th Framework Programme, 2012, <http://beucitizen.eu/publications/report-of-case-studies-on-gender-equality-as-a-focus-point-of-national-and-nativist-discourses-deliverable-9-7/>
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- ¹⁴ Paula-Irene Villa, "'Anti-genderismus": German Angst?', in Kuhar, Roman and David Paternotte (eds), *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against Equality*, London, Rowman and Littlefield, 2017.
- ¹⁵ Francesca Scrinzi, *Gendering activism in populist radical right parties. A comparative study of women's and men's participation in the Northern League (Italy) and the National Front (France)*, In-progress preliminary analysis report', ERC Starting grant, 2014a, <http://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/socialpolitical/research/sociology/projects/genderingactivisminpopulistradicalrightparties/publications/preliminary%20report/>; Francesca Scrinzi, 'Caring for the elderly in the family or in the nation? Gender, women and migrant care labour in the Lega Nord', *West European Politics*, 40, 4 (2017b), 869-886.

¹⁶ Eszter Kováts and Maari Põim (eds), *Gender as symbolic glue. The position and role of conservative and far right parties in the anti-gender mobilizations in Europe*, Brussels, Foundation for European Progressive Studies and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2015.

¹⁷ Tjitske Akkerman, 'Gender and the radical right in Western Europe: a comparative analysis of policy agendas', *Patterns of Prejudice*, 49, 1-2 (2015), 37-60.

¹⁸ Francesca Scrinzi, 'A 'new' National front? Gender, religion, secularism and the French populist radical right', in M. Köttig, R. Bitzan and A. Petö (eds), *Gender and Far Right Politics in Europe*, London, Palgrave Macmillan 2017b, pp127-140; Ann Towns, Erika Karlsson and Joshua Eyre, 'The equality conundrum', *Party Politics* 20, 2 (2014), 237-247; Sara R. Farris, 'Femotionalism and the Regular Army of Labour Called Migrant Women', *History of the Present*, 2, 2 (2012), 184-199; Tjitske Akkerman and Anniken Hagelund, 'Women and children first!', *Patterns of Prejudice* 41, 2 (2007), 197-214; Ruth Wodak, *The politics of fear*, London, Sage, 2015.

¹⁹ Tjitske Akkerman, 'Gender and the radical right in Western Europe: a comparative analysis of policy agendas', *Patterns of Prejudice*, 49, 1-2 (2015), 37-60.

²⁰ Ann Towns, Erika Karlsson and Joshua Eyre, 'The equality conundrum', *Party Politics*, 20, 2 (2014), 237-247.

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²² Olivier Roy, 'The French National Front: From Christian Identity to *Laïcité*', in N. Marzouki, D. McDonnell and O. Roy (eds), *Saving the People: How Populists Hijack Religion*, London, Hurst & Company, 2016.

²³ Claudie Lesselier, 'De la Vierge Marie à Jeanne d'Arc', in C. Lesselier and F. Venner (eds), *L'extrême droite et les femmes*, Villeurbanne, Golias, 1997, pp41-70.

²⁴ Quoted in Erwan Lecoeur (ed.), *Dictionnaire de l'extrême droite*, Paris, Larousse, 2007, p142.

²⁵ 'L'heure de vérité', Antenne 2, 13th February 1984, quoted in Sylvain Crépon, 'La politique des moeurs au Front national', in S. Crépon, A. Dézé and N. Mayer (eds), *Les faux-semblants du Front national. Sociologie d'un parti politique*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2015, pp185-205.

²⁶ The principle of ‘national preference’, more recently renamed ‘national priority’, is still distinctive of the FN policy under its current leader. It claims that French citizens should be given priority over foreigners in the access to jobs and Welfare state benefits.

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³⁰ Claudie Lesselier, ‘De la Vierge Marie à Jeanne d’Arc’, in C. Lesselier and F. Venner (eds), *L’extrême droite et les femmes*, Villeurbanne, Golias, 1997, pp41-70.

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³³ Tjitske Akkerman, ‘Gender and the radical right in Western Europe: a comparative analysis of policy agendas’, *Patterns of Prejudice*, 49, 1-2 (2015), 37-60.

³⁴ Quoted in Erwan Lecoeur, *Dictionnaire de l’extrême droite*, Paris, Larousse, 2007, p140.

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³⁶ Claudie Lesselier, ‘Far-Right Women in France’, in P. Bacchetta and M. Power (eds), *Right-wing women*, New York, Routledge, 2002, pp127-140.

³⁷ Françoise Laroche, ‘Maréchale, nous voilà !’, in C. Lesselier and F. Venner (eds), *L’extrême droite et les femmes*, Villeurbanne, Golias, 1997, pp153-163; Deborah R. Levy, ‘Women of the French National front’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 42, 1 (1989), 102-111; Martin

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⁴⁶ Alexandre Dézé, 'La "dédiabolisation": une nouvelle stratégie?', in S. Crépon, A. Dézé and N. Mayer (eds), *Les faux-semblants du Front national. Sociologie d'un parti politique*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2015, pp27-50.

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⁴⁸ Nonna Mayer, 'From Jean-Marie to Marine Le Pen'. *Parliamentary Affairs* 66, 1 (2013), 160-178.

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