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Gendering the White Backlash: Islam, Patriarchal ‘Unfairness’, and the Defense of Women’s Rights Amongst Women Supporters of the British National Party

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Introduction

Formed in 1982 out of the overtly fascist National Front, The British National Party (BNP) went on to be the most successful extreme right party¹ in British electoral history, reaching a high point in the 2010 general elections, securing 564,000 votes (though no seats); this on the back of prior successes in securing seats in elections for local government, the Greater London Assembly (GLA) and the European Parliament (Cutts and Goodwin 2014, Ford and Goodwin 2010). However, despite broader socio-economic and political conditions still favorable to the BNP’s ideological agenda, and largely as an outcome of its own persistent deficiencies, by the time of the 2012 local, GLA and mayoral elections, the BNP was in terminal decline, suffering huge reductions in its electoral support (Cutts and Goodwin 2014).

Capitalizing on a host of demand-side conditions, including the ever-increasing socio-economic and welfare precarities of the post-industrial working class, and profound social transformations associated with processes of globalization and mass migration, the BNP allied a drive for modernization and professionalization within the party to an effective appeal to important sections of the white ‘have nots’ directly on the basis of the latter’s sense of resentment at the ‘unfairness’ of their position in the own ‘national home’ (Cutts and Goodwin 2014, Ford and Goodwin 2010, Rhodes 2010, Copey 2008). The nature and effects of such resentment constitutes what has usefully been conceptualized as a white backlash (Rhodes 2010, Hewitt 2005).

As an extreme right, ultra-nationalist party, the BNP belongs to a party family commonly labelled ‘*Männerparteien*’ (men’s parties), on account of the predominance of men in their leadership, membership and support base. But this rendition may fail to recognize the important role played by women in such organizations. An important research trajectory has illuminated the active role played by women in variable nationalist (see Power and Vickers – this volume) and extreme/populist right movements (see Köttig et al 2017, Spierings et al 2015, Mudde and Kaltwasser 2015, Akkerman 2015).

Drawing on semi-structured interviews, this paper explores how resentment and ‘unfairness’, as key features of the white backlash, become gendered in the hands of women supporters of the BNP, and how the notion of unfairness is deployed as a tool for signifying and pathologizing the Muslim presence in the UK as a direct threat to gender-related justice and equality. The paper contributes to a broadened, because gendered, understanding of the white backlash thesis, and to a richer and more nuanced understanding of how the BNP successfully attracted women supporters via an (albeit Janus-faced) appeal to the latter’s

¹ For the purpose of this paper I define the BNP as an **extreme right party**, with important and ongoing fascistic characteristics, but also as a party that whilst not fully fitting the continental European model of a **Populist Radical Right (PRR)** party, has nevertheless enlisted important elements of this model.

interests as ‘liberated women’ (see Akkerman 2015). The paper illuminates the ways in which women supporters of the BNP utilize gender and sexuality to fix the nature of, and relationship between, four discursively-constructed collective subjectivities, and to infuse the respective natures of, and relations between these subjectivities, as locked into a social drama marked by a gender injustice wrought by the pathology of Muslim patriarchy.

The chapter commences by situating the data within a consideration of the complex and shifting articulations between nationalism, gender and sexuality, particularly in the context of the extreme and populist radical right (PRR), and calls for a fuller consideration of gender and sexuality within the framework set by the otherwise useful white backlash thesis. It then goes on to map out the gendered social and sexual drama constructed by our participants in accounting for the nature and implications of an Islamic/Muslim presence in the West. Specifically, it goes on to delineate the participants’ elaboration of four collective subjectivities, or players, within this gendered social drama; namely, the *oppressors* (Muslim men), the *victims* (Muslim women and vulnerable non-Muslim women), the *saved* (liberated non-Muslim women) and the *saviors* (the BNP). The chapter demonstrates how resentful invocations of ‘unfairness’ inform and lend coherence to women BNP supporters’ claims of the wholesale oppression of non-Muslims at the hands of Muslim patriarchy.

