



A Southern European model? Gender regime change in Italy and Spain

Alba Alonso ^a, Rossella Ciccio ^b, Emanuela Lombardo ^{c,*}

^a University of Santiago de Compostela, Spain

^b University of Oxford, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

^c Madrid Complutense University, Spain

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Gender regimes
Southern Europe
Democracy
Italy
Spain
Gender-based violence
Polity
Civil society
Feminist movement
State feminism
Anti-gender

ABSTRACT

How do we understand differences in the gender regime of Southern European states? Our study challenges the idea of a common Southern European gender regime by studying evolution of policies against gender-based violence in Spain and Italy from the 1980s until today. This analysis shows that the two countries have taken different trajectories: while the Spanish gender regime is increasingly public-progressive, the Italian one remains public-conservative. The moment of transition to democracy is identified as a critical turning point that shaped the nature of the two gender regimes. This article further develops and operationalizes Sylvia Walby's theory of gender regime by showing that change is crucially affected by the dynamics between actors defending pro-and anti-feminist projects in the *polity* and *civil society* domains.

Introduction

How can we understand differences in the gender regime of Southern European states? Spain and Italy are often lumped together as belonging to the domestic (Walby, 2009) or conservative (Shire & Nemoto, 2020) model because of their shared authoritarian legacies and familistic welfare state, which entrench unequal gender relations and restrict women's access to the public sphere. Our study challenges the idea of a common Southern European model (Ferra, 1996) by showing that, while the Spanish gender regime has become increasingly public-progressive, the Italian gender regime remains public-conservative.

This article further develops Sylvia Walby's theory of gender regimes (2009; 2020) by investigating the political processes through which gender regimes are transformed. It contributes to theories on the nature of the relationship between Walby's four domains – economy, polity, violence and civil society – by analyzing how issues relating to gender-based violence (GBV) (see Walby, 2023) are transformed in the interactions between institutions and actors located in the polity and civil society. If the relationship between domains is one of mutual adaptation and co-evolution (Walby, 2009, 90–95), then our focus on the evolution of the *polity* and *civil society* domains in Spain and Italy allows to specify

how their interplay differently affects the development of GBV legislation and consequently gender regime change in the two countries. Furthermore, this article develops and broadens Walby's operationalization of gender regime by: a) expanding the range of factors considered in the *polity* to include the political party system, state feminism and the 'depth of democracy' (Walby, 2020, 145); and b) specifying the type of women's movement, strategic alliances, and the strength of anti-gender movements as crucial factors in the *civil society* domain.

Our analysis shows that the historical moment of the transition to democracy acted as a critical turning point setting the two countries on different trajectories. We also demonstrate that the differential evolution of the Italian and Spanish gender regimes depends on the relative strength and interactions between actors defending pro-and anti-feminist projects in both polity and civil society. These results demonstrate the importance of considering anti-feminist forces such as anti-gender mobilizations and radical right populist parties (RRPPs) neglected in previous analyses of gender regime change. While pro-equality factors exercised a greater pressure towards a public-progressive gender regime in Spain, conservative and anti-gender forces and the persistence of traditional gender norms account for the greater institutional inertia of the Italian gender regime. The next section presents the theoretical

* Corresponding author at: Departamento de Ciencia Política y Administración, Facultad de Ciencias Políticas y Sociología, Instituto de Investigaciones Feministas, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Campus de Somosaguas, 28223 Pozuelo de Alarcón, Madrid, Spain.

E-mail address: elombard@ucm.es (E. Lombardo).

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2023.102737>

Received 22 October 2022; Received in revised form 13 April 2023; Accepted 15 April 2023

Available online 25 April 2023

0277-5395/© 2023 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

framework and makes a case for looking at the dynamic interplay of the polity and civil society domain as an engine of change of gender regimes. After illustrating the data and method used, it proceeds to trace the empirical development of the polity and civil society domains and its influence on the evolution of legislation against gender-based violence in Italy and Spain. The final section concludes and highlights the key catalysts and dampeners of change in the two countries as well as identifying avenues for future research.

Civil society and polity as engine of gender regime change

Sylvia Walby defines gender regime as ‘a set of interrelated gendered social relations and gendered institutions that constitutes a system’ (2009, 301). According to Walby, the transformation of gender regimes is shaped by the dynamic interaction (co-evolution) between four types of domains -economy, polity, violence, and civil society- and regimes of inequality (primarily, class, gender and race/ethnicity). Here we focus on political dynamics and the interplay between civil society and polity.

