Politics of Reversal:
Dangerous Convergences of Gender and Race in Migration and Feminist Politics

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ABSTRACT: *Right-wing politicians who speak out for women's rights while attacking emancipatory feminist politics appear to be a contradiction. Nevertheless, studies show that this is a widespread Western phenomenon in fact. It represents a discursive construction, one that Suvi Keskinen understands as a »politics of reversal«: namely as »the adoption and rearticulation of central feminist ideas […] to promote racist agendas« (2018, 161). However, racialized and culturalist gender discourses and images cannot only be found in the context of far-right parties and groups that can be easily and readily defined as »femonationalists« (ibid.). Rather, we can observe »dangerous convergences« of gender and race across the political spectrum, especially in the context of feminist and migration politics. These convergences, how they are produced within feminist as well as migration-related social fields, plus how they circulate and hence structure policies and politics are the focus of this article. We argue that culturalist and racializing gender discourses within current migration and feminist politics reinforce each other—whether intended or not. Hereby several incidences of sections of the international feminist movement deliberately opting for (racial) alliances with the state and law and order policies are illustrated.*

Introduction

» By your politically correct, culturally sensitive silencing you are complicit in the loss of women's rights and liberties that have been hard won over centuries«[1] said Mariana Harder-Kühnel, member of the party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), in the parliamentary debate taking place on the occasion of International Women's Day 2022. She finished her critique of the current government with the request to stop »mass migration from archaic cultures,« which from her point of view is not a phenomenon compatible with the fight for women's rights. During the last few years the AfD has made repeated requests for forced marriage and female genital mutilation to be combated.[2] Such narratives orientalize sexualized violence against women as a practice supposedly only happening in migrant contexts, and use it as a key trope to prove their »backwardness« and »cultural incompatibility« with

Western, allegedly women-friendly societies—tendencies many studies have highlighted by now (Erdem 2009, 187; Petzen 2012).

Right-wing politicians who speak out for women's rights in the German parliament and use feminist topics and narratives while criticizing emancipatory politics as »gender madness« appear to be a contradiction (Lang 2018). Nevertheless, as scholars have also indicated, this is a widespread Western phenomenon in fact (Keskinen 2018; Sager 2018; Ticktin/ Tudor 2021). It represents a discursive construction, one that Suvi Keskinen understands as a »politics of reversal«: namely as »the adoption and rearticulation of central feminist ideas […] to promote racist agendas« (2018, 161). However, as we will argue, such racialized and culturalist gender discourses and images about the »dangerous patriarchal migrant man« and the »helpless vulnerable (migrant) woman« who needs saving are not only be found in the context of far-right parties and groups that can be easily and readily defined as »femonationalists« (ibid.).

Rather, we can observe »dangerous convergences« of gender, race, and migration across the political spectrum, which Miriam Ticktin and Alyosxa Tudor (2021) also note as being one main characteristic of the contemporary political conjuncture they call »right-wing times.« These right-wing times can be understood as »regimes,« per Ticktin and Tudor, that force race, migration, gender, and sexuality into the same frame of reference (ibid., 1648 – 1649). For Germany, the discourse following the events of New Year's Eve 2015 became paradigmatic of this convergence: it produced the mediated figure and trope of a »toxic masculinity« in relation to refugees and laid the discursive grounds for a new surge in »sexual panic« politics as a vital resource in promoting racist agendas (see also, Dietze 2016). Precisely this specific gendering of the asylum and migration discourse—wherein certain feminist actors like Alice Schwarzer were heavily involved—contributed to problematizing the »long summer of migration« and led to a subsiding of the country's hitherto welcoming attitude (Willkommenskultur).[3]

These culturalist perspectives are not only powerful in more or less mainstream and liberal discourses on migration as well as in feminist debates: they also form a decisive narrative and lens helping structure European and European Union migration policies. These framings and convergences, how they are produced within feminist as well as migration-related social fields, plus how they circulate and hence structure policies and politics are the focus of this article. We argue that culturalist and racializing gender discourses within current migration and feminist politics reinforce each other—whether intended or not. In a first step, we show how gender entered the political field of EU migration and border policies long before its recent discursive conjuncture in the aftermath of the 2015 events quickly labeled a »European refugee crisis.« Hereby we will demonstrate how the EU migration and border regime could draw on an alliance between itself and certain feminist positions—especially within the field of politics seeking to counter violence against women—long before the events of 2015/2016, when gender and sexuality now reappeared in public discourse as a central analytical lens (Hess et al. 2016; Elle/Müller 2019).

In a second step, we then demonstrate how the production and depreciation of the »cultural Other« has always been constitutive of the Western feminist movement and is kind of a long-produced »blind spot« that can be easily instrumentalized to justify nationalist anti-immigration policies. Even though this orientalizing narrative continuously structures certain feminist discourses to a great extent, there is also a growing awareness within the heterogeneous feminist movement about the core dilemma that comes along with such narratives: namely that the critique of sexism in racialized contexts always runs the risk of being instrumentalized for nationalist and racist political agendas, and as such is silenced

altogether. We shed light on different strategies to deal with this danger—María do Mar Castro Varela and Nikita Dhawan speak here of a »tricky situation« (2016, 21)—of playing into the hands of right-wing politics as a feminist.

In a third and final step, the reasons for these »dangerous convergences« are explored. We argue that the mutually reinforcement and affirmation of these two political fields—of migration and feminist politics—through culturalist and racialized gender discourses is embedded within a certain political configuration in Europe: the current hegemony of post-liberal racist politics drawing on supposed European values like gender equality and the acceptance of homosexuality.