Methodology

This chapter focuses specifically on data drawn from 14 women supporters of the BNP, interviewed as part of a larger project funded by the British Academy/Leverhulme Trust on women supporters of nationalist organizations in the UK. With the exception of one participant born in South Africa, the remaining 13 were born in the UK, and all described themselves as white. Two participants were resident in Wales, 4 in North-West England, 3 in the Midlands, 1 in the South-East, 2 in the South West, 1 in South Africa and 1 in Malta. Eight identified themselves as non-practicing Christians, 1 as Spiritual, 2 as Agnostic and 3 as Atheist. There was a distribution across age cohorts, with 1 participant under 25, 2 aged 25-34, 4 aged 35-44, 3 aged 45-54, 4 aged 54-64, and no participants aged over 65. All were heterosexual. In terms of academic qualifications, 2 participants failed to provide information, 1 left school at 15, 5 had secondary school qualifications, 4 had tertiary level qualifications, and 2 were graduates. In terms of employment status, 5 were unemployed, 2 were home-makers or housewives, 4 were in part-time employment, 1 was employed full-time, 1 self-employed, and 1 retired.

Reflecting a tendency for extreme right organizations to refuse researcher access (Carter 2005, Sanders-McDonagh 2014), we chose to contact active contributors to the BNP Facebook site to recruit participants, and also had some success with snowballing via this route. The interviews were conducted via Skype or telephone. Research suggests that: where participants receive informational support in advance, where interviews take place at a convenient time for the participant, and where care is taken to establish rapport, then telephone/Skype interviews can produce rich data, facilitating open and frank dialogue (Drabble et al 2016). The lengthy and semi-structured nature of the interviews enabled the generation of a rich and nuanced data-set, with some significant degree of saturation. Reflecting the findings of Goodwin (2010), initial uncertainties and even mistrust, on the part of the participants, appeared to quickly give way to some ‘de-sensitization’, given participants readiness to articulate views that may readily be deemed racist, Islamophobic or xenophobic.

Nationalism, Gender, Sexuality and Extreme/Populist Radical Right

Gender and sexuality remain enduringly and deeply implicated in the nationalist project. A substantial legacy of scholarly work now attests to the multi-dimensional nature of nationalism's gendering and sexualization, illuminating nationalism's masculinist and patriarchal character, and its accompanying tendency to submit women to a conservative gender order. However, nationalism's ongoing evolution has witnessed important reconfigurations of its relationship to transforming gender and sexual identities and relations, at least in some contexts. An important research trajectory highlights very different positionings for women within (at least some) expressions of nationalism (Vickers, this volume). According to Power (this volume), research is needed to advance our appreciation of women's own understandings "of their roles, participation in, contributions to, and impact on nationalist movements" (p. **). Some liberal democratic nationalisms have deployed representations of gender/sexual liberation, equality and justice as defining features of their national character and accomplishments. This extends to variants of sexually cosmopolitan homonationalisms (Puar 2013).

Such reconfigurings have become a defining characteristic of an important shift, particularly notable in the context of Europe. This shift concerns the complex, multi-speed, and highly contingent strengthening of a certain Europeanisation of national identities and boundaries. This Europeanisation is inseparable from an insistent Islamophobic response to both the mass migration of millions of Muslims to Europe, and to global conflicts increasingly framed as expressing a Muslim/non-Muslim polarity (Bunzl 2007). Here the category *Europe*, and beyond this, the *West*, emerge as pan-national identity central to the effective framing of relations between the 'Muslim world' and the 'non-Muslim world' as those of a civilizational struggle (Bunzl 2007). Within this 'clash of civilizations' logic, gender and sexuality play a pivotal role. Muslim civilization becomes rendered as archetypically and perpetually patriarchal, with Muslim men constructed as sexual oppressors, and Muslim women as their muted victims. Such renderings draw on longstanding, culturally essentialist constructs of the Orient as despotic, mysterious, inferior, dangerous and sexual (Ardizzioni 2004).

Reflecting these broader developments, Zuquete (2008) highlights the manner in which extreme and populist radical right organizations have increasingly deployed a post-national, European and/or Western framing in their ideological positionings. Europe becomes here a definitely Judeo-Christian geo-political space under threat from an expansionist and invasive Muslim civilization. Muslims have come to replace the Jew as the other to Europe (Bunzl 2007), where cultural fundamentalism renders the Muslim as barbarous and warranting of exclusion from Europe (Fekete 2006).

