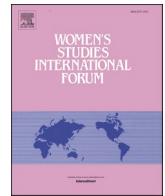


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# Women's Studies International Forum

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## Reproductive righteousness of right-wing movements: Global feminist perspectives

Radical right-wing movements are resurging around the globe across diverse cultural, economic, and religious contexts. Angry politics in far-right regimes are propelling illiberal movements by polarizing the people, capitalizing on catastrophe, and undermining democratic institutions (Ben-Ghiat, 2020; Edelman, 2020; Maskovsky & Bjork-James, 2020), and are doing so more successfully than any other political trend in decades (Spierings et al., 2015). How far-right extremism, which is far from being new, came to experience a distinct “moment” (Mouffe, 2018) in the twenty-first century has raised broad concern, with scholars focused on topics such as gender (Blee, 2017; Butler, 2024; Fangen & Skjelsbæk, 2020), racism (Fekete, 2018; Mondon, 2023; Mondon & Winter, 2020), and neoliberalism (Kiely & Saull, 2017; Maskovsky & Bjork-James, 2020). In this special issue, we show that reproductive politics have been key to the recent successes of the rising global right. This is a crucial task because reproductive politics are “powerfully central” (Briggs, 2017) to most politics, although this fact is often hidden.

“Reproductive politics” is a term developed by twentieth-century feminists to address concerns about who or what has power with respect to reproduction (Ginsburg & Rapp, 1995; Ross & Solinger, 2017). Matters like sex, pregnancy, fertility, parenthood, and family are not intrinsically relevant to politics, and yet many parts of our intimate lives, including our bodies and our beliefs about them, have been ensnared in power dynamics across place and throughout history. Building on activists’ longstanding recognition of the links between the personal and the political, as well as the local and the global, feminist scholars have made deliberate efforts to trace how, when, where, and why reproduction becomes political (Briggs, 2017; Ginsburg & Rapp, 1991, 1995; Rapp, 2001; Ross & Solinger, 2017). This politics of reproduction framework has inspired countless interdisciplinary scholars to examine the centrality of reproduction within broad global processes, making explicit its integral role in settler colonialism and state-making as well as in medicalization and market economies (Inhorn & Tremayne, 2012; Mehta & Varghese, 2018; Natividad, 2018; Ver-tommen et al., 2022). A core contribution of this literature is that locating an “outside to reproductive politics” in mainstream analyses proves difficult, “even though that fact is sometimes obscured” (Briggs, 2017, 4). By focusing on reproductive politics, we aim at making the centrality, yet relative invisibility, of reproductive politics within far-right movements worldwide much more explicit.

Consider examples from the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic which demonstrated that right-wing leaders mobilized reproductive politics to seize power amid crisis. Under Donald Trump’s presidency in the United States, antiabortion governors in twelve states halted abortion services by classifying the time-sensitive procedure as “elective”

and “non-essential.” Republican lawmakers also ensured that the first federal pandemic stimulus bill disqualified Planned Parenthood from receiving emergency funding, while large corporations and so-called crisis pregnancy centers received millions in public monies (Cromer & Bjork-James, 2020). The right-wing administration’s direct assault on reproductive rights coincided with more covert uses of reproductive politics to advance white Christian nationalist ambitions (Burdick, 2024; Cromer, 2023). It came to light in 2020 that the Trump administration endorsed the forced sterilization of migrant minority women detained in US custody (Chaparro-Buitrago, 2024), as well as the unlawful treatment of unaccompanied migrant children—including through expulsion and forced adoption—who were alleged to be risks to national security.

Authoritarian leaders around the world made similar moves during the pandemic by centering reproduction, overtly and covertly, to advance regressive agendas. Poland’s Law and Justice Party used abortion rights to undermine democratic processes when it quietly brought an abortion case to the Constitutional Tribunal—the nation’s highest court stacked with judges in the party’s favor—rather than work legislatively to restrict abortion. When the court issued a decision radically limiting legal access to abortion, millions of Polish citizens broke pandemic-era laws to protest en masse. In India, reproductive politics played a more covert role in fomenting anti-Muslim violence among right-wing Hindu nationalists during the pandemic. Demographic conspiracies about Muslim people’s intentional spread of COVID, described by right-wing political leaders as a “Muslim disease” and “Corona Jihad” (Bajoria, 2020; Ellis-Petersen & Rahman, 2020; Tieri & Ranjan, 2023), escalated under Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s leadership, whose right-wing extremism has emboldened Hindu racist rhetoric about being “replaced” by Muslim minorities through their “reckless reproduction” (Raghavan & Mushtaq, 2024). Reproductive politics form the core of conspiratorial “replacement” discourses of all kinds (Bracke & Aguilar, 2023; Saluk, 2023; Taragin-Zeller, 2023), yet are especially evident in political preoccupations with fertility, birth rates, and notions of who should—and shouldn’t—be procreating.