The analysis presented here draws on the material derived from two empirical-research endeavors. The two authors conducted their respective projects independently from one another and only developed their common argument beginning with this article. The first such endeavor is based on 15 years of research on the EU border and migration regime and its gendered dimensions (Hess 2010, 2013), with focus mainly on a recent three-year project on »Gender, Forced Migration & the Politics of Reception« conducted by Sabine Hess and Johanna Elle (2020). By applying a praxeological and intersectional approach, one based on notions of the anthropology of policy as well as of legal anthropology, the two research-ers explored how gender narratives were used by different actors in the field with highly ambivalent repercussions and contradictory material effects.[4] The insights of these studies inspired the analyses of the first section below.

The second such endeavor, meanwhile, is an ongoing research project on »Ambivalent Gender Knowledge — Negotiations of Cultural Difference in Feminist Initiatives of the Post-migrant Society« conducted by Miriam Gutekunst. This actor-centered and praxeological study looks at feminist initiatives that are engaged in struggles against forms of so-called culture-based violence like forced marriage or female genital mutilation. It aims to scrutinize the gender knowledge of these initiatives, as crucial sites for the (re)production and negotia-tion of knowledge about the relationship between gender and cultural difference.[5]

When Protection Turns into Exclusion: The Allying of Agents of Migration Control and Western Feminist Movements

Already in 2008 Ticktin would analyze for France how culturalist gender narratives, exter-nalizing and racializing patriarchal violence as deeply rooted in the culture of the »Mus-lim Other,« were increasingly being used to argue for and legitimate restrictive migration policies. Sexuality and gender, as she put it, had become the »language of border control« (Ticktin 2008, 1). This served to produce alliances between government actors and sections of the Western feminist movement.

An extensive literature in Migration Studies has shown how gender and sexuality are core factors structuring migration experiences and projects and how, vice versa, migra-tion structures gender relations and practices too. Yet, there is still no broadly established research agenda that considers border/migration control, gender, and sexuality intersec-tionally (Shekhawat/Del Re 2017). While there have been a few anthologies and research endeavors working thoroughly from a gender-analytical perspective in Refugee Studies in recent years (Freedmann 2016; Buckley-Zistel/Krause 2017; Freedmann et al. 2019), the analytical category of »gender / sexual orientation« has not yet appeared among interna-tional border studies—a handful of exceptions aside (Luibhéid 2002, 2013; Shekhawat/Del Re 2017; Gutekunst 2018). If gender and sexuality do appear in such works, they often do so

by specifically addressing forms of discrimination, suppression, (gender-based and sexualized) violence, and suffering (see also, the critique by Saleh 2020).

This kind of perspective has not only far-reaching consequences for the populations addressed in these ways but significant epistemological effects too. Gender and sexuality hereby again remain »the Other« of the border regime—its objects. Such an empirical perspective fails to illuminate how the border regime itself is based on the articulation of gender relations as well as on »gender expertise«[6] (FitzGerald/Freedman 2021) and as such how gender and sexuality have been strategically invoked and performed in the attempt to regulate and control migration and refugee movements ever since the 1990s (Hess et al. 2022).

Thereby the specific architecture and rationale of migration and border policies that have been gradually harmonized within the EU context since the so-called Schengen Treaty of 1985 must be considered here. To cut a long, complex, and contradictory story short (Lahav/Guiraudon 2000; Lavenex 2004; Hess/Tsianos 2007), the creation of an external EU border regime on the one hand as well as a »Common European Asylum System« on the other—as grounded in international and European legal standards for protection such as the Geneva Refugee Convention—opened up the space for gender-based narratives to emerge. Migration control, especially how it was thought of and propagated at the turn of the millennium within European and global think tanks as »migration management« (Geiger/Pecoud 2010), was based on the technocratic vision of an »orderly migration« and the »new governance« logics (Hess/Karakayali 2007). It was envisioned as a clean, selective process[7] taking into consideration, to a certain extent, both the protective aspects of the Refugee Convention and, since the late 1990s, also of the growing field of anti-trafficking policies (Bahl et al. 2010; FitzGerald 2010; Hess 2012).

As a result, the European border regime was based on a mix of security-oriented and humanitarian discourses and practices from the very beginning—albeit to varying degrees (Ticktin 2011a; Walters 2011; Perkowski 2018). While linking these rationales is not free of contradictions, they intersect and are closely entangled in helping to build a »humanitarian-security nexus,« as Andersson (2017) argues. Also, the recent highly restrictive policies implemented to restabilize the European border regime after its near-collapse in 2015 were introduced to the public as »humanitarian measures«—that is, as ones designed to save lives by preventing refugees from taking the risky journey across international borders in the first place.

In retrospect, it is possible to see the suggestively titled »Secure Borders, Safe Haven« paper published by the United Kingdom's Home Office in 2002 as an early discursive initiation of this political rationale. The paper not only argued for a policy of externalizing migration control to countries of transit and origin—a rationale and practice forming ever since one of the main pillars of the EU border regime—but it did so by coining it as protection for migrants on the move. The paper in particular employed a gendered rhetoric by especially drawing on the discourse of anti-trafficking in women and employing the figure of the »victim of trafficking« (FitzGerald 2012) that, as Heli Askola analyses, »experienced an almost meteoric rise onto the EU agenda [in these years]« (2007, 204). The paper does so by outlining the »high vulnerability« of the female migrating body, directly coupling women's migration with their trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation (FitzGerald 2012, 232). The migration movement of women was not only presented as extremely dangerous but also as occurring against their will, a narrative that firmly structures the discourse and imagination of the gendered nature of migration. The consequence hereof is the construction of the figure of the »passive, helpless, more or less forced migrant woman« who is somehow better off staying in her country of origin (see Andrijašević 2009, 2012).[8]

This chosen phrasing of protection and saving migrant women found strong resonance even with feminist and humanitarian actors. FitzGerald (2010) as well as Ticktin noted how the figure of the female victim of sexualized violence had become the »model subject of aid« (2011b, 250) since the turn of the millennium. As Ticktin (2011a) also revealed, this corresponded with emerging political orientations within the international women's movement seeking a »compromise« between the Global North and the Global South by putting the focus on bodily integrity and a »politics of the body.« This represented a turning away from addressing international socioeconomic relations of exploitation. As she continued: »What emerged was a victim-subject, particularly one of sexual harm, seen in isolation from other injustices or forms of exploitation — this was the only way to get around the tensions between the feminist movements in the North and the South« (ibid., 17). This political shift from a »politics of social justice« to a »politics of the body« (ibid., 250) would have significant consequences.