Extreme and populist radical right organizations have made important strategic usage of gender and sexuality in their anti-Islam/Muslim discourses, but in complex and inconsistent ways (Akkerman 2015). Though it remains the case that the extreme and populist radical right in Europe are characterized by enduring gender conservatism (Akkerman 2015), this conservatism is generally moderated by a prevailing liberal-democratic political and popular culture (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2015). It is also partially displaced by the ways in which such organizations deploy a selective liberal-egalitarian discourse on gender and sexuality as a means to underpinning an account of Islam and Muslim civilization as backward and antithetical to European society (Akkerman 2015, Mayer et al 2014).

The BNP has sought to strategically position itself as a defender of gender and sexual equality in its opposition to a Muslim and Islamic presence, constructed as a morbid threat to British *and* European civilization, even attacking the media and the political establishment for colluding in the oppression of Muslim women (Zúquete 2008). In so doing, the BNP evidences the Janus-faced nature of extreme and populist radical right positions on gender and sexuality (Akkerman 2015). In line with other extreme and populist right movements across Europe, the BNP has sought to walk a treacherous path between the inherent gender conservatism of its core ideology, and the strategic allure of aligning itself to a politics of gender liberation that effectively serves to ground a pathologization of Islam as a faith, and Muslims as a people, on the grounds of their imagined patriarchal violence. In this sense the BNP may serve as a case in point of what Farris and Scrinzi (this volume) have referred to as a ‘sexualization of racism’ and a ‘racialization of sexism’, whereby the extreme and radical right have strategically deployed a sexualized double standard as a means to effecting the Othering of immigrant and Muslim constituencies.

Gendering the White Backlash

We have asserted that the appeal of the BNP, along with other extreme and populist radical right organizations, in some measure lies in their effective self-positioning as the voice of the white backlash. According to Hewitt (2005), white backlash has tended to articulate resentful accusations of unfairness. These accusations commonly emerge in circumstances: of proximity to migrant and black and minority ethnic (BME) communities; where BME communities are seen to have acquired political power and status; where a legislative framework protects minorities in the name of ‘racial’ and ethnic equality (Hewitt 2005); and where there exists a perceived lack of commensurate representation for ‘white interests’ (Rhodes 2010). The majoritarian white population are here invited to construct for themselves a sense being a disadvantaged and betrayed minority in their own national home, performing an ‘ethnodemographic inversion’ (Cohen, cited in Rhodes 2010). The heartland of the white backlash is in the main those who also make up the support base of the extreme/populist radical right (see Mudde 2004).

According to Rhodes (2010) “it is clear the BNP has become, for many, the champion of ‘backlash’ sentiments” (90). Rhodes’ (2010) study shows how ideas of ‘unfairness’ were successfully deployed to justify accounts of the white ‘have nots’ as: the subjects of racism at the hands of multiculturalism’s defense of ethnic and religious minorities, and as the cultural and material victims of political neglect and betrayal (Rhodes 2010).

The white backlash thesis has, to date, tended to focus on resentments relating to perceived disadvantages in the field of labor markets, public services and housing, and more generally multiculturalism. This paper seeks to expand an account of the white backlash thesis by exploring the manner in which ideas of unfairness may speak to, and be utilized by, women supporters of the BNP to construct pathologized accounts of Muslim patriarchy as a morbid threat to an accomplished gender justice in Europe/West.

Oppressors, Victims, Saviors and the Saved: The Clash of Civilizations as Gendered Social and Sexual Drama

The chapter now turns to an exploration of the complex ways in which gender and sexuality become deployed, ‘on the ground’, by women supporters of the BNP. Specifically, it illuminates how gender and sexuality serve to cast and characterize performers in a Clash of

Civilizations drama, with the principal players being: The *Oppressor* (The Irredeemable Muslim Patriarch), The *Victim* (Muslim women and vulnerable non-Muslim women and children), the *Saviors* (the BNP) and The *Saved* (liberated non-Muslim women). The chapter will go on to explore how such characterizations are informed by, and go on to inform, resentful accusations of unfairness characteristic of the white backlash (see Rhodes 2010).