Walby (2009, 2020) examines complex combinations of patriarchal and feminist forces to explain gender regime change. Our approach draws on theories of feminist politics and opposition to gender equality (Verloo, 2018; Verloo & Paternotte, 2018) and expands this focus by ‘zooming in’ on the interplay between pro- and anti-feminist actors active in the polity and civil society domains.

Scholarship on state feminism (McBride & Mazur, 2010) has demonstrated the relevance of alliances between feminist movements and women’s bureaucrats and policy agencies for progress in gender equality legislation in western post-industrial democracies (Woodward, 2003). This literature also often points to the presence of left-wing parties in government as a favorable condition for advancing women’s rights (Kittilson, 2013), making the analysis of years of left- vs right-wing cabinets relevant to observe comparatively.

However, in the current context of democratic backsliding, anti-gender mobilizations by conservative, religious and radical right populist actors threaten these partnerships between the state and civil society for promoting gender equality (Krizsán & Roggeband, 2021). Indeed, in Spain and Italy feminist mobilizations (Beccalli, 1994; García, 2015) are increasingly met by anti-gender campaigns (Cornejo & Pichardo, 2017; Lavizzari & Prearo, 2018; Prearo, 2020) and the opposition of radical right populist parties (RRPPs) such as Vox in Spain (Alonso & Espinosa, 2021) and Lega and Fratelli d’Italia in Italy (Bellè & Donà, 2021). Since illiberal governments adopt anti-gender equality policies and attack feminist organizations (Krizsán & Roggeband, 2021), the inclusion of anti-feminist actors in the analytical framework becomes necessary for understanding gender regime change in contexts of rising de-democratization.

The transformation of party systems across Europe brings another layer of complexity. Mainstream and radical right-wing parties (RRPPs) had not until recently made gender issues the focus of their programmatic strategies (Bale & Rovira-Kaltwasser, 2021). However, increased electoral fragmentation and volatility provides a new centrality to RRPPs and threatens state action on gender equality issues. This shift is crucial for the state of gender equality policies, and scholarly works show that RRPPs enjoy significant leverage in shaping the policy agenda of the mainstream right, also when not in government (Alonso & Espinosa, 2021).

In this article we analyze the co-evolution of the domains of polity and civil society with the domain of violence by taking gender-based violence (GBV) as the central issue for assessing gender regime change in the two selected countries. *Violence* as a domain refers to its deployment and regulation by the state, which depending on the forms it takes can constitute or challenge inequality (Walby, 2023, 2009). The use and regulation of GBV depends on the depth of democracy and the ‘effective political representation of the interests of women and minorities’ (Walby, 2009, 203). This makes polity and civil society dynamics between pro- and anti-feminist actors central to the possibility of

effectively ending violence and supporting victims. The *economy* domain, while not our focus, is mentioned for contextualization and when analytically relevant.

Methods, case selection, and research material

Italy and Spain are selected for theory building reasons in a most similar systems design. The two cases are generally considered *most similar* across a range of dimensions. They are included in the ‘Southern-European model’ of welfare regimes (Ferrera, 1996), traditionally sharing a strong role of the family in the provision of welfare (Naldini & Saraceno, 2008). Institutional similarities also include authoritarian legacies, and pervasive political corruption as a key liability for the quality of democracy (Mendilow & Peleg, 2014). Membership in the European Union has generally served to advance democratization and gender equality in both countries (Lombardo & Bustelo, 2012) even if in recent times the heightened neoliberal turn in the European Union has reinforced gender and socioeconomic inequalities (Lombardo, 2017). De-democratization processes have become more apparent after the 2008 economic crisis as both political institutions and the welfare state have come under significant strain and RRPPs have been on the rise (Alonso & Lombardo, 2018; Bellè & Donà, 2021).

Despite this broad set of commonalities, Italy and Spain show intriguing divergences in the evolution of their gender regimes (León et al., 2021). The differences are reflected in EIGE’s 2021 equality index. Table 1 shows that Spain performs significantly better than Italy both overall (73.7 vs 63.8) and in specific areas, particularly those of power (24.7 points difference) and work (10 points). Regarding violence, the EU Fundamental Rights Agency shows that women are less likely to report being victim of physical and sexual violence in Spain (22 %) as compared to Italy (27 %) (FRA, 2014). This indicator should be interpreted with some caution since it could also be influenced by the measurement framework adopted as well as differences in the institutional context (Merry, 2016).¹ Nonetheless, data also shows that the percentage of women ‘having heard of campaigns against violence against women’ is in Spain one of the highest in Europe (Italy 66 % vs Spain 85 %). Spanish women also show greater awareness of institutions that offer support to women victims of violence (FRA, 2014).

