

Gender Relations and the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ)

Abstract: *The article explores the controversial approach to gender issues in the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ). Therefore, I will give a brief overview of the representation of females within the party (i) and secondly, it will try to highlight the programmatic and discursive approach to gender in the official and semi-official publications of the FPÖ.*

Keywords: *gender, Austria, Freedom Party of Austria, right-wing extremism.*

Only recently, the Polish EMP Janusz Korwin-Mikke said women are weaker, smaller and less intelligent. On other occasions, he presented his conservative view, defending child pornography as long as children are not abused, rallying against abortion and questioning the right to vote for women. One could argue that he is a marginalized minority: 4 percent of the voters elected him during the first round of the Polish presidential election in 2015. But he is also quite popular among young people in Poland.¹

The reaction within the EP was fierce and not very friendly towards Mr. Korwin-Mikke and there was also a debate in wider mediated sphere. But it seems, that gender relations are up for a debate in very different forms. The US elections in 2016 have shown that sexism is no longer seen as a line-crossing behaviour. Rather the opposite, sexism has been legitimized as simple locker room talk. In Germany (2013) and Switzerland (2016) the hashtag #Aufschrei (outcry) initiated a debate about sexism in society. Recent migration has brought a new element to the discussion, especially after the very different events in Cologne 2015 and 2016: sexism and sexual violence have been recently framed as alien to a German (White) cultivated tradition and as import from Muslim countries.²

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On the forefront of this conservative turn we can observe right-wing populists and extremists. This paper deal with different aspects of Gender relations of the right-wing extremist party FPÖ. The growing success of right-wing parties in terms of visibility and approval rates, resulted also in a shift of extremist positions from the periphery to the mainstream. This also affects severely gender relations as the discourse on these issues becomes more and more polarized.

This paper will give a brief overview of the representation of females within the party (i) and secondly, it will highlight the programmatic and discursive approach to gender in the official and semi-official publications of the FPÖ.

Gender and electorate

The FPÖ, a rather old party (founded in 1955) has a very conservative, German national ideology but was politically speaking rather irrelevant until the 1980s. It could only attract a small margin of the Austrian electorate while the majority of the votes went either to the social democratic SPÖ or conservative people's party ÖVP. These two parties dominated the political realm after WWII up until the 1990s. The FPÖ was, for a short period of time, a junior partner in government together with the SPÖ. The election of Jörg Haider as a new party leader changed the party completely. While some describe it rather as populist others categorize the FPÖ as an extremist party.³

The recent Austrian Presidential elections polarized the Austrian society. In the second round, the FPÖ candidate Norbert Hofer was running against the (former) Green candidate Van der Bellen. The outcome of the election⁴ brought a victory of van der Bellen. Looking at the voters, the overwhelming discrepancy lies within the labour force. While 85 percent of the workers opted for Hofer, only 34 percent of the public servants did so. Another widely discussed topic is the gap between men and women. Norbert Hofer only got a share of 38 percent of the female electorate while 56 percent of all male voters voted for him.⁵ This gender gap in voting is a quite common phenomenon in right-wing parties and cannot be explained by other socio-demographic factors such as age or education.⁶ Some authors argue with social desirability. From this perspective, women are socialized in a way that they opt for mainstream or conventional parties – those that are socially accepted even though they might agree to populist positions.⁷ This argument is difficult to uphold in the Austrian case as almost 50 percent of the voters opted for a right-wing party in the presidential election 2016. The FPÖ has become – it seems – an accepted/acceptable choice for a large part of the Austrian voters.⁸

Others stress the fact that the racial, sexist and biologicistic approach of right-wing parties is generally more rejected by women.⁹ These explanations present only general trends. Looking for voting patterns by sex hide the fact that women (as well as men) are a diverse and heterogeneous group with multiple interests and identities. Some might 'favour right-wing parties for their "white superiority" thinking and accept sexism as an inevitable side product. Other might hold conservative beliefs and value traditional family structures as promoted by those parties. Feminist theories have highlighted the fact of heterogeneity: intersectionality addresses multiple forms of discrimination and subordination of women based on e.g. race, class, gender but also beyond, just to mention sexual orientation or age. Within the queer community we can observe a similar trend. An online-survey among LGBTIQ* people in the local election in Vienna also found that around 10 percent of the respondents would vote for the FPÖ.¹⁰

To sum it up, it is reasonable to assume that the voting behaviour of women is explicable by multiple factors. Still, what we can say is that women are more reluctant to right-wing populist parties, be it as a consequence of socialisation or because they tend to hold postmaterialist beliefs that run counter to right-wing populist. The gender approach of these parties might be one additional decisive factor.