The Oppressor – The Irredeemable Muslim Patriarch

Reflecting Zuquette's (2008) account of the emerging force of a European civilizational logic to the boundary constructing practices of the extreme right, participants routinely articulated a post-nationalist analysis that rendered the relationship between Britain/the British and Islam/Muslims as 'merely' one conflictual manifestation of an enduring civilizational antithesis. Characteristically invoking a modernization thesis, participants also deployed a cultural fundamentalism (Fekete 2006) to account for Muslims as stuck in a religiously-fettered 'dark ages', reflecting the commonplace representations of Muslims within Islamophobic tropes as unchanging, and so, dangerous (Zuquette 2008). Serving as both explanation and measure, essentialist accounts of Islamically-authorized patriarchy served as the nodal point for our participants' accounts of Muslim civilization more generally.

The central character in this social drama was undoubtedly the irredeemable Muslim patriarch, the primary oppressor, characterized by his unalloyed insistence on the ontological and ethical inferiority of women. Dancing to the compositional tune the patriarch-oppressor, according to Claire, 'their whole culture is disrespectful, you know, to women. They treat their own like crap...they're disgusting'. Muslim men's rights were constructed as absolute and all-pervasive, and as guaranteeing the rightlessness of Muslim women to the point of the latter's servitude. According to Lucy, Muslim women are rendered 'servants to the men'.

The patriarchal ordering of gender roles and relations within the Muslim population was seen as premised on a foundational double-standard in the application of Islamic principles, where Muslim men imposed a systematic and totalitarian application of the most austere Islamic standards on women whilst simultaneously and hypocritically indulging themselves in evidently un-Islamic behaviors. Jenny refers to the way in which some Muslim men navigate a path between the respectability of their Muslim-facing personas and the code-breaking lives they actually lead beyond the gaze of the moral guardians of Muslim communities.

Every time my brother did a boxing show, the amount of Muslim men that were there and all over the lap-dancing girls...not just drinking, taking cocaine...I'm thinking, 'Oh my God', and you tell me about this religion and I can see with my own eyes what's going on.

The hegemony of Muslim men was seen, without exception, to spell violence against women and children, both Muslim and non-Muslim. Reflecting many of our participants' claims to scriptural expertise, Elizabeth asserts, 'if you look at the amount of spousal abuse [in Muslim marriages]...they can beat the hell out of their wives...it's condoned by the Islam views'. Violence, physical and sexual, extended to children. According to Bridget, Muslim fathers 'beat their kids, and an eight year old in their [religion], they can marry them. To me that's child abuse'.

Reflecting the high profile granted to 'Muslim grooming gangs' within the mainstream media at the time of the project (Tufail 2015), and the commonplace deployment of the 'Muslim

grooming' issue by the extreme right at the same time, 'Muslim grooming gangs' figured significantly in the data. Isabelle, having previously acknowledged herself the ways in which the BNP had exploited the highly mediatized accounts of 'Muslim child sex grooming gangs', nevertheless asserted, in her 'unbiased opinion, Muslim men are ... a lot more predatory than the white men'. Whilst the problem of grooming was generally understood as directed toward vulnerable white children, as an expression of both opportunism and the inferiorization of the non-Muslim other, it was also seen as a further manifestation of a broader normalization of child exploitation in the context of Muslim patriarchy. Elizabeth makes the link, alleging the normalized practice of marriage between adult men and female children, 'with the grooming of young children, taking an eight-year old child and selling an eight-year old child off to a man of fifty-six for arguments sake to be his wife. It's disgusting'.

Our data were here strongly supportive of Farris and Scrinzi's (this volume) account of how the extreme and populist right have successfully deployed a 'sexualization of racism' as a means to constructing Muslim men as oppressors. We add to this account by showing how the Muslim man is deployed by women supporters of the BNP as *the* principal referent in supporting a backslash-styled, resentment-fueled, account of the gendered unfairness brought to the UK by an inherently 'out-of-place' Muslim patriarch. In this context, the unfairness brought by the Muslim patriarch appears to rest on the twin elements of their outright oppression of all women, and their own willful failure to meet the decrees of their faith. In this sense, our data also appeared to support accounts of the influence of femo-nationalism amongst women supporters of the extreme/radical right, where nominally liberal feminist discourses become deployed, however partially and strategically, in support of Islamophobic agendas (see Lim and Fanhangel 2013).