Our analysis focuses on the interplay between the polity and civil society domains and how it has differently affected the development of GBV legislation in the two countries. GBV was selected as an issue emblematic of the transformation occurring in the two countries because of its salience in contemporary feminist mobilizations, and its

Table 1

EIGE gender equality index in Italy, Spain and EU average, 2021. Data available at, <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2021/compare-countries/index/bar>

	Spain	Italy	EU
Power	76.9	52.2	55
Work	73.7	63.7	71.6
Time	64	59.3	64.9
Health	90.3	88.4	87.8
Knowledge	67.9	59	62.7
Money	78.4	79.4	82.4
General score	73.7	63.8	68

(Source: EIGE Gender Equality Index 2021.)

¹ Research shows that the incidence of women reporting being victims of violence tends to be higher in contexts of advanced gender equality legislation and women’s economic independence and visibility in the public sphere (Gracia & Merlo, 2016). In this view, an increase in the rate of reporting could also be interpreted as an indicator that women feel more comfortable in reporting violent behavior and support mechanisms are more developed.

centrality for democracy (Walby, 2009). Previous research also shows that GBV can act as an ambivalent issue that draws in the collaboration of conservative and right-wing actors with the intent to instrumentalize feminist mobilizations to heighten the criminalization of racial and other minorities (Colella, 2021; Whittier, 2018).

We develop a timeline of policy interventions in the field of GBV as emblematic of the transformation of the gender regimes of the two countries. Such a timeline is used to trace the unfolding of the domains of polity, civil society and violence over time and identifying relevant actors and policy outputs in both countries in a paired comparison (George & Bennett, 2005). The longitudinal analysis starts from the creation of gender equality institutions (1983 in Spain, 1984 in Italy) because this is the starting point in which feminist movements' demands acquire political legitimacy. The analysis of the evolution of GBV covers the period from 2001 (as this is the date of the first major legislations against GBV in Italy, closely followed by Spain's in 2004) until today. The specific focus on this period allows capturing the controversies around gender equality that were intensified with the emergence of anti-gender campaigns in Europe (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017) and the rise of RRRPs in Italy and Spain (Alonso & Espinosa, 2021; Bellè & Donà, 2021; Prearo, 2020). The analysis focuses on the central state, though Spain's decentralized structure and Italy's North-South divide must be kept in mind for contextualization (Lombardo & Alonso, 2020).

To understand the key determinants of dissimilar trajectories, the analysis proceeds as follows. First, it contextualizes the main factors involved in the development of gender regimes focusing on polity and civil society. It captures the two countries' positioning on a progressive-conservative continuum, that includes public ideas about gender roles and gender equality policies, and the prevalence of il/liberal values amongst right-wing parties. It then proceeds to present differences in the evolution of policies against GBV in Italy and Spain. We look both at pre-adoption (inclusion in the agenda, main frames), adoption (approval of laws and policies), and post-adoption stages (development and implementation of policy instruments). The material analyzed consists of secondary expert literature, the compilation of key policy documents and statistics.² Since secondary information of the relevant topics for each country were sufficiently extensive for the period studied, there was no need to conduct interviews.

The comparative analysis of relevant factors (see Table 2) for gender equality in the polity and civil society domains and the closer comparative analysis of GBV in the two countries allows us to assess the type of gender regime that emerges from the interactions of pro and anti-feminist actors in both domains and the gender regime project they envision.

The forms of gender regimes we consider for assessing the Spanish and Italian cases are the public vs. domestic and progressive vs. con-

servative forms. The public regime empowers women in the public sphere but may still segregate them in less powerful positions; the domestic regime excludes women from access to employment, political representation and bodily autonomy (Walby, 2020, 2009). The distinction between conservative and progressive gender regimes further develops on Walby's neoliberal vs social democratic categorization of public gender regimes by capturing state action to influence gender roles and ideas about gender equality (Gottfried, 2023; Shire, 2023; Shire & Nemoto, 2020). Hence, public gender regimes can be *progressive* if they show a social democratic orientation to promoting equal gender roles in all four domains, a positive pattern of institutionalization of gender equality policies including GBV legislation, and socio-cultural ideas favorable to gender equality. They are instead *conservative* to the extent that they adopt policies that enable women a limited access to the public sphere (e.g. in the labor market or parliamentary arena) and relegate GBV and other 'women's issues' to the private domain of either the family (e.g. childcare) or the voluntary sector (e.g. women's organizations).