Although reproductive politics are “central” to most politics, they have not yet featured centrally in analyses of right-wing politics. A politics of reproduction framework, we argue, helps draw attention to the explicit and implicit political activities concerning sex, fertility, and family that abound in right-wing movements (Franklin & Ginsburg, 2019). The approach of this special issue reveals the proxy role that reproduction often plays in advancing right-wing agendas, from anti-LGBTQIA+ (Smietana, forthcoming; Taragin-Zeller & Kasstan-Dabush, 2024) and anti-gender policies (Petó & Juhász, 2024), to neoliberalism (Bjork-James, 2023), migration (Van Raemdonck, 2023), and white supremacy (Gaddini, 2023). This scholarship highlights the

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diverse historical, economic, cultural, and religious contexts in which right-wing regimes take hold, and provides analytic tools for investigating their synchronies. In other words, centering reproduction within analyses of right-wing politics makes it possible to ask: Why do right-wing actors feel threatened by what they perceive as attacks to the “national family” mounted by LGBTQIA+ communities, racial and religious minorities, and feminists? What local discourses cohere the nationalist, xenophobic, demagogic, antifeminist, and majoritarian goals of right-wing politics? What roles do religious fundamentalisms and symbolisms play in propelling global right movements? While such questions have attracted some scholarly attention (Barbosa & Casarões, 2022; Wilfred, 2021), the centrality of reproductive politics within right-wing political landscapes has remained under-examined.

Feminist scholarship on far-right political movements has gone further in this respect by theorizing the constitutive roles of gender, sexuality, race, and religion in their successes (Arguedas-Ramirez, 2021; Butler, 2024; Corrêa, 2018; Corrêa et al., 2023; Mehta & Varghese, 2018). Feminist scholars maintain that these issues function not as peripheral problems of “culture” but as the “symbolic glue” (Grzebalska & Pető, 2018), “meta-language” (Dietze & Roth, 2020), and “familiar grammar” (Franklin & Ginsburg, 2019) of right-wing movements. Comparative feminist studies contextualize differences across right-wing ideologies, discourses, strategies, policies, and effects as well as offer critical vocabularies for understanding their common features (Erel, 2018; Graff et al., 2019; Mason, 2019). Intersectional feminist analyses reveal how right-wing regimes deploy charismatic, hyper-masculinized leaders to wield narratives that position right-wing movements as saviors of a “national family” alleged to be under siege by a threatening social “other” (Erel, 2018). Feminist scholarship documents how right-wing leaders representing dominant groups have deployed the rhetoric of “apocalyptic panic” (Mason, 2019) and “demographic fever dreams” (Gokariksel et al., 2019) to mobilize protectionist support for exclusionary projects by claiming national vulnerability (Franklin & Ginsburg, 2019). Importantly, feminist scholars call for continued attention to far-right forces and emphasize the importance of intersectional analyses that interrogate the strategic roles of gender, race, sexuality, class, and religion at work in them (Baiocchi, 2020; Burdick, 2024; Butler, 2024; Graff et al., 2019; Gutierrez Rodriguez et al., 2018; Murray, 2022; Roth, 2018). We take up their provocation by bringing reproductive politics into analyses of resurging right-wing movements worldwide.

This special issue is an outgrowth of a global feminist collaboration organized through the Reproductive Righteousness Project (RRP). Together with Sarah Franklin (University of Cambridge), we launched RRP in June 2021 as an international dialogue focused on investigating the roles of reproductive politics in propelling the rising right worldwide. Global in reach and significance, this project has supported an interdisciplinary group of feminist scholars in Europe, the Middle East, the Americas, Asia, and Africa. Together we have systematically examined what moralizing claims about “threats” to social decline reveal about the constitutive role of reproductive politics within contemporary right-wing movements. In addition to this special issue, RRP activities have included a virtual symposium, a workshop, a writing seminar, and a website for public-facing pedagogy projects ([www.reproright.com](http://www.reproright.com)).