Female members and candidates of the FPÖ

At first glance, the FPÖ is evidently male dominated. The party leadership is exclusively male¹¹, the first high ranking females are Dagmar Belakowitsch-Jenewein (one of the five deputy chairmen of the parliamentary group) and Marlene Svazek, the head of the party in the

land Salzburg. In 2000 Susanne Riess-Passer was named the party leader and considered a compromise candidate for the first ÖVP-FPÖ government coalition. She was seen as loyal to Jörg Haider until their discord in 2002 when she left the party. Jörg Haider's sister, Ursula Haubner, had the same position for almost a year between 2004 and 2005. 30 percent of the MPs in the Austrian parliament are female, while only 18 percent of the FPÖ MPs are women¹². This gender gap can be seen throughout all legislative periods.

The most prominent women in the FPÖ is Barbara Rosenkranz long-time head of party in the land Lower Austria, ran as the FPÖ nominee for the presidential candidate in 2010¹³. She received 15,2 percent of the votes.

Barbara Rosenkranz has been in the national parliament since 2002, before that she was in the local parliament of the land Lower Austria. She is married to Horst Rosenkranz who is considered to hold extreme right positions¹⁴ and was member of the party National Democratic Party (NDP), that split from the FPÖ in the 1960s and was disbanded in 1988 due to their proximity to the Nazi ideology.¹⁵ During her presidential campaign, Barbara Rosenkranz was forced by the most influential newspaper to acknowledge the prohibition act 1947¹⁶. She belongs to the right-wing of the right wing populist movement. Barbara Rosenkranz is also an interesting case and role model when analysing gender relations that are promoted by the FPÖ. Her occupation is "housewife"¹⁷ and she is a mother of ten children. In 2008 she published a book called "MenschInnen"¹⁸ where she discredited gender mainstreaming as an ideology to create sexless beings and re-educate society, targeting especially young children in kindergarten and schools. She can also be considered as one of the forerunners of the now unfortunately quite established anti-gender activism that coined the terms "Genderwahn" or "Genderismus".¹⁹

When it comes to queer politics, the FPÖ has no party organization for LGBTIQ* people and –as far as one can say – one official "out" representative.²⁰

This first part has shown that there is a clear gender gap in terms of voters and female party representatives. The FPÖ is overwhelmingly voted by males and heterosexual males dominate the party positions.

Gender in the political program

The FPÖ's position on gender issues will be analysed according to the *party manifesto*²¹ and their general *political program*²². At first glance, the FPÖ holds a moderate view on these issues. They stress the equality of men and women but they strongly oppose policies (such as quotas or gender mainstreaming) to tackle actively "real or perceived" discrimination²³. Thus, the FPÖ acknowledges gender inequality but sees no need for action. The FPÖ's point of view is simple: qualified women will be successful, sooner or later.²⁴ The party also stresses that politics need to improve equality but they also stress "gender-specific" behaviour that should not be oppressed. This specification hints already to a deterministic role perception based on perceived biological predispositions and natural roles within society.

The FPÖ rejects any kind of gender mainstreaming. In the manifesto, it is (correctly) presented as an instrument to fight discrimination. In their party program, "gender mainstreaming" is presented as an "ideology" to re-educate society and to destroy identities and families (the "nucleus of society" as they see them). Gender mainstreaming is presented a feminist conspiracy and has no resemblance with real concepts and practices in this field.

Family policy is the core field where gender relations are negotiated.²⁵ They define family as follows “as a partnership between a man and a woman with common children, is the natural nucleus that holds a functioning society together (...)”²⁶. Here, the very traditional heterosexual marriage is portrayed as the only legitimate form of family. Within this construct of the real family, gender roles are also discussed, highlighting on the one hand the freedom to choose between staying at home and working, on the other hand, the FPÖ highlights that women who stay at home are primarily victims of discrimination, once they re-enter the job market. Even more important is recurrent argument of “natural” gender roles where mothers are perceived as the only suitable care takers of young children, thus naturally limiting the father’s role²⁷ and framing other models as deviant. “Real freedom of choice” is implicitly predetermined by biology and would automatically lead to mothers who stay at home. At the same time, other family constellations are simply ignored or explicitly excluded such as same-sex couples. The party is also opposed to adoption rights for same-sex couples even though this is legal in Austria since 2015.²⁸

When it comes to abortion rights, a similar pattern can be observed. On the one hand, the FPÖ does not oppose abortion vehemently, on the other hand it is condemned in various ways, for example, calling the uterus “the place with the highest probability of dying”²⁹ or referring to psychological long-term effects of abortion.