In this article, we focus particularly on the distinction between conservative and progressive forms of gender regime. We avoid instead referring to the neoliberal type since it is misleading in capturing the origins of gender regimes change in the two countries, and especially in the case of Italy where the lack of provisions for victims of GBV is not so much the outcome of neoliberal restructuring but rather a legacy of the historical low prioritization and institutionalization of gender equality in the country. We refer to neoliberalism only when relevant to understand socioeconomic developments.

Polity: critical turning points, catalysts and dampeners of change

The analysis of the polity domain identifies the transition to democracy as a critical turning point for the Spanish and Italian gender regimes. The transition occurred in Italy during the cold war, resulting in a political system blocked around the center due to the existence of a very strong communist party and an equally strong catholic one. In this tense context, the catholic and communist parties reached a political consensus around the ideology of 'familialism' or the recognition of the family as the most important unit of social regulation and provision, including for the system of social protection (Saraceno, 1994). This ideology acted as an obstacle to the adoption of policies that would alter the traditional roles of men as breadwinners and women as caregivers (Lombardo & Del Giorgio, 2013). Beyond the historical dominance of Christian-Democracy, left-wing parties enjoyed less opportunities to govern and often only in weak majorities. The persistence of a male-dominated political context and comparatively low level of women's representation in parliament have also acted as 'dampeners' of change towards gender equality (Guerrina, 2014).

In Spain the moment of transition to democracy was more favorable to the development of a public-progressive gender regime. The end of the Franco dictatorship in 1977 coincided with the entry of feminist actors in left parties, allowing them to exercise greater pressure from within the state (Bustelo, 2016). The European Union, which at the time of Italian transition in the 1950s was just beginning to institutionalize, had by the time of the Spanish transition already developed a gender equality policy framework. The EU was thus able to apply pressure on Spain to adopt gender equality policies during the 1986 process of accession (Lombardo, 2004). In sum, we observe the presence of several catalysts of change in Spain in the form of women pressuring left parties from within, the alternance of right- and left-wing governments (Roggeband, 2012), pressure from the EU and ability of the left to govern for a period of 24 years during which gender equality policies and institutions were consolidated.

The *political party system* was also more favorable to gender equality progress in Spain than in Italy. Mainstream center-right parties governing in Italy for long periods (Christian Democracy for 40 years, Forza Italia for 20 years) played a key anti-feminist role. In the so-called First

Table 2
Summary of relevant factors analyzed in the polity and civil society domains.

Domain	Factor
Polity	Transition to democracy (critical juncture)
	Party system
	Political ideology of the party in government
	Women's descriptive representation
	Strength of State Feminism
Civil society	Political influence of organized religion
	Type of women's movement
	Strength of oppositional anti-gender actors
	Public opinion on gender roles and gender equality

² We look at the main plans, regulations, political agreements, and policy evaluations, as well as key indicators. They provide an accurate picture of GBV policies both in pre and post-adoption stages.

Republic (1948–1994), Christian Democratic parties, being the political ally of the Vatican, promoted measures protecting the traditional family and granted political influence to the catholic hierarchy. During the so-called Second Republic (1994–) Berlusconi's Forza Italia (FI) party dismantled the gender equality machinery, deprioritized gender equality measures (Pietrobelli et al., 2020, 382), and overall curtailed democratic accountability to the service of the corrupt private interests of its leader.

The Spanish party system has proved instead more stable and characterized by the alternance between left and right-wing cabinets. Spain's main right-wing party (PP) has shown an ambivalent position towards gender equality policies. Its ambition to attract the median voter and become the hegemonic party at the right of the political spectrum produced a strategic convergence with the socialist party (PSOE) which contributes to explain Spain's position as a forerunner in the promotion of gender equality in the last decades (Valiente, 2008). However, the PP deployed a narrow equality agenda and opposed developments on reproductive rights and same-sex partnership, aligning with the Spanish Catholic Church on those issues (Alonso & Lombardo, 2018). Nonetheless, as social support for those measures grew, the PP opted for lack of active opposition and maintained many of the equality measures introduced under left-wing governments.