The Victims

The victims of Muslim men were legion, including at the broadest level the nation as a whole, and there was a very real sense that the nation itself was rendered 'raped' at the hands of the Muslim patriarch. The paper now turns to a consideration of the two principal victims of Muslim patriarchal injustice, Muslim women and vulnerable non-Muslim women and children.

Muslim Women

Undoubtedly, the predominant framing of Muslim women within the data was that of victimhood, as a direct outcome of their Islamically-authorized inferiorization. Our participants drew on various metaphors in invoking the disrespected status of women in Muslim civilization, including accounts of Muslim women as animals, inanimate material, and even occupying a condition of 'nothingness'. Elizabeth asserts, 'within their religion, you know, women are dogs'. Anne links the status of women to the realm of the inanimate, 'Muslim women are treated like dirt by the Muslim men'. For Beatrice, 'a woman in a Muslim man's eyes is nothing'. The contractual relations of slavery were here commonly invoked.

Muslim women were generally seen to be subjected to a fear-induced passivity, even muteness; 'I'm sure they'd love to speak their own mind but they're too scared to, if that makes sense' (Wynona). Constructed as both symbol and mechanism of patriarchal oppression and injustice, and as a device for obstructing social integration, the veil featured

heavily within the data. . Broadly, Muslim women were assumed to be compelled to wear the veil against their own wishes and interests, at the direct insistence of male patriarchs. According to Beatrice, ‘they’re forced to wear the hijab and they’re forced to wear the niqab’. Jill makes direct reference to the functionality of veiling for alleviating Muslim men’s anxiety about the threat posed by other men’s desire: ‘they’re not allowed to show their face, ankles or nothing in case anybody else wants them’. Whilst none of our participants explicitly aligned themselves with a feminist position, their standpoint on the veil, as an inherent negation of agency, appeared consistent with the colonialist ‘feminist paternalism’ of Elizabeth Badinter and Susan Okin, amongst others (Fekete 2006).

Nevertheless, there was also some important complexity in the data in this respect. There was a recognition from some of our participants that not all Muslim women felt oppressed by their veiling. Nancy remembers, ‘there was a woman on the television the other day who said it [the burka] gives them more freedom to say what she wants when it’s only her eyes that are showing’. Furthermore, Muslim women’s experiences of oppression, allied to their essential locatedness within a Western national context, was seen to serve as a potential catalyst for circumscribed resistance, even if the inherent unfairness of Muslim patriarchy made genuine liberation unlikely. According to Elizabeth, significant numbers of Muslim women are resisting; ‘a lot of [Muslim] women are speaking out and, you know, also taking a stand...against how they are treated’. Claire also suggests the emergence of ‘modernized’ constituencies of Muslim women who are beginning to find their voice; ‘...there are the ones that do have a voice that are quite modern, but as a general rule, the majority of them they don’t’. Isabelle points to a generational shift, at least in the context of the UK, in opportunities available to, and accessed by, young Muslim women, “I feel that the [Muslim females] who were born here and are British citizens, like the ones in my age group, they go in college, have an active effect on society”. Katie was relatively unusual in pointing to sectarian differences as a variable impacting on the position of women in Muslim populations; ‘there’s a lot more leniency within the religion if they’re Sunni Muslims as opposed to Shiite Muslims”.

This *de facto* resistance may occasionally come to be witnessed by non-Muslims through occasions of ‘leakage’, where ethno-religious boundaries are breached and Muslim women find the agency and audience to speak out about their conditions ‘behind the wall’ of theocratic patriarchy. Muslim/Non-Muslim friendship could provide one such opportunity. Whilst none of our participants were prepared to countenance friendship with ‘radical Muslims’, and some declared themselves unwilling to befriend any Muslim, others acknowledged having friendship-orientated relationships with some Muslim women. Such friendships were often considered to have been formed against the backdrop of a more general tendency for Muslims to not want to befriend non-Muslims as an outcome of their own committed isolationism, and the unfair preferentialism that Muslims were assumed to show toward their ‘own kind’. Claire reflects, on being told by a Muslim friend of her experience of violence, that she was ‘really shocked...[to be told of the violence]...because normally they’re quite tight-knit aren’t they?’. Claire’s work provided an institutional context in which to bear witness to such ‘leakages’, or ‘breaches’; ‘I had a Muslim lady on my books...She was severely abused by her husband...her family actually took her and the children away from him which is very rare’.