Violence against women is also addressed by the FPÖ, however, in a very specific way. It is used to highlight the perceived difference between the Christian West and the Muslim societies.

Aspects of gender equality are discussed within the frame of Western occidental values and norms, creating the Muslim violent and brutal other. Under the sub-heading *The Christian and Enlightened Occident*³⁰, the party program describes violence and oppression of women as a cultural trait of Islam, implying that Western societies are more or less free of abuses against women and repressive behaviour towards them.

From these formal party documents, it becomes clear that gender is an important topic for the right-wing FPÖ. Gender relations are subjected to a biological determinism that ascribes everybody a natural role in society. At the same time, gender equality is not officially questioned. On the whole, a conservative, traditional family model is the core ideology of the FPÖ. Inequality is subjectified, heteronormativity confirmed and violence against women in Austria ignored or alien to the ethnic Austrian society. Very often, these arguments are framed in a way that they come across as conservative but not necessarily radical. Thus, they are also appealing for the mainstream society even though they clearly display – a quite common – anti-gender bias.

The FPÖ has also published a book, written by one of the parliamentary FPÖ staffers, Michael Howanietz³¹ that displays its idea of gender relations much more radical and stirred quite some irritations. The FPÖ presidential candidate Norbert Hofer and the party leader HC Strache have both written introductory remarks. Hofer even functions as the editor. In terms of gender relations, the author condemns any kind of lifestyle that is not oriented towards the traditional family. The whole book is written in a cynical, exaggerating way, devaluing women in several ways (mothers who leave their homes to help orphans or women in women’s shelter because they value foreigners more than their own kind as he sketches it³²). Any kind of pro-active gender equality mechanism is devalued. Howanietz argues that institutions lose reputation once, more and more females enter in high positions.³³ Child bearing is also racially framed by comparing birth statistics of Austrian women compared to other nationalities and voicing fear of

becoming a minority on one's own country. At the same time, he describes child care as "brood care"³⁴. In this scenario, the male is the breadwinner and guardian, the female takes care of the "brood". Any other way of life is thus a result of a forcefully implemented gender ideology acting against nature. This renders gender quality to a fiction because "nature" is the sole decisive factor. This book gives an insight into the FPÖ's understanding of gender relations beyond official positions. It displays a racial and biologicistic understanding of gender, branding everything that does not fit the traditional norm as abnormal and deviant, thus inferior.

Conclusion

The FPÖ stand for a right-wing conservative backlash. This backlash can be discussed from a (neo-)liberal perspective: women are understood as competitors on the labour market who strive for well-paid jobs with career opportunities. They do not necessarily want to supplement the male's main breadwinner's salary in a low paid part-time job. This perspective reinforces the fact that right wing voters are quite often members of the squeezed middle class that fear economic decline.

The FPÖ is a male dominated party: the electorate is overwhelmingly male as well as the representatives. Still, they are voted by a fair share of female voters and they do have prominent female party representatives who quite often reinforce discursively traditional role models. The FPÖ officially declares gender equality as an important good. But the underlying argument highlights the idea of deterministic biological predispositions of males and females. Females are confined to care work while males to the economy. Any other way of life is deemed deviant.

This is shaping slowly the societal discourse: feminism, gender mainstreaming and same sex equality are condemned in cultural terms, while (heteronormative connoted) gender equality is formally supported. It is thus merely reduced to an extreme liberal and individualistic formal quality. Structural discrimination and a critical reflection on the heteronormative "normality" is left out of the equation. Even worse, quite often it is enough to note that LGBTIQ* people are small minority and the large minority of women should not complain as their legal status is the same as for men. Gender issues are therefore framed as irrelevant and a waste of time while more pressing issues need to be resolved. At the same time, gender is instrumentalized to discredit the "Other", specifically Muslims. Here the FPÖ presents itself as a spearhead of gender equality.

To conclude, gender has become a very controversial issue, for some reason. On the one hand, the question of equality between people independent of their sex or sexual orientation has been more and more discussed as a universal Human Right, also symbolizing the ideal of a pluralist and free society. On the other hand, it is discussed as a forced re-education program, almost a conspiracy, to neutralize "natural" roles of men and women. The FPÖ addresses these issues in tamed formal documents and more radical in other publics. The conservative backlash is having a deep impact.

