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When "protecting our women" harms them: how nationalist masculinity is remaking Europe

Executive Summary

Europe's new strongmen keep promising protection—of "our women," "our families," "our way of life." Yet scratch the surface and this protection narrows rights, shrinks safety nets, and silences women's voices. What drives this trend is not random turbulence but a portable governing script: neo-nationalism, conservative populism, and a narrow ideal of masculinity. This brief shows how Austria, Poland, and Turkey—three very different political contexts—have converged on similar gender backlashes. It highlights how these regimes not only restrict rights but also produce epistemic injustice by deciding whose knowledge counts. Feminist epistemic justice, as developed in the Jean Monnet Chair on Feminist Epistemic Justice in the EU and Beyond (FEJUST), offers a lens to see these harms and a pathway to more inclusive policymaking.

Rahime Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm, Bahçeşehir University
Jean Monnet Chair on Feminist Epistemic Justice in the EU and Beyond (FEJUST)
rahime.kurum@bau.edu.tr
Elif Gençkal Eroler, Istanbul Topkapı University
elifgenckaleroler@topkapi.edu.tr

Austria, Poland, and Turkey could not be more different in their histories and EU trajectories. Austria joined the EU in 1995, shaping and exporting equality policies from within. Poland acceded in 2004, absorbing EU acquis while asserting a Catholic-national identity. Turkey remains a candidate state, obliged to engage EU norms even as it distances itself from them. Yet all three now display the same outcome: **gender equality rollback, family-centred governance, and epistemic silencing.**

In **Austria**, right-populist rhetoric once confined to the margins has become mainstream, normalising doubt about gender mainstreaming and empowering parties like the FPÖ to frame equality as an elite project disconnected from "real Austrians."In **Poland**, the Law and Justice Party fused Catholic authority with state power, turning reproductive rights into a sovereignty question and branding LGBTQI+ identities as a foreign contagion. The phrase "LGBT ideology" is used to mark the boundaries of nationhood itself.

In **Turkey**, the post-2010 nationalist conservative turn has redefined women's safety as compatible with fewer international safeguards, culminating in withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention in 2021. At the same time, family-centred policies framed as "protection" have increased women's dependency and vulnerability.

Different contexts, but one portable script: leaders position themselves as defenders of women while enacting policies that restrict their autonomy, shrink their rights, and silence their advocates.

"Three cases, one script"

The epistemic logic of the backlash

What unites these examples is not just their similarity of policy but their **logic of knowledge.** Each regime insists that certain voices—priests, imams, nationalist leaders, or government-organised NGOs—speak with authority, while feminist research, equality expertise, or grassroots testimony are treated as threats. This is epistemic injustice in action. It explains why so many technical fixes disappoint: when those who could flag harms are excluded, **the harm becomes the point.**

The COVID-19 pandemic made this starkly visible. Lockdowns turbocharged unpaid care, domestic violence spiked, and labour markets rewarded those who could work from home—mostly men. Yet many governments framed pandemic response as national discipline, not social repair. The flag was everywhere; the funding was not. Once again, "protection" meant policing borders and bodies, not investing in shelters, childcare, or wage floors. **Disaster patriarchy** turned crisis into opportunity for patriarchal entrenchment.

From a feminist epistemic justice perspective, these dynamics reveal why the backlash is so resilient. It is not just about what policies are adopted but **whose knowledge is disqualified.** When lived experience is downgraded to anecdote, gender equality cannot take root, no matter how sophisticated the legislation.

What, then, can disrupt this cycle? Our research points to three urgent interventions:

- **Budgets that care.** Put care at the centre of growth. Universal childcare, eldercare, equal pay enforcement, and violence-prevention infrastructures are not luxuries but preconditions for equality. Family-centred rhetoric collapses when genuine family-supporting infrastructure is in place.

- **Knowledge pipelines that listen.** Require gender impact assessments for all laws and budgets, publish them, and condition EU and national funding on meaningful consultation with independent women's groups. Evidence should be operational, not ornamental.

- **Crisis responses that include.** Emergencies must not be excuses for exclusion. Whether pandemic, migration, or climate shock, governments should be prevented from smuggling in long-term exclusions under the guise of national discipline. EU recovery funds and conditionality mechanisms should tie resources to inclusive practices.

Finally, the EU itself must wield its leverage more consistently. Benchmarks linked to the equality acquis, conditionality on funds, and direct support to subnational innovators—cities, universities, grassroots networks—can help amplify plural voices where national governments.

Europe has always been plural—many languages, many histories, many ways of flourishing. The task now is to keep it plural in who gets to speak, decide, and belong. Feminist epistemic justice is not a niche academic framework; it is a survival strategy for democracies where the national is increasingly written onto the personal: the rhythm of care, the price of food, the silence after a cut in services. Sovereignty should mean the capacity to care for all who live under a state's laws, not the license to decide whose truths are expendable.