The transformation underway was accompanied also by a further narrowing of the complex of »violence.« As intersectional feminist studies have noted, the structural socioeconomic aspects of violence—as affecting women from the Global South, racialized, socially marginalized women from the Global North, and LGBTIQ+ persons more heavily than privileged white women—have been increasingly ignored in the narratives of violence propagated within the international women's movement (Castro Varela/Dhawan 2016; Olivius 2017). In their place, articulations of violence have started to dominate political discourse and practice that rather one-dimensionally link it to the »public-private divide« and emphasize forms of interpersonal, body-related, sexualized, and domestic violence (Hall 2015). This is also reflected in the norm-building processes of international humanitarian organizations such as UNHCR, seemingly structuring public and political discussions nowadays on the specific needs and vulnerabilities of refugee women (Miller 2004; Olivius 2017).

This problematic oversimplification of violence and migration would lead to an ambivalent rapport between activists working to counter violence against women and the border regime, which we characterized in previous research as situative, uncanny work alliances (see also, Bahl et al. 2010; Aradau 2004). In consequence, the success of feminist anti-trafficking campaigns in the EU and United Nations arenas, at the beginning of the new century, came at a high price, since it was based on alliances with security- and migration policy actors, as Helen Schwenken's (2006) research shows as well. Especially the signing of the Palermo Protocol in 2000 was »the target of heavy feminist lobbying,« as Jo Doezema, a sex workers‹ rights activist, remembered (2002a, 20); meanwhile »two camps,« a »neo-abolitionist« and a »human rights-focused« one, were competing with their positions. It is beyond the scope of this paper to interrogate the ideological positions of the diverse actor involved in these globally organized networks here. However, researchers as FitzGerald and Freedman show how the »former position on prostitution [has] dominate[d] the policy debate [ever since]« (2021, 442).

Those responsible were so successful as they were able to frame the issue as a »threat to national security,« and as such as a question of »law and order«—meaning one for border and immigration policy. Like Schwenken (2006), Ticktin (2011b) indicates how this pertains to specific women's or feminist groups that increasingly draw on the state and particularly the judicial system—including UN fora and internationally dominant human rights regimes. Janet Halley et al. (2006) describe these practices and strategies to advance feminist political agendas by aligning them with wider state concerns as »governance feminism«—that is, as one that situates feminist positions within the regulatory politics of the state. Already in 2002, Doezema would ask at a conference being held at the University of Ghent:

»As trafficking is increasingly being used by governments and even by NGOs as an excuse for repressive policies, NGOs are left wondering: Where did we go wrong?« (2002b, 1).

This policy, also locally based on the cooperation between feminist groups and the law-enforcement apparatus, has not only lead to the criminalization of migrants perceived as human traffickers or smugglers but also, indeed, harmed those meant to enjoy protection (Andrijašević 2012; Hess 2012). Fadi Saleh describes a similar entanglement of global queer politics and the humanitarian field in the context of the Syrian exodus, creating what he calls »the figure of the suffering Syrian gay refugee« (2020, 1). In his research, Saleh illustrates the far-reaching repercussions of this discourse and political practice for the subjects addressed by a UN system that enforces on them performing suffering for protection (ibid.).

The Year 2015 and the Emerging »Dispositive of Vulnerability« in Migration Politics

Since the mass-migration movements of 2015, European media outlets, policymakers, and NGOs have increasingly paid attention to the question of »gender,« understood as mainly women and LGBTIQ+-specific experiences and structures in the context of forced migration and refugee-reception policies. Not only have women and LGBTIQ+ people become visible in the media coverage of refugee migrations (Elle/Müller 2019) but it has also been possible to observe a genuine boom in national and local programs and concepts addressing gender (and to a lesser extent sexuality) specifically in reception policies—and particularly regarding women. This we were able to earlier demonstrate for the German context (Elle/Hess 2020; on Sweden, see Olivius 2017).

The tropes informing the renewed gender debates emerging in the wake of the events of 2015/2016 show striking similarities to the previous ones outlined above, since they have also been limited to »protection« and »violence.« A review of the most recent publications in the realms of gender, forced migration, and border studies reveals that the trope of »gender-based violence« across these research contexts seems to once again have become the main perspective in the emerging field of gender-border-refugee studies, as titles such as *Gender, Violence, Refugees* (Buckley-Zistel/Krause 2017; see also, Freedman 2016) demonstrate. No doubt, there is a specific »migration-violence nexus« (Freedman 2019, 128) ensuing from restrictive externalized border policies, as Alison Gerard and Sharon Pickering (2014) convincingly point out. This migration-violence nexus causes particular challenges, difficulties, and forms of suffering for refugee women, children, LGBTIQ+ people, and other discriminated-against groups. It represents a »continuum of violence« from the context of origin to the presumed arenas of destination and reception (Krause 2012). The recent volume by Seema Shekhawat and Emanuela C. Del Re (2017), with its ten studies primarily on the relationship between gender, violence, and borders, makes clear that the border regime is indeed highly gendered, insofar as it produces specific gendered experiences, practices, and subjects/subjectivities.