Despite such recognitions of intersectional complexities and change, it was difficult for the participants, given the relentless patriarchy granted by them to a perpetually hegemonic Muslim masculinity, to envisage Muslim women acquiring game-changing capacities for

agency. Isabelle was typical in asserting the over-determining force of the patriarchally-framed, and disempowering, 'beaten paths' of Muslim femininity; "I can't imagine them putting their education to work or employment. I know they maybe end up married and then they'll go and swallow up their career dreams and it's quite upsetting really...The lost ones".

Vulnerable non-Muslim Women

Patriarchal oppression, at the hands of Muslim men, was not reserved only for Muslim women. In fact, the worst abuses were seen to be metered out to non-Muslim women, vulnerable white women and children. Our participants were unanimous in their view that Islam authorised ethical disregard towards non-Muslims, and in fact, legitimized the abuse of non-Muslim women as the 'corrupted enemy'. Non-Muslim women were seen by Muslim men as 'legitimate targets': "this is where the sex gangs come from, because they see white women, they can do what they like with us...because a woman's wearing a short skirt she deserves to get raped" (Beatrice). Claire is in no doubt, 'Muslim men see white women as trash...white women are slags, whores, they're there to be fucked'. Invoking a religious authorization of sexual oppression in conditions of civilizational conflict, Isabelle asserts, 'it does state in the Koran that they can keep women as sex slaves under issues of war, and we are at war with Muslims at the moment, well Muslim countries anyway'.

Invoking a clear sense of white British women as victimized by an unjust Muslim patriarchy, as prevented from exercising their inalienable and fair freedoms in their 'own country'. Jill accounts for events in 'some market down London' where in response to white women wearing 'wearing what they normally wear...Muslims were just spitting on them because they weren't covered up. The police didn't do anything...[white women]...get attacked, in their own country".

White female vulnerability to Muslim patriarchy was seen to be at its most acute where a predatory Muslim ambition intersected with socio-economic disadvantage and familial dysfunction in the former. Such intersections were seen to offer Muslim men the occasion to express their nature beyond the fettering gaze of their own ethno-religious community. Claire recalls an under-aged girl she knew who was groomed by a Muslim man; "her mum's a serious alcoholic, her dad was a heroin addict, and he's dead...he comes along, shows her all this money, nice lifestyle and she goes for it...I know a lot of girls that have sold themselves out".

Here we have a striking example of the allegations that underpin a gendered white backlash, where white native women become unjustly denied belonging and entitlement in their own 'national home'. Interestingly positioning Christianity as a guardian of gender justice, Katie portends a potentially bleak future for gender justice in the UK, "if Islam is left to spread and override Christianity, all Western women are threatened with oppression".

The Saved: Liberated Non-Muslim Women

Native British and European women occupied a complex but pivotal role in the narratives of our participants, as authors, beneficiaries and defenders of gender/sexual liberty, equality and justice. Pointing to the historical struggles associated with achieving such equality, Jenny insists, "us Europeans have come far too far now to let [Muslim patriarchy] take a hold in our country. We've fought for our freedom...I don't want to be taken back to a barbaric age". This notion of gender equality in the West, as an outcome of hard-fought struggle against

indigenous patriarchal resistance, did however exist in complex and uncertain relationship to another rendering; namely, a more teleological account that presents gender equality as an almost pre-determined outcome of civilizational forces inhering within the Western tradition. Undoubtedly, in the hands of our participants, even in the context of their support for an ultra-conservative party, “Enlightenment values associated with secularism, individualism, gender equality, sexual freedom and freedom of expression...[serve as the]...markers of civilizational superiority” (Kundnani 2012, 155)

The accomplishment of a fully-fledged gender equality, and hence fairness in the gendered distribution of rights and opportunities, largely served as a taken for granted fact of European life. According to Jill, ‘yes, women are more independent now...years ago like men did the work and women stayed at home...But they’re more independent now and, you know, they can go do their careers and they can do what they want really’. Melissa reflects, ‘that’s why I don’t like Muslims. I just think as a free-thinking woman, why would you want to be like that in such a free-standing, free-thinking society?’.