Mainstream and radical right-wing parties (RRPPs) have a longer history in Italy than in Spain. While Spain lacked until recently a relevant party to the right of the PP, Italy, 'was the only established democracy in Southern Europe which experienced a period of (far-right) populist government during which equality and LGBTQI+ policies regressed due to delegitimizing discourse and attempts to dismantle or reframe existing policies' (Belle & Donà, 2021, 1). Since 1994, the Lega governed with FI at central, regional and local levels and formed government with the populist M5S (Five Star Movement) in 2018–2019. Additionally, the electoral appeal of the far-right Fratelli d'Italia (FdI) party has grown considerably in the last decade, and in 2022 Giorgia Meloni (leader of FdI) has become the first female prime minister in the history of the country. In Spain, RRPPs are a more recent phenomenon. Vox achieved parliamentary representation for the first time only in the 2018 regional elections in Andalusia. However, already in 2019, it became the third largest party with 52 seats in the national parliament, challenging PP's long-lasting hegemony of the Spanish right.

The position of right-wing parties on social and cultural issues is relevant to understanding the trajectories of the gender regime in our two cases. The CHES expert survey (2006–2019) (see Table 3) shows that Italy features a consistent presence of mainstream and RRPPs that reject postmaterialist values and support order, tradition, and stability, believing that the government should be a firm moral authority (*GALTAN dimension*) and strongly oppose gender equality policies (*social lifestyle dimension*). These are the cases of Lega, Alleanza Nazionale and CCD/UDC, and more recently FdI. The Italian RRPPs parties are open allies of anti-gender movements as demonstrated by the participation of Salvini (Lega) and Meloni (FdI) in the 2019 Verona World Congress of

Family (Pavan, 2020). In Spain instead both the PP and Ciudadanos (Cs) show a more moderate position on both dimensions and only Vox scores above nine on both indicators.

The *political ideology of the party in government* matters for gender equality with left parties generally being more proactive than center-right parties in advancing gender equality policies and institutionalization in both our cases. In Spain, long periods (22 years) of majority government by the socialist party (PSOE) and the strength of feminists within left-wing parties (PSOE first, and then Podemos) have ensured continuous progress in advancing the gender equality agenda. In this context, the PP has found dismantling the existing programs too high an electoral cost (Alonso & Field, 2021; Valiente, 2008). By contrast, in Italy the center-left party PD enjoyed fewer opportunities to govern, and often governed in unstable majorities which promoted consensus-seeking and hindered ambitious equality policies (Lombardo & Del Giorgio, 2013). The PD also lacked that critical mass of feminists within the party that pushed for progress in Spain. Furthermore, the constitution of the PD, the successor of the old communist party, incorporated some conservative actors from the former Christian democratic party.

The introduction of compulsory gender quotas in Spain in 2007 and the presence of voluntary quotas in left-wing parties (Verge, 2013) have allowed for a relatively high presence of women in parliament (47 % in 2019). By contrast, women's representation has remained below or around 10 % in Italy until the mid-2000s, and reached levels above 30 % only from the 2018 national elections (Andreuccioli et al., 2018).

The institutionalization of gender equality machinery presents dissimilar patterns in the two countries. Italy shows a weak and unstable tradition of *state feminism* with the National Commission for Equality (1984) and the Ministry for equal opportunities (1996) -without portfolio-, set up respectively by the socialist and center-left parties. Spain shows instead a steady development of the equality machinery with the progressive institutionalization of independent institutions at both the national (Woman's Institute 1983, General State Secretariat 2004, Ministry of Equality 2008, all set up by the socialist party) and regional levels (Bustelo, 2016).

The influence of *organized religion* on gender equality policies appears stronger in Italy than in Spain. In Italy the Vatican has traditionally exercised a strong political interference on sexuality and reproductive issues through its political allies (such as the DC during the first republic). This interference has produced considerable policy impacts, for instance with regard to same-sex unions, abortion rights and assisted reproductive technology (Lombardo & Del Giorgio, 2013). While the Catholic church mobilized against sexuality and reproductive issues also in Spain, it was not able to produce significant policy impacts, and mostly succeeded only in delaying advancements. The greater secularization of Spanish society as compared to the Italian one contributes to understanding these diverging contexts (Naldini & Jurado-Guerrero, 2013).