We began RRP as feminist scholars residing in places where right-wing regimes have gained power, and as researchers of the reproductive dimensions of these regimes’ diverse political expressions. RRP came to fruition from the experiential urgency to wield feminist tools for understanding the specific contextual factors that were giving rise to right-wing political power near and far, with attunement to rhetoric and imagery, policies, social movement strategies, social media, and more.

Our work is informed by three major feminist frameworks that we engage in our analyses: reproductive justice (Davis, 2019; Luna & Luker, 2013; Ross & Solinger, 2017; Sasser, 2018; Silliman et al., 2004; Zavella, 2020), reproductive governance (Morgan & Roberts, 2012), and critiques of familialism (Collins, 2000; Franklin & Ginsburg, 2019;

Grzebalska & Pető, 2018). “Reproductive justice” is an intersectional framework for social change articulated by Black women in 1994 that acknowledges, and envisions alternatives to, the interlocking systems of oppression that limit whether, when, and how to raise children safely and sustainably. Reproductive justice directs our attention to how misogyny, racism, homophobia, transphobia, economic marginalization, environmental destruction, and other oppressive forces conspire to undermine fundamental human rights. “Reproductive governance” is a complementary concept developed by feminist anthropologists for tracing “the mechanisms...[that] produce, monitor, and control reproductive behaviors and population practices” (Morgan & Roberts, 2012, 243), with a particular emphasis on moralizing mechanisms wielded by state, religious, economic, and political actors. Relatedly, feminist critiques of family-centric discourses (Franklin & Ginsburg, 2019; Grzebalska & Pető, 2018) help to reveal how moralized notions of “the family” deploy racialized, gendered, and sexualized rhetoric to propel right-wing regimes through reproductive politics.

These scholar-activist frameworks guide us in taking a wide-angle view in order to see how conceptions of race, nation, and the very idea of “a people” are being redefined and redeployed within right-wing power grabs. By broadening the aperture on reproductive politics across diverse contexts—from tracing the racializing appeals for “national survival” in Erdogan’s Turkey to exploring the neo-fascist roots of Trump’s supremacy agendas—we find that reproduction is strategically employed to moralize right-wing movements as *righteous* projects.

The concept of “reproductive righteousness” emerged through our comparative and interdisciplinary work to describe how right-wing agents employ reproductive politics as a moralizing mechanism for bringing legitimacy and urgency to regressive plans. Reproductive righteousness thus helps to explain how quasi-religious claims cohere different expressions of right-wing political efforts. Authors in this special issue bring these links into view by examining such topics as the rhetorical style of right-wing leaders (Saluk, 2023; Taragin-Zeller & Kasstan-Dabush, 2024), the Janus-faced effects of policy initiatives (Bjork-James, 2023; Pető & Juhász, 2024; Smietana, forthcoming), and the everyday conceptions of saviorism (Gaddini, 2023; Van Raemdonck, 2023). These authors also demonstrate that morality as a political strategy has inclined some right-wing regimes to engage explicitly with religious leaders and institutions, yet others implicitly leveraged quasi-religious discourses to advance regressive political agendas. Saviorist appeals, for instance, are unveiled as moralizing discursive devices that invoke the threat of national, social, and cultural decline and anoint right-wing leaders as defenders of the so-called vulnerable majority (Cromer, 2023; Gaddini, 2023; Saluk, 2023; Smietana, forthcoming; Taragin-Zeller & Kasstan-Dabush, 2024).

Papers in this special issue by Sophie Bjork-James, Katie Gaddini, Seda Saluk, Andrea Pető and Borbála Juhász demonstrate that reproductive righteousness takes different shapes through forms of familialist rhetoric within right-wing political rhetoric. In her analysis of Christian Right political theology in the United States, Sophie Bjork-James shows how the right-wing state claims “righteousness” vis-à-vis its opposition to abortion, which provides ethical justification for its embrace of free market capitalism and all of its harms. Analyzing the controversy around pro-environment evangelicals’ efforts to expand pro-life politics to include care for the environment, Bjork-James argues that focusing on the fetus provides white pro-life evangelicals a moralized means for redirecting concern away from capitalism’s catastrophic effects on all forms of life.

Katie Gaddini also examines the US Christian Right by interrogating how anti-Black racism among white evangelical Christians reproduces right-wing politics as a moral order. Gaddini’s considers how white evangelicals reproduce a racialized moral order through expressions of defensive racism—a multi-modal form of anti-Blackness that displaces racism away from white people and denies its effects on Black Americans—while seeking to uphold the idea of a righteous Christian nation.