Jenny proposes the notion that such freedoms are now in jeopardy, and at the hands of a nexus of interests revolving around Islam/Muslims, multiculturalism and political correctness. Constructing a constituency of ‘we’ around the shared interests of non-Muslim women in the West, and a ‘they’ around the forces of multicultural political correctness and Islam/Muslims, she goes on to say,

We’ve been told that women are free in Europe, and we’ve got free speech. Clearly we haven’t, so what happens? Do we submit to everything that they’re throwing at us? – ‘You’re not allowed to say this?’ - and go back into the dark ages?

Participants’ accounts clearly reflected the ways in which forms of liberal-feminism have been readily deployed by populist and extreme right groups and their supporters, asserting a right for women to be free from compulsion from either the state, or overly-protected and gender-conservative religious minorities (Akkerman 2015, Puar 2014). Such accounts also function as an ontological underpinning for a gendered white backlash that asserts indigenous gender fairness as an accomplished fact, and does so in the service of Islamophobic renderings of Muslims and Islam as ‘out of place’, whilst ‘over here’, and specifically on a gendered basis.

The Saviors – The British National Party

For most of our participants, the BNP represented a pragmatic, if in some ways problematic, means to ‘rebalance’ the unfairness that has come to characterize the UK in an era of multiculturally-sanctioned Muslim privilege (at the hands of an elite rendered ‘anti-own people’ (Mudde 1996). The BNP are here then accounted for as supporting the interests of ‘natives’, and their civilizational accomplishments and rights (Rhodes 2010). In the hands of our participants, the BNP warrants support as the only party willing to shine a light on the ways in which white natives have become victimized by the excess of their own virtue, and specifically, their own commitment to a here misguided sense of fairness (see Fekete 2006).

For Harriet,

I'm not at all racist, I just feel that the balance needs redressing at the moment and I think that's why I'm starting to understand more when I hear certain things from the BNP...I do feel that the natives of this country need to be taken seriously again

Typically denying their own racism or Islamophobia, participants consistently framed their political standpoint as anti-Islam, with an attested problematization of the Islamic faith (commonly referred to as a cult). Harriet elaborates, and rather paradoxically, "I'm racist against the religion, I'm not racist against people's ethnicity".

The BNPs 'track record' on issues of Muslim grooming, rape gangs, prostitution and domestic violence was commonly specified as a strength by our participants. According to Katie, "I know they are concerned for the safety of women and children within the Islamic cult due to the rape, beating and child sexual assault at the hands of extremist men".

Participants often referred to the BNP as being pro-women women, in their 'defense' of families and mothers. Anne sees "...the child care policy is a good one. I think they would support working mums better, and I know that they would prefer to make it easier for mums to stay at home". We see here clear testimony of a broader rendering of 'choice' within the gendered narratives of the populist and extreme right, where women are encouraged to choose what is their 'natural' inclination, to be mothers and home builders first, and against the 'ideological' imperative that sees them pressured into the labor market (Mayer et al 2014). Interestingly, and reflecting the contradiction identified by Mayer et al (2014), whereas native women's adoption of a reproductive familial role was seen by our participants as a case of 'choice', Muslim women's parallel adoption of this role was taken as evidence of an absence of choice.

Our participants' framing of the BNP in the role of saviors was clearly informed by a sense that the party stood alone in their unalloyed stand against Islam and Muslim 'tyranny'. The BNP was celebrated for the bravery and honesty of its stance, for its unique willingness to say the unsayable, and in ways redolent of Mudde's (2004) account of the populist radical right as profiting "from their role as taboo breakers and fighters against political correctness" (Mudde 2004, 554). Along with organizations of the PRR, the extreme right BNP had clearly secured much traction amongst our participants with its quasi-populist, anti-elite, anti-pluralist and 'moralist' positioning (see Mudde and Kaltwasser 2015; Mudde 2004).