Civil society: feminist movement, anti-gender and conservative forces

The key developments in the civil society domain that contribute to explain the different trajectories of gender regimes in Italy and Spain are the type of feminist movement, the strength of anti-gender actors and socio-cultural attitudes towards gender roles and gender equality.

The type of *feminist movement*, as a catalyst for change, shows important differences in the two countries. In Spain a large portion of the feminist movement was state-oriented with important connections with feminists in political parties, while at the same time a strong autonomous feminist movement pressured the state from outside. Preventing GBV has been 'a unifying battle for the Spanish feminist movement' since the 1970s (Valiente, 2013, 182). Feminist persistent demands to reform the Penal Code and strengthen public services for women victims of violence pushed the two main parties to introduce a broad set of policies. Feminist law experts actively contributed to shape

Table 3
Right-wing parties' positions in Italy and Spain.

Political party	2019		2014		2006	
	GAL-TAN	Social lifestyle	GAL-TAN	Social lifestyle	GAL-TAN	Social lifestyle
LN (IT)	9,2	8,22	9,14	9,19		
FdI (IT)	9,42	8,47	9,28	9,75		
FI (IT)	6,84	6,22				
AN (IT)					8,88	9,19
CCD/UDC (IT)					7,63	8,8
PP (ES)	8	6,9	8	7	8,46	7,82
Cs (ES)	5,46	4,13	3,2	2,8		
Vox (ES)	9,46	9				

(Source: CHES Expert survey, 2019, 2014, 2006.)

the design of the new policies and the approval of comprehensive legislative measures (Roggeband, 2012). In the last decades, Spain has witnessed an intense wave of new feminist mobilization with an intersectional perspective – with a greater focus on sexuality, race and ethnicity- and demanding a feminist transformation of society and institutions. GBV is a central issue of those campaigns with strong emphasis on both improving the implementation of existing regulations and reforming norms on sexual violence. Feminist mobilizations around popular GBV cases like *La Manada* (group rape) or social media campaigns like #Cuentalo (Spanish #MeToo) contributed to incorporate those issues to the political agenda.

The Italian feminist movement has instead been traditionally more oriented towards differences. Viewing the state as patriarchal and thus theorizing the need for feminists to remain outside of institutions, the Italian difference feminism has produced limited influence on public policies (Beccalli, 1994). GBV was one of the central issues of the Italian feminist movement in the 1970s, although the movement experienced less intense mobilizations in the subsequent decades. It is in 2016, with the birth of Non-Una-di-Meno (NUDM) – a self-defined trans-feminist movement inspired by the Argentinian movement *Ni Una Menos* – that a new wave of feminist mobilizations and massive demonstrations against GBV erupt again on the public scene (Montella et al., 2019). The movement also actively campaigned against the growing influence of anti-gender actors in Italy (for instance during the World Congress of Families in Verona in 2019) and regressive family legislation, also known as ‘Pillon Decree’ (Lavizzari & Prearo, 2018; Prearo, 2020). The movement adopts an intersectional perspective which aims to build alliances across class-gender-race-LGBTQ+ to contrast the institutional rhetoric of sexism, homophobia and racism of mainstream conservative and RPPs parties. Compared to past feminist mobilizations, NUDM appears more oriented towards policy impact, as shows the development of a feminist plan against GBV (Montella et al., 2019; Pietrobelli et al., 2020).

The presence of *oppositional anti-gender actors* played a significant role in both Italy and Spain. According to Kuhar and Paternotte (2017, 255) ‘Spain appears as the earliest case in Europe: the Catholic Church, conservative groups and political parties mobilized against the government of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero and the same-sex marriage bill from 2004’. Since then, anti-feminist civil society grassroots groups such as Hazte Oír or Red Madre have effectively raised media attention to formerly non-controversial issues such as sex education in schools (Cornejo & Pichardo, 2017) and tried to undermine existing abortion regulations (Alonso & Lombardo, 2018). Their policy impact has remained limited to date. However, the rise of Vox may increase the influence of these actors, as shown by its recent alliance with anti-feminist groups challenging the existing GBV framework (Alonso & Espinosa, 2021).