However, the redundant invocation of violence as the only border experience of women, homosexual, and gender-variant persons pushes questions of practice, agency, and contestation aside, and reduces the range of accepted self-presentations. It also drastically denies the violence male-positioned and -attributed migrants experience per the ever more brutalizing forms of border deterrence deployed on the ground (Turner 2016). The forms of direct, interpersonal violence increasingly practiced in border zones operate along a »gender-race-religion« axis of differentiation that targets especially persons read as »male« and

»non-Christian,« as Simon Lauer (2020) was able to demonstrate in a recent ethnography (see also, Augustová/Sapoch 2020).

It produces as well new, highly normative images and categories that have far-reaching effects. This is true also in the asylum procedure and in related jurisdiction, forming a normative template against which self-narrations and persecution are measured and potentially discarded (cf. Hübner 2016; Schittenhelm 2018). As our own research shows, these reductive images and categorizations are paramount in the NGO and volunteer scene too, greatly affecting how projects are structured and the way »support« is understood and hence performed (Elle/Hess 2020).

With the rising focus on violence, »vulnerability« has gained—as a new *terminus technicus*—increasing significance among humanitarian professionals, volunteers, as well as actors working in the reception and asylum systems. As has already been shown (Butler et al. 2016; FitzGerald 2011), the term has specific origins in feminist discourse and epistemology. Yet, it developed as well into one of the most dominant political and operational terms for the post-2015 border and asylum regime—and this against the backdrop of acute refugee rights violations and cutbacks to procedural rights, as the dominant mode of response employed by the EU and its member states (Hess 2021). The tropes of »vulnerable groups« and »vulnerability« have played a crucial role on the legal level too. In a political and legal context characterized by a wide range of official, legally coded, as well as informal attempts by state agents to reduce access for people on the move to the international asylum-protection system, the category »vulnerability« and the ascription of being »vulnerable« were among the few means left to acquire humanitarian attention and protection. This was the case for arriving refugee migrants on the Aegean Islands (Antonakaki et al. 2016; Hänsel 2019)[9] as well as along the Hungarian-Serbian border—where the label »vulnerable« constituted one of the last available chances to access Hungary's asylum system (Beznec et al. 2016). These empirical insights demonstrate how a »dispositive of vulnerability« emerged that softens the dismantling of legal-protection standards and serves as a means for state agents and politicians to pretend to still follow a humanitarian rationale (Hess/Kasparek 2017).

On the other hand, as our research on Germany illuminates, the heightened sensitivity to gender, women-related concerns, and to the needs of vulnerable groups in the reception process was seemingly a window of opportunity to elaborate the »Minimum Standards for the Protection of Refugees in Refugee Shelters« (Mindeststandards zum Schutz von geflüchteten Menschen in Flüchtlingsunterkünften). This brought together a broad coalition of feminist organizations, welfare institutions, UNICEF, and even the Ministry for Family Affairs (2017). However, the federal as well as state-level concepts that have mushroomed in the wake of this sensitivity have not moved past the recommendation stage, so there are still no clear and homogenous rules and standards in place.[10] The implementation of protection measures is still at the discretion of the individual operator of shelters and it remains up to the wider NGO scene to inaugurate another temporary project. As such, protection measures guaranteed by international and European legislation are still not formally ratified and homogenously implemented under German law (Elle/Hess 2020; PRO ASYL 2021). A significant gap currently exists, therefore, between increased sensitivity and rhetoric on the one hand and practical implementation on the other with respect to refugee reception and accommodation policy in Germany (Elle/Hess 2020).

Additionally, there is still no secured financing for gender-/sexuality-related support infrastructures and activities in the context of refugee reception—as women's NGOs noted in interviews (ibid.). As such, relevant parties are forced to play along with a vocabulary anchored in the »dispositive of vulnerability.« This logic practically compels the (re)pro-

duction of the image of the passive, refugee woman in need of and deserving protection. Furthermore, many programs and activities follow the reductive understanding of violence outlined above and focus more or less on domestic and interpersonal forms thereof among the refugee population itself—thus negating the structural factors of the asylum and camp system, for example the lack of privacy in overcrowded camps and prohibition on working in combination with a general legal precarity and insecurity regarding even imagining a future, as refugee women kept on highlighting in interviews with Elle (Hess/Elle 2023).

This reductionist approach is often inspired by an orientalizing, culturalist, and ethnicized understanding of gender relations and practices linked to the above-outlined notions of backwardness and patriarchal cultures. This again draws on colonial legacies, rearticulating them as the »white woman's burden« to today liberate migrated women from their ostensibly patriarchal cultures (cf. Farris 2017; Braun 2019). As such, the heightened sensitivity to the gendered aspects of flight and migration in the context of the 2015/16 refugee migration movement rather led to a reinforcement of processes of the Othering and racialization of sexual and gender politics based on a Western self-perception of being »gender-equality champions.« Accordingly, those concerned not only have to protect other women but also to teach them how to emancipate themselves.

It is also important to note that even though gender—in these contexts, addressed at women's and sometimes LGBTIQ+ concerns—has taken on greater visibility and relevance in public and political discourses as well as in practical work with refugees, it is only marginally associated with a more powerful voice for these persons themselves. Refugee women and LGBTIQ+ people are rarely allowed to participate in the discourse and are not treated as experts and competent actors in the political arena who can equally take their place at the discussion table (Women in Exile 2019). Since »the victims,« as Ticktin (2011a) has shown, are purest in their passivity, they all too quickly lose their intrinsic victim quality once they actually speak out. In the following section, we will show that the heightened discussion and visibility of gender in the wake of the recent migration and asylum debate gaining momentum in Europe found as well another key focus in problematizing migrant masculinity and connecting it further with violence and criminality. Here as well, certain sections of the wider feminist movement were spearheads of formulating the trope of a »toxic migrant masculinity« (Dietze 2016).