Seda Saluk’s historical and discursive analysis of Erdogan’s political

rhetoric in contemporary Turkey shows how reproductive righteousness takes shape through what she calls “fraternal natalism.” Fraternal natalism describes how long-standing alliances between different state actors in Turkey—such as government officials, physicians, religious authorities, and military leaders—consolidate righteous power through reproductive politics. Saluk shows that fraternal natalism finds expression in narratives of a national family in crisis that provoke demographic anxieties about religious and ethno-racialized “others,” casting their reproductive activities as inherently dangerous for the right-wing nation’s continuity and security.

Focusing on Hungary, Andrea Petó and Borbála Juhász analyze the family mainstreaming policies put forward by the ruling FIDESZ government, which, they argue, are premised on a “cult of righteous motherhood.” Analyzing the policy-focused discourses of right-wing political leaders, Petó and Juhász show that family-focused policies are “Janus-faced” in seemingly supporting the rights and needs of women while, in effect, forcing them “back into the kitchen.” Their article demonstrates the difficulty for, yet necessity of, feminist scholarship on illiberal policy efforts.

Other authors in the special issue draw attention to the proxy roles that anti-LGBTQIA+ discourses and policies often play in advancing right-wing agendas. Drawing on auto-ethnography, interviews, and analysis of political discourse, Marcin Smietana exposes the logics of reproductive righteousness in contemporary Poland where the creation of families among LGBTQIA+ people is systemically discouraged through forms of social sterilization. Smietana traces right-wing anxieties about LGBTQIA+ reproduction as “contaminating” future generations and, thus, “threatening the nation.” Eugenic expressions of anti-LGBTQIA+ right-wing Polish politics create what Smietana calls “unreproductive citizenship,” which describes how queer and trans people are “tolerated” yet disallowed status as reproductive subjects.

In the context of Israel, Lea Taragin-Zeller and Ben Kasstan-Dabush examine the political rhetoric and policy pursuits of *Noam*, an extreme right-wing party that champions ethno-religious nationalism and opposition to LGBTQIA+ rights. The authors’ discursive analysis of right-wing political materials traces how *Noam* frames gender and sexual diversity as evidence of the state’s moral decline and as a contaminating force, which can only be redressed by righteous (heterosexual) saviors. *Noam*’s vision of a “Jewish state” is underpinned by a “grammar of normality” that is ethno-nationalist, heteronormative, and patriarchal. Their attempts to construct threats to the “normal” Jewish nuclear family help to gain broader public support and forge alliances with hegemonic political parties through a discourse of “Jewish family values,” embedded within a contemporary attempt to reproduce a “pure” Jewish population through the control of gender, sexuality, and exclusionary-nationalist stances.

Lastly, An Van Raemdonck uses ethnographic methods to examine how international development agencies and NGOs attempt to curb the rise of early (or underage) marriages among Syrian refugees in Jordanian refugee camps. Her anthropological study showcases how Jordanian health care workers create distinct reproductive “cultures,” distinguishing between local Jordanian and Syrian migrant patterns of fertility, while reifying national boundaries. This work highlights how perinatal care serves as a site of reproductive stigma and morality discourses in postcolonial contexts.

Taken together, this special issue helps to lay bare the mechanisms that link reproductive politics to moralizing appeals about the righteousness of right-wing power. Expressions of reproductive righteousness take varying forms and crosscut wide political terrain, from racist demographic anxieties about migrants and ethno-religious minorities to reifications of capitalism’s moral order by focusing on fetuses and white supremacy. Within these expressions, reproductive politics come into view as a proxy for different kinds of regressive agendas, be they colonialist, ethno-religious, nationalist, anti-feminist, supremacist, and/or capitalist. Some expressions of reproductive righteousness are strategically deceptive, both in how they obscure the role of reproductive

politics and in how they hide intended policy goals, which pose theoretical and methodological challenges for studying them in isolated national contexts.

Inspired by feminist methods of knowledge-sharing, we found in the Reproductive Righteousness Project that collaborative international dialogue helped chart a conceptual path toward more robust theoretical perspectives on the elemental role of reproductive politics in the resurging global right. We offer *reproductive righteousness* as an example of what is possible when feminist methods and analyses align, and as an analytical resource for understanding how right-wing extremism is moralized—and resisted—around the globe. In doing so, this special issue advances scholarly debates on right-wing configurations of power, especially in interdisciplinary studies of gender, race, sexuality, nation, and religion. Our research shows the vital importance of feminist theory for social studies of right-wing extremism by theorizing how reproductive politics operate as a constitutive force within far-right movements, which remains a crucial task today.

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