

# Women really shine on the right.

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The misconception that women allow themselves to be used by the far right obscures the real problem: the left offers ambitious women and minorities insufficient opportunities to shine.



**AUTHOR**  
LAURA KEMP

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**A**lice Weidel, frontwoman of the far-right German party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), lives with her Sri Lankan wife Sarah and their two sons in

the picturesque Swiss mountain village of Einsiedeln. As political leader of the AfD, Weidel advocates for mass deportations of migrants. She wants to abolish same-sex marriage. Weidel presents herself as the guardian of the 'traditional German family', consisting of a father, a mother, and a few children.

The apparent contradiction between Weidel's life and her political ideas is not exceptional. Throughout Europe, (far-)right parties are led by women, whether or not they have a migration background.

Kemi Badenoch is now at the helm of the British Conservatives. As a potential next prime ministerial candidate, the Nigerian-British politician positions herself with far-right themes. For instance, she disputes that transatlantic slavery was a crime against humanity and encourages parents of children in disadvantaged neighborhoods to 'strictly discipline' their offspring.

The Italian anti-democratic movement broke through when divorced mother Giorgia Meloni took the helm at Fratelli d'Italia, a party that until recently identified itself as 'post-fascist'. Meloni wants to roll back emancipation. For instance, she blocked a law that would have granted fathers paid parental leave as well, and had non-biological parents (mostly LGBTQ+ people) removed from their children's birth certificates.

Here in the Netherlands, chemist Lidewij de Vos has been hoisted onto a pedestal as the leader of Forum for Democracy. The VVD is led by a woman who arrived at Schiphol by plane at a young age as a family member accompanying an asylum seeker. Under her leadership, the traditionally liberal VVD has settled into the camp of the far-right anti-migration and anti-emancipation parties.

## **Pinkwashing**

In feminist and left-wing circles, the rise of the radical right-wing woman has long been dismissed as the naivety of these women. The sentiment bordered on something that lies somewhere between misogyny and a sort of maternal (or paternal) savior complex.

The conversations sounded something like this: 'Don't those women see what is happening to them? They are being completely abused. They serve as poster children for a patriarchal project that ultimately restricts them themselves. They are *tokens*!'

# Radical right-wing women are not helpless victims of the system. They know exactly what they are doing.

Now that there are finally large-scale studies into the career paths, recruitment, and motives of right-wing women in politics, what is really at play is slowly becoming visible. Radical right-wing women are not helpless victims of the system. They know exactly what they are doing.

'Women have exactly the same motivations as men to enter politics on the '*far right*'' This is according to political scientist Dr. Sofia Ammassari of Griffith University in Australia. Her book, *Grassroots Women in the Populist Radical Right*, will be published in July of this year.

Ammassari spoke with more than one hundred radical right-wing party members and officials. She analyzed conversations with over ten thousand female members of, among others, the Italian nationalist Lega and the Swedish right-wing nationalists of Sverigedemokraterna.

The motives of far-right women turn out to be no different from those of their male colleagues. They want to save civilization for the next generation, preserve the nation-state, and protect 'the pure people' against pernicious external influences.

Once members, these women also turn out to be more active than men. They organize party meetings and charity dinners. And, importantly for the growth of the movement, women recruit new women through 'women's wings' within their parties.

This visible presence of women is a major political asset for the acceptance of far-right ideology. Researchers speak of *pinkwashing*: women give hardline views a friendly face. Women are simply less likely to be suspected of sexism, just as people of color are less likely to be accused of racism. Voters still associate women with caring and reasonableness. Which boils down to: if *she* says it, it can't be sexist.

Prominent members of both the Sverigedemokraterna and Lega were candid about this with Ammassari. 'Yes. We are strategically actively recruiting women. It is good for our electorate and for our image.'

## **What's left?**

It is painful to note that women who want to reach the top in (far-)right parties now have much better career opportunities than in their progressive counterparts.

## Moderately conservative parties seem to offer better career prospects to women than the left.

You only have to look at Europe to recognize the pattern. Giorgia Meloni is Italy's first female Prime Minister. In France, Marine Le Pen reached the second round of presidential elections multiple times. She positioned her party as the alternative for everyone who is fed up with the status quo.