The Production of the »Cultural Other« as an »Ignored Blind Spot«[11] of the White Women's Movement

In the process of making »Cologne« a central argument in the anti-immigration security discourse in Germany after the events of New Year's Eve 2015, feminist actors played a crucial role here—most notably Schwarzer, a key figure in the second women's movement and editor-in-chief of the feminist magazine *EMMA*. Sabine Hark and Paula-Irene Villa describe her reaction to these events as a form of essentializing feminism, »[one] that is not so much critically responding to ressentiment-filled, othering dynamics in society as it is contributing to them« (2020, 78). In her 2016 book about what happened in Cologne, Schwarzer refers to the perpetrators as »North Africans and Arabs« and explains their behavior as being due to their Islamic background, speaking of »Sharia Muslims« and even »Islamists« (2016, 17ff.). She describes the harassment as »acts of terror« and appreciates more restrictive migration measures—concretely the classification of Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia as »safe countries of origin«[12]—as well as harsher penalties explicitly for young male migrants (ibid., 27ff.).

Hereby Schwarzer reproduces not only gendered anti-immigrant and Islamophobic sentiment about the »dangerous Arab man« that can be easily instrumentalized but she is even deliberately complicit in supporting anti-immigration security policies. The culturalization of gender (Dietze 2017) comes along with the self-conception of being gender-equal and emancipated: Schwarzer speaks of our »enlightened« countries to whose shores men from traditionally misogynist cultures arrive (2016, 33). This narrative wherein the »cultural Other« stands for backwardness and in need of development while one's own culture is civilized and progressive dates back to colonial times. Liz Fekete (2006) termed this »enlightened fundamentalist.« The use of clearly »femonationalist« arguments by those like Schwarzer or Necla Kelek—who also published an article in Schwarzer's book about Cologne, further to having appeared alongside the racist politician Thilo Sarrazin in the past—is a phenomenon that can be traced back to the 1990s originally. Back then, women's rights activists started to criticize a too-liberal multiculturalism and called for more restrictive migration and integration policies (Razack 2004; Hess et al. 2009; Lentin/Titley 2011; Sauer 2011).

This ambivalent positioning of feminist actors—if not altogether based on an outright racial positioning and claim to European superiority (Rommelspacher 1995; Fuchs/Habinger 1996; Petzen 2012)—can be read as a kind of unchallenged »byproduct« of the long engagement of the women's movement against gender-specific violence. In fact, in the first instance, the critiquing of a too-narrow societal understanding of »violence,« the consequential problematization of the phenomenon within familiar and intimate relationships, as well as the combating of instances of it constituted important successes of the second women's movement no doubt. This increased sensitization also led to a new focus on violence perpetrated against migrant women in Western Europe in the 1990s (Sauer 2008, 49). Labeled »harmful traditional practices,« phenomena like forced marriage, female genital mutilation, and honor killings increasingly became the focus of governments and supranational institutions like the EU and the UN, consequently now being more extensively prosecuted (ibid., 49f.).

Esra Erdem (2009, 188) writes that migrant feminists were surprised about this new attention being paid to such phenomena: despite their long-term grassroots work, nobody had been interested in the situation of migrant women until it was taken up by this emerging alliance. She criticizes the fact that the racialized debate around »harmful traditional practices«—interpreted as signs of »failed integration«—did not help the affected women per se, rather only conservative politicians. The latter capitalized on these circumstances to legitimate restrictive anti-immigration measures—like those on marriage-related migration introduced at the turn of the millennium (Sauer 2008, 51). These campaigns strongly contributed to the continued demonization of migrant men, to the victimization of migrant women, and to the culturalization of gender-specific violence as outlined above. However, and despite these public debates and revisions to migration and criminal law, opportunities for the effective prevention of violence and the protection of afflicted women, children, and LGBTIQ+ persons in the fields of migration and flight remain insufficient to this day (Elle/Hess 2020; PRO ASYL 2021).

The described intersections between feminist practice and nationalist, anti-immigrant policies are strongly entangled with the production and depreciation of the »cultural Other« within Western feminism. This Othering practice can be understood as a central historical »ignored blind spot« of that movement. Gabriele Dietze (2014) showed in her study of the United States context that women's rights groups and racial-emancipation movements have been intertwined since their inception in the nineteenth century, and they have always been antagonistic. The racist narrative of »white/female civilizational superiority«—

remaining potent to this day—was a central aspect of white women's politics at that time (ibid., 19). While their »Othering« of black women—first criticized by the enslaved freedom activist Sojourner Truth (1851)—was based on biological notions of race, in the second half of the twentieth century it was subsequently replaced by an essentialist understanding of culture (Balibar 1990). The practice of cultural Othering would be constitutive of the second women's movement as well (Hügel/Lange 1993; FeMigra 1994; Kalpaka/Räthzel 1994; Uremovič/Oerter 1994; Eichhorn/Grimm 1995; Gümen 1997; Gelbin/Kader/Piesche 1999).[13]

Birgit Rommelspacher (2010) recalls how in the 1970s the accusation of being rooted in archaic patriarchy and unable to emancipate was directed at Jews within the women's movement too, while in the 1990s women from the former East Germany would become the target of the same logic. Black women faced similar rejection within second-wave feminism (Kelly 2019; Lorde 2019 [1984]). The literature shows that feminists have hugely contributed to the orientalist, gendered stereotyping of Islamic people and strengthened the logic that Muslim women are in need of saving (Abu-Loghud 2002; Petzen 2012; Kulaçatan 2020). This has happened to such an extent that Muslim womanhood and liberty are now considered incompatible in the hegemonic Western feminist discourse (Castro Varela/Dhawan 2016, 17).