Notes

¹ <http://www.thenews.pl/1/9/Artykul/226333,Polish-youth-votes-for-conservatives>.

² http://www.feministisches-institut.de/sexismus_rassismus_koeln/.

³ For a debate on how to classify the FPÖ – populist or extremist – see Pelinka 2012.

⁴ The second round took place on May 22, 2016 and Van der Bellen won with a slight majority of 30 000 votes. The result was contested by the FPÖ on procedural grounds. Therefore it was repeated in December 2016. Van der Bellen could extend his lead and one by 300 000 votes.

⁵ <http://www.sora.at/themen/wahlverhalten/wahlanalysen/bpw16-wh.html>.

⁶ Arzheimer 2008: 333.

⁷ Falter 1994: 28.

⁸ In addition, the FPÖ is also considered to be an acceptable coalition partner for the ÖVP (who were in a coalition with the FPÖ/BZÖ between 2000-2005) There are also strong tendencies within the social democratic party to form a coalition with the FPÖ. There is one SPÖ-FPÖ coalition in the land "Burgenland" since.

⁹ For critical discussion see Hentges 1993, Stiller 1997.

¹⁰ <http://www.univie.ac.at/lgbt-wahlstudie/>.

¹¹ As of 09.03.2017.

¹² Thus, the new liberal party NEOS have one female MP out of 9 (11 percent).

¹³ In 1992 Heide Schmidt from the FPÖ ran for presidency as well but she belonged to the liberal fraction of the FPÖ and left the party in 1993 due to the rising anti-migration positions.

¹⁴ http://www.doew.at/cms/download/b3c9m/lasek_funktionaere-5.pdf.

¹⁵ VfGH Erkenntnis B999/87, 25.06.1988.

¹⁶ This constitutional law prohibits any activity that belittles the Nazi regime or denies its atrocities, such as the Holocaust.

¹⁷ https://www.parlament.gv.at/WWER/PAD_14693/.

¹⁸ The title is a critique of gender-inclusive language as the term humans (Menschen) already gender-neutral, is now ridiculed by the inclusion of an I that is used in the German language to highlight the inclusiveness. For a discussion on the book see En, Boka, Michael En, and Mercedes Pöll. "A World Without Gender? The Struggle of Austria's Far Right over What It Means to Be Human: An Analysis of Barbara Rosenkranz' Book MenschInnen." Gender and Far Right Politics in Europe. Springer International Publishing, 2017. 235-252.

¹⁹ The first term can be translated to "gender madness" or "gender craziness" in order to highlight the unjustified, overemphasized topic of gender. The second, "genderism" in German is primarily a deprecatory term for gender-related topics that are presented as a dangerous ideology.

²⁰ Of course, there have been rumours about the sexual orientation of Jörg Haider. In 2010 an FPÖ local council member even said in a public discussion: "We are the only party that was run by a gay person for 17 years" (Die Presse online, 16.09.2010). The mayor of a small village, Christian Popp is officially out.

²¹ Parteiprogramm der Freiheitlichen Partei Österreichs (FPÖ), <https://www.fpoe.at/themen/parteiprogramm/>.

²² Handbuch freiheitlicher Politik, <https://www.fpoe.at/themen/handbuch-freiheitlicher-politik/>.

²³ <https://www.fpoe.at/themen/parteiprogramm/familie-und-generationen/>.

²⁴ Handbuch freiheitlicher Politik, 134.

²⁵ Appel 2000, Rosenberger et al. n.y.

²⁶ <https://www.fpoe.at/themen/parteiprogramm/parteiprogramm-englisch/>.

²⁷ Handbuch freiheitlicher Politik, 131.

²⁸ Handbuch freiheitlicher Politik, 142. There is no same-sex marriage in Austria but the constitutional court ruled in 2015 that same-sex couples are allowed to adopt children.

²⁹ Handbuch freiheitlicher Politik, 160.

³⁰ Handbuch freiheitlicher Politik, 50-54.

³¹ Howanietz, Michael (2013): Für ein freies Österreich. <http://nfz.fpoe.at/fur-ein-freies-osterreich-sou-eranitat-als-zukunftsmodell/37365969>.

³² Howanietz, 19.

³³ Howanietz, 119.

³⁴ Howanietz, 118.

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