Moderate conservative parties also seem to offer better career prospects to women than the left. Angela Merkel reached the highest political office in Germany as the leader of the conservative CDU. The Conservatives in the British House of Commons have already produced three female prime ministers with Thatcher, May, and Truss, whereas the left-wing Labour Party has never had a female party leader.

'This imbalance applies to the Netherlands as well,' says Devika Partiman, director of Stem op een Vrouw. 'Left-wing parties portray themselves as inclusive, but in practice, the internal culture often remains just as hierarchical and based on old networks, making it harder for newcomers and women to break through.'

White men still make too little room for women and minorities, as is also evident from the doctoral thesis on which political scientist Zahra Runderkamp obtained her PhD at the University of Amsterdam. For her research into the political representation of women and people with a migration background in the House of Representatives, she sifted through eighty-eight *maiden speeches*, interviewed (former) politicians, and studied letters of resignation.

What turns out?

For years, the House of Representatives has misjudged the difference between diversity and inclusion. Diversity is about percentages: how many women are in the House, on the list, or at the table. Those numbers are rising. Quotas are being met.

**Across the board, women and minorities are still structurally excluded.**

What happens next is only now becoming clear: dropouts. 'It is always the same people who leave the party early: women and minorities,' says Runderkamp. There

is little support. 'Once inside, everyone just has to figure it out for themselves.' Across the board, women and minorities are still structurally excluded.

Adding to this is the fact that politics is structured entirely around the lives and preferences of people without caregiving responsibilities. Late meetings, limited leave arrangements, no provisions for young mothers. Runderkamp: 'Combining politics with caregiving responsibilities, whether you are a woman or a man, is simply unsustainable.'

The fact that a sustainable and rewarding career for women on the left still leaves much to be desired evokes disappointment and frustration among women with great potential.

On the right, on the other hand, men sometimes see more clearly than their progressive colleagues why it makes sense to take a step back themselves to help an ambitious woman move forward. Thierry Baudet saved the image of his FvD by putting forward Lidewij de Vos, who until recently was completely unknown.

While Baudet made himself impossible with his theories about lizards and the moon landing, De Vos was warmly welcomed on radio and television during the campaigns. The right extends a hand to ambitious young women because having a woman at the helm is considered to be of strategic added value. As a result, women and minorities on the right have a better understanding of the deal, says Partiman. 'They do not necessarily receive more respect there and hold far fewer positions within the party on average. But whoever finds their way up can indeed become party leader and prime minister.'

**Women of color or with a migration background have traditionally faced racism and sexism.**

### **Double exclusion**

The question remains why women and minorities are drawn to ideologies that run counter to their own interests. African American scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw has been writing about this since the 1980s: women of color or with a migration background have traditionally faced racism *and* sexism.

Double exclusion, then.

And it is precisely this that makes it particularly tempting for some of these women to conform to the norms of the dominant group. Even when these norms come at the expense of the opportunities of the young (migrant) women who come after them.

This phenomenon now has a name. In the last century, the Turkish gender scholar Deniz Kandiyoti described it as the *patriarchal bargain*. This entails adopting the dominant language: 'I am not like other women.' Or: 'I find racism excessive,' or: 'I am against preferential treatment for disadvantaged people.'

By prioritizing their own political opportunities over the emancipation of the group from which they originate, they discredit the women who do stand up for their own communities. A politician's choice to politically position herself on the far right therefore not only runs counter to her personal interests; it is an undermining of the emancipation struggle as a whole.

## **Cloudy**

The misconception that radical right-wing parties are male strongholds and their female leaders naive tokens obscures the view of the real problem. While the right produces female prime ministers and chancellors, the left offers ambitious women insufficient opportunities to develop their potential. If progressive parties are serious about the struggle for emancipation, they will do everything in their power to bring progressive women to the top. Otherwise, right-wing women will pull the ladder up behind them for the young girls.

## **Correction**

As the cover image of our digital weekly issue of April 17 and above an earlier version of this article, an illustration of the Forum for Democracy election poster was placed, as we frequently saw it in the streets during the election campaign. The image of Lidewij de Vos, adorned with a Hitler moustache by passers-by.

In hindsight, we as the editorial team were unhappy with this choice. We are highly critical of the views of Forum for Democracy. However, the depicted image did not align sufficiently with the thrust of the story. Moreover, the drawing was interpreted differently by many readers than intended.

Therefore, we have decided to withdraw the original image.

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