However, when participants were asked to talk more specifically about the extent to, and ways in, which the largely male leadership and membership could be expected to ideologically and practically support a politics of female empowerment, far greater levels of ambivalence came into view.

On the one hand, Lucy characterizes the BNP in terms of the fairness of its treatment of women, claiming that "all women members and non-members are treated fairly and with respect". Elizabeth also felt that the greater presence of women within the party could be expected to bring about a corresponding shift in the ideological climate in favor of a fuller support for women's interests; "...a lot of women are actually getting involved, so I would honestly say that the BNP...could sway, and could actually listen to women and listen to their issues and their grievances. Then I would say the BNP would get a lot of support". But the subtext to Elizabeth's hopeful rendition here, is clearly an acknowledgement of an underlying truth, namely that populist and extreme right organizations are rarely programmatic

supporters of women's rights, being at best gender blind, and at worst gender conservative (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2015, Meyer et al 2014).

Against Elizabeth's testimony, Isabelle's account was indicative of a more skeptical standpoint, stressing the enduring nature of BNP members' traditional patriarchal readings of gender roles; "some of the BNP members think that women should be quite subservient...that kind of pissed me off as well...they're just very closed-minded". Isabelle's account did reflect more widely shared misgivings about the political style of the BNP, and in a manner reflective of Hartevelde et al's (2015) suggestion that the masculinist and adversarial style of populist and extreme right organizations may potentially weaken their appeal to women.

The BNP were in part recognized as a party without a demonstrable and substantive commitment to a holistic politics of gender equality, and it was not even clear that our participants were themselves necessarily overly allied to such a politics. But the BNP *were* seen as only organization that, in standing as a bulwark against the incursions of Muslim civilization, could effectively speak to the understandable resentments of white women's backlash against the threat of Muslim patriarchy.

Conclusion

Extreme and populist radical right parties have conventionally been understood as '*Männerparteien*'. However, research suggests that the 'gender gap', seen as so characteristic of the extreme and populist radical right's political appeal, has been overplayed (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2015, Mayer 2013). On this basis, there is a need for further work to explore the context-specific relationship between the gendered and sexed nature of such organization's ideologies, structures and practices, and the orientations of its women supporters (Spierings and Zaslove 2015).

In addressing this need, this chapter has contributed to an understanding of how women supporters of an extreme right party in the UK signify gender and sexuality in the context of their anti-Islam and anti-Muslim positionings. Specifically, it has illuminated the ways in which gender and sexuality are deployed to pathologize Islam, and Muslim civilization, as irredeemably patriarchal, and Muslim men and Muslim women as respectively oppressors and victims. In achieving this end, women supporters of the BNP elaborate a gendered social drama, played out by four principal collective subjects, Muslim men (Oppressors), Muslim and vulnerable non-Muslim women (Victims), the BNP (Saviors) and non-Muslim women in the West (the Saved).

The chapter has sought to apply, and in its application extend, the conceptualization of the white backlash. White backlash politics offered a useful, because flexible and pragmatic, medium for the BNP to enlist support. Central to the white backlash was a constructed sense of 'unfairness' experienced by the 'white have nots' (Rhodes 2010), in a context of a politics of multicultural recognition of minorities, and the perceived abandonment of a marginalized and disadvantaged white majority-turned-'minority'. But whereas the application of the white backlash thesis within social scientific studies of the extreme/populist radical right has tended to lack a gender framing, and has tended to assume a conventional color-based 'racial' modelling, the application of the concept here specifically illuminates how women supporters of the extreme right may be drawn into a white backlash standpoint through a specifically gendered and ethno-cultural and religious rendering of contemporary 'unfairness' in the UK. Here, women supporters appear to have been drawn to the (inherently gender-conservative)

BNP precisely because of the latter's positioning of themselves as the only effective defenders of the hard-won gender fairness enjoyed by women of the West in the face of an irredeemably patriarchal Islamic, and Muslim threat in 'our national home'.

This research suggests the value of further exploration of how gender, and sexuality, function as intersectional ingredients informing white backlash politics in a context of multi-ethnic and multi-confessional diversity, and specifically where a 'clash of civilization' politics has re-framed the 'battle-lines' in less obviously 'racial' terms as those between Islam/Muslims and the Rest/West.

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