Even though such culturalist Othering has a longer history of affecting different groups of people over time, the situation has changed insofar as, according to Rommelspacher, certain feminist critiques of Islam find nowadays—at the latest since 9/11 (Abu-Loghud 2002)—the backing of a large majority of society as well as extensive support from very different political groups (2010). The »Muslim man« has hereby become a central target of surveillance and disciplining (Razack 2004, 130). Another result of this dynamic is the rendering invisible and overlooking of the self-organized migrant, as well as of the Black and Jewish feminist movements that were fairly active in the 1980s and 1990s. Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodriguez and Pinar Tuzcu criticize this neglect in their book *Migrant Feminism* (2021), which is a collection of marginalized voices speaking from within different feminist movements. Despite their multiple activities and interventions, these decades are seen as »silent time« in the dominant narrative about the women's movement in the German context (Rodriguez/Tuzcu 2021). In the debate arising after the 2015 events in Cologne, it was also noticeable that the perspectives of migrant women and women of color—who face sexual harassment as well as racist attacks in their everyday lives (Castro Varela/Dhawan 2016)—remained heavily silenced.[14]

The Dilemma of Unintended Alliances in Feminist Politics

Against this backdrop, feminists find themselves in a core dilemma that gives rises to the following key concern: How to address sexism in racialized contexts like Black, Muslim, or migrant communities without reproducing racist paradigms? And, how to address racism without neglecting sexism in racialized contexts? Drawing on empirical examples from my research,[15] I will illustrate how certain feminist groups currently handle this dilemma. Revealed is the fact that while awareness of this tricky situation is omnipresent in the German feminist movement(s), there are quite different strategies employed to deal with it: One is to acknowledge the uncertainty resulting from this dilemma and try to integrate the full complexity of race and gender relations into own feminist practice. This means, concretely, a form of de-essentialization. Another approach is to quell the uncertainty resulting from this dilemma by rejecting criticism and ignore the social effects of one's own speaking and writ-

ing. Islam and related topics like the veil or forced marriage, but also ideas of a supposedly »backward« Muslim masculinity, constitute a gender-political focal point in this context.

The public debate after the events of New Year's Eve 2015 in Cologne led to a form of uncertainty and even feelings of helplessness within certain feminist contexts. While the political closeness to conservative through right-wing thinking and politics is clear in the case of Schwarzer and Kelek, the subsequent cultural essentialization of gender as well as rise of femonationalism have affected also feminist contexts where relevant actors position themselves as left-wing and eschew anti-immigration sentiment and racist political agendas. For example the Frauenkultur e.V. in Leipzig—a sociocultural feminist center engaged in tackling racism since the 1990s—reacted as one of the few institutions and groups directly to do so to the aforementioned dilemma with an event held in May 2018. It brought together representatives from different feminist institutions combating gender-specific violence. They discussed, per the event flyer, the »question of how to deal with sexual harassment from a feminist point of view as well as the desire for answers, arguments, and discussion without ›giving food‹ to the right or *being ourselves pushed into a racist corner.*«[16]

One of the discussants, a member of a women's advisory center, described the outlined dilemma and resulting uncertainty as follows, in drawing on the example of the legal changes enacted after Cologne: The events of New Year's Eve 2015 were used to legitimate the implementation of more restrictive asylum policies and, at the same time, the reforming of the law governing sexual offenses. Feminists had been fighting for the latter for decades in Germany, which is why the discussant called Cologne also a »racist stirrup«[17] for this particular achievement. A representative of the Women's Emergency Hotline spoke, meanwhile, about young women who are active in providing refugee aid and sometimes get harassed by migrant men, but do not talk about it for the fear of contributing to blanket stigmatization. In consultation they try to take such incidents seriously and encourage the affected women to talk about it, but also to be always aware of the pitfalls of such cases and to analyze the situation and the conditions at hand in detail.

On their flyer, the event organizers also prominently wrote that »›violence against women‹ as a phenomenon cannot be traced back to nationality.« In this context, feminist actors—who were mostly practitioners—took the danger of perpetuating racism seriously, attempted to deal with the surrounding uncertainty, and sought solutions on how best to integrate the intersectional complexity of sexualized violence into their feminist practices. This works sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse. However, the attitude displayed here is one of acknowledging the aforementioned dilemma of entanglements between racism and certain notions of feminism and a will »to unlearn what we thought was right« (Hark/Villa 2020, 105). Castro Varela and Dhawan conclude that there is no »good solution« in these circumstances. Rather, it is important to do always both: »The disclosure of racist practices and the thematization of violence against women (and other vulnerable subjects) within flight migration and diasporic communities« (Castro Vela/Dhawan 2016, 25f.).

In other feminist contexts, we can also observe awareness of this dilemma. However, the handling of it is quite different: namely simply ignoring the dangers of reinforcing essentialist gender discourses rather than taking them seriously. The justification for such a strategy is mostly that anti-racist critiques would lead to the trivialization of sexism and sexualized violence. For example, Inge Bell—a member of the executive board of Terre des femmes—gave an interview in the context of a rape case in Freiburg in 2018 where, among others, men of Syrian citizenship were involved. Both right-wing actors and anti-racist groups subsequently took to the streets: the first against migration, the second against right-wing extremism and the instrumentalization of sexualized violence for racist agendas.

Bell criticized the second camp on the following grounds: »It's good that people go out onto the street against the far right, but we don't need anti-racism cosmetics that encourage the protection of the perpetrators.«[18] In the same interview, she emphasized also that »one must be allowed«—as she put it—to ask what role Islam plays here.