Since 2012, a strong anti-gender neocatholic and political movement with intense ties with actors from RPPs (Lega and Fratelli d'Italia) has actively mobilized in Italy to ‘defend’ the traditional heterosexual family and attack gender equality and LGBT rights (Lavizzari & Prearo, 2018; Pavan, 2020). Prearo (2020) argues that this movement, while having ecclesiastical connections, develops a secularized discourse that allows anti-gender actors to occupy a broader space. The movement, in collaboration with conservative political leaders at different levels of government, has achieved a growing politicization of gender, sexuality, and pro-traditional-family issues (Prearo, 2020). The appointment in 2022 of Eugenia Roccella, a vocally anti-gender spokesperson, to lead the renamed ‘Ministry of Family, Natality and Equality’ exemplifies these political connections.

Finally, an important intervening factor for understanding change in the gender regime of the two countries are differences in *public opinion about gender roles, inequalities and gender equality policies*. Eurobarometer data shows a greater prevalence of conservative ideas about gender in Italian socio-political culture compared to Spain. (Table 4). The level of awareness of gender inequalities and support for gender equality

Table 4

Public opinion about gender equality in Italy and Spain.

	Italy	Spain
Gender stereotypes index	8.6	5.1
Gender stereotypes in politics index	8.7	6.6
Men should contribute to equality index	14	15.2

(Source: Special Eurobarometer- Gender Equality 2017.)

measures is in Spain close to that of Northern European countries, while Italy is often below the EU average (Eurobarometer - Gender Equality 2017).

A study by León et al. (2021) argues that the Spanish more proactive path towards gender equality compared with Italy reflects a clearer departure from ideas regarding the traditional division of labor. According to León et al. (2021), Italy is an outlier with respect to global trends in family policy in Europe. The more conservative nature of the Italian gender regime shows also on the domain of the economy with comparatively higher rates of women’s economic discrimination and one of the lowest rates of women’s participation in the labor market in Europe.

Gender-based violence: divergent Southern European gender regimes

In this section, we describe policy development on GBV to enable a closer analysis of the divergent paths in the two countries.

Spain

In Spain, GBV is treated as a public matter that needs to be addressed institutionally and comprehensively by the state (Bustelo, 2016). From the late 1970s, the feminist movement focused on legal reforms leading to the modification of the Penal Code in 1989 and the definition of violence against women as a crime ‘against sexual freedom’ and no longer ‘against honesty’. However, this law did not consider the gendered nature of violence (Roggeband, 2012). In 1998, the Spanish government issued the first national policy plan to combat domestic violence. The most important measures included a public awareness campaign, the expansion of services to denounce domestic violence and refuge for victims. Two further reforms (Organic Law 11/1999 and 14/1999) expanded the definition of domestic violence to include psychological forms and violence between non-cohabiting partners. While women’s organizations were appreciative of these changes, they also criticized the lack of a comprehensive policy approach and the scarcity of funding (Roggeband, 2012).

The 2000s marked a heightened politicization of GBV in Spain with all parties giving attention to the issue in electoral campaigns. In 2004, the newly elected Socialist Party (PSOE) introduced a new comprehensive legislation on protection measures against GBV (Organic Law 1/2004) – which was acclaimed as an international good practice (Pastor-Gosálbez et al., 2021). This legislation recognized GBV as a gendered phenomenon with structural causes in society that must be addressed through systemic interventions including judicial and penal measures, but also a wide range of educational, healthcare, and socio-economic ones. In Spain, feminist mobilizations have explicitly sought to influence legislation and the 2017 state-wide agreement on GBV and the 2021 sexual violence bill prove their significant impact.

GBV in Spain is addressed through several machinery in different institutional branches (executive, judiciary) at different levels of government, and most anti-violence centers are managed by the state. The implementation and inter-institutional coordination remain weak, but the most important setbacks relate to the budget cuts during the austerity crisis (Lombardo, 2017). Despite resistance to some of these measures, the mainstream conservative party PP has been responsive to GBV, as shown by its approval of the first national plan in 1998, the first

specific regulation in 1999, the implementation of the first state-wide cross-party agreement on GBV in 2017, and support to the adoption of the 2004 PSOE comprehensive law against GBV. The inclusion of GBV in the institutional agenda, along with vast cross-party support, also reflects rapid changes in public attitudes towards GBV (Ferrer & Bosch, 2014).

Italy

In Italy, similarly to Spain, the issue of GBV started to gain political visibility in the 1970s because of feminist mobilizations demanding its recognition