Another example of similar positioning is the work of the feminist writer Koschka Linkerhand. In her article »Traitors. On the status of feminist Islam critique« (2020),[19] the chosen starting point is her own experience with the accusation of being racist and reinforcing right-wing discourse when criticizing Islam or Muslim people—as articulated by queer and decolonial feminists (ibid., 1). She favorably highlights the *EMMA* feminism around Schwarzer that still focuses on »sexist grievances« and does not get distracted—from her point of view—by a »mistaken and incapacitating anti-racism« (ibid., 3). She sees an opportunity in forming interesting alliances with Muslim feminists like Sineb El Masra, but also with ex-Muslims like Kelek, Mina Ahadi, and Ayaan Hirsi Ali (ibid., 8). At the same time, she criticizes the »growing reconciliation [of *EMMA*] with the nation« (ibid., 3) as well as the insensitivity of Kelek and Hirsi Ali »to patriarchal structures in the West« and »their connectivity to right-wing, anti-Muslim politics« (ibid., 6).

Bell and Linkerhand are only two examples of a larger group of feminists who argue similarly, though they represent quite different political camps. The simultaneity of their radical positioning against versions of political Islam while also being aware of the risk of being used in racist discourses indicates a deliberate attempt to reduce the complexity of the diverse global space they speak to. It also represents a liberal misconception about the power one has to determine what the effects of own speech acts are—as it can no longer be ignored that anti-Islamic narratives are firmly »married« with racist agendas in the West.[20]

Floris Biskamp (2016, 2017) analyzed the dilemma surrounding public utterances about Islam in the German context. He pointed out that—regardless of the question of whether certain critiques of Islamic milieus are reasonable or not—talking about Islam in public has always to be understood as a social action carried out in a social context that has also social effects: »It is less about what the speaking subject *wants to do*—intended or not—but rather what it *does* with its speech«[21] (Biskamp 2017, no page). The public use of essentializing notions about the dangerous Muslim man and the oppressed Muslim woman—no matter by whom, and whether intended or not—*does* indeed reinforce culturalist neoracism as well as play into the hands of the right and their anti-immigration, nationalist security policies.

Answering the question of how to address sexism in racialized contexts, then, is not a simple undertaking. It is, indeed, one that gives rise to many issues and uncertainties. However, what becomes clear is the following: While the strategy of taking the dilemma seriously by integrating complexity into one's own practice and reflecting on the social effects of one's own speech is sometimes more muted (even running into the danger of being too silent to be heard), the strategy of ignoring the dilemma and perpetuating simplistic cultural-essentialist answers rings even louder in a society marked by »right-wing times.«

Conclusion: »White Border Guard« Feminisms?

In this article we have showed how culturalist notions of gender and the racialization of sexism within feminist politics—two discursive operations that stretch back to colonial times—have become virulent in the contemporary conjuncture. We outlined how the notion of »gender equality« was part and parcel of white women's claim to civilizational superiority. Sections of Western feminist movements have perpetuated this legacy ever since as part of

what we termed an »ignored blind spot.« We also illustrated how certain feminist projects that are framed in this one-dimensional way as a fight against sexism—in our case, especially campaigns seeking to counter sexualized violence against women—are connectable to law-and-order policies in the field of European migration control. This framing has not only led to a further securitization of migration but also helped to firmly establish a link between refugee migration as a sexual threat and a decoupling of European societies from those elsewhere considered still deeply patriarchal, reinforcing the white norm of self-identifying as »gender-equality champions.«

Critical race theory extensively illustrates that once race as such became taboo, especially after the atrocities of the Nazi regime in Europe, racial knowledge and racist narratives continued to work through »proxies« (Goldberg 2008). »Culture and gender [seemingly took] a prominent place in what has been called ›neoracism'« (Keskinen 2018, 158; see also, Pieper/Tsianos 2011). Addressing the transformative capacities of racism in the new millennium, Pieper, Tsianos, and Panagiotidis speak of a »postliberal racist configuration« (2011, 194ff) that is not only characterized by its flexible (re)combining of anti-immigrant, post-/neocolonial, anti-Semitic, and anti-Islamic narratives. Rather, these three authors convincingly demonstrated how this recent racist configuration, which Alana Lentin (2016) and others have even termed »postracial,« especially works by drawing on egalitarian tropes and narratives like gender equality or the acceptance of homosexuality (see also, Puar 2007). They converge in the disciplining of »postnational subjects,« and redefine the boundaries of belonging, citizenship, and the nation-state in ever more subtle ways (Erdem 2009; Pieper/Tsianos/Panagiotidis 2011).

Since the mass-migration movement of 2015 and its right-wing politicization as a »European refugee crisis,« we can observe a new wave of what David Goldberg (2006) called »racial Europeanization«—meaning a specific regional history of constructing Europe in racial terms, whereas migration is discursively positioned as one of the main threats hereto. Recently, migration has even been depicted as a »weapon« and »hybrid attack« against the sovereignty of European nation-states and cultures (Hess 2023). This reconnects the phenomenon of migration with the survival of European values in ever-closer ways. In this regard, Keskinen speaks of a »crisis of white hegemony« that fuels right-wing, racist movements overtly calling for the defense of European values—if necessary also by violent means, as seen in many places along the EU's external borders. Such sentiments also pop up, too, in gender-equality campaigns under titles like »Our equality, our rights« that target refugee communities (Hänsel/Hess/Elle 2022).

It is the same context that allows for the renewed appropriation and instrumentalization of feminist arguments and narratives by racist nationalist agendas, what Franziska Schutzbach coins »equality nationalism« (2018, 101). We are witnessing a new generation of right-wing women—using pop-culture elements and social media channels—who present themselves as »true feminists« (Rahner 2018, 8; AK Fe.In 2019). Hark and Villa describe this kind of activism as a »genuine historic novelty«—»instead of mobilizing against ›feminism', they mobilize against an academic concept: gender« (2020, 94). Meltem Kulaçatan emphasizes that such femonationalist actions—like the activism of the Identitarian women's group *#120db*—should not be understood as feminism at all, rather as an »abuse of women's rights concerns in order to enforce restrictive political measures in the context of a strategy to prevent the real recognition of the plural and open society« (2020, 159). In this context of what Ticktin and Tudor defined as the contemporary conjuncture of »right-wing-times« now forcing gender, migration, and race into the same frame of reference as a central axis in redrawing the boundaries of belonging and citizenship in Europe, feminists need to be

more aware than ever of the underlying potentiality for gender (equality) notions to be used in the »politics of reversal« that positions certain projects as »white border guard« feminisms (Keskinen 2018, 160).

Notes

1   All translations the authors‹ own unless otherwise indicated. German original: »Und durch ihr politisch korrektes kultursensibles Schweigen machen Sie sich mitschuldig daran, dass die über Jahrhunderte hart erkämpften Rechte der Frauen und Freiheiten der Frauen verloren gehen« (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k4TJJp6uhyw; 22:20 – 26: 45; last accessed December 1, 2022).

2   See, for example: https://www.bundestag.de/webarchiv/presse/hib/2020_11/808982 – 808982; https://www.parlament-berlin.de/ados/18/IIIPlen/vorgang/d18 – 2237.pdf; https://dserver.bundestag.de/btd/19/227/1922704.pdf (last accessed December 1, 2022).

3   For instance, when the Munich sociologist Armin Nassehi warned of a »masculinization of public spaces« (Die Welt 05.10.2015).

4   For the project description, see: https://www.gender-flucht.uni-osnabrueck.de/en/home.html (last accessed December 1, 2022).

5   For the project description, see: https://gepris.dfg.de/gepris/projekt/492003373?context=projekt&task=showDetail&id=492003373& (last accessed December 1, 2022).

6   Also, Sharron FitzGerald and Jane Freedman reflect on the instrumentalization of gender expertise in the field of EU anti-trafficking policies by pointing to the selectivity of which feminist voices and which gender expertise are being invited and which still are excluded. Especially human rights-focused feminist positions and migrant voices »are consistently refused voice in policy-making« (FitzGerald/Freedman 2021, 3, 10).

7   This dominant policy rationale of »migration management« was certainly accompanied on the ground by diverse rights abuses and violations of legal norms, as practiced by several national border guards; at the level of policymaking and »teaching« how to do »border management,« however, the vision of a »smart border« was the prevailing logic of the day.

8   Another example of this victimization of migrant women in order to legitimate restrictive migration measures on the basis of humanitarian arguments is the policy changes made in the context of marriage-related migration in Europe and North America since the beginning of the twenty-first century. Pretending to aim at protecting migrant women from forced marriage, exclusionary instruments like needing to present a language-proficiency certificate before entry would be introduced (D'Aoust 2013; Gutekunst 2015).

9   In November 2022 the Italian government ruled only »vulnerable« groups were allowed to disembark from rescue boats, with the consequence that single men were sent back onto the high seas: https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/italien-fluechtlinge-seenotrettung-humanity-1 – 1.5688011 (last accessed December 1, 2022).

10 In August 2019, after years of controversy, protection in refugee accommodation was finally included in the Residence Act. However, this is still a provision and not a binding directive. So far, it has neither been transposed into state legislation nor into municipal accommodation practice.

11 By terming this so, we draw here on critical race theory. The latter shows that the silencing of »racism,« even the rendering taboo for many years of the term itself in German public and academic debate, can be understood as a function of its working to help produce white ignorance and amnesia (Alexopoulou 2016).

12 According to the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees: »The law defines countries as safe countries of origin if it is possible to prove on the basis of the democratic system and of the general political situation that no state persecution is to be feared there as a rule, and that the State in question can provide protection against non-state persecution as a matter of principle« (BAMF 2018). Critical Migration scholars and researchers have demonstrated that this categorization mostly does not coincide with the genuine situation on the ground in these countries and with the lived realities of migrants themselves. This categorization is hence an important tool for lowering procedural as well as social rights in the asylum process (Hänsel/Hess 2019).

13 A very rich overview of the extensive literature on this debate can be found online at: https://www.rosalux.de/news/id/3860/fruehe-debatten-um-rassismus-und-antisemitismus-in-der-frauen-und-lesbenbewegung-in-den-1980er-jahren-der-brd (last accessed on December 1, 2022).

14 The voices of migrant women are only heard when they attest to the veracity of the dominant discourse: »The authentic voice speaks and says what the majority wants to hear« (Castro Varela/Dhawan 2016, 24).

15 »Ambivalent Gender Knowledge« by Miriam Gutekunst.

16 »Die Frage nach einem feministischen Umgang mit sexuellen Übergriffen, sowie der Wunsch nach Antworten, Argumenten und Diskussionen — ohne ›den Rechten Futter‹ zu geben oder *selbst in eine rassistische Ecke* gestellt zu werden.«

17 »Rassistischer Steigbügel.«

18 »Es ist gut, dass Menschen gegen rechts auf die Straße gehen, aber wir brauchen keine Antirassismuskosmetik, die Täterschutz befördert.« See: https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/plus183138074/Mutmassliche-Vergewaltigung-in-Freiburg-Lieb-gewonnener-Antirassismus-befoerdert-Taeterschutz.html (last accessed December 20, 2022).

19 »Nestbeschmutzerinnen. Zum Stand feministischer Islamkritik.«

20 For example, the veil has a different meaning in the German context—where anti-Islamic racism is quite prominent and women are attacked on the street for wearing it—compared to in the Iranian one, where women are forced to wear the hijab by the country's authoritarian regime.

21 »Es kommt weniger darauf an, was das sprechende Subjekt bewusst oder unbewusst tun will, sondern darauf, was mit dem Sprechen es *tut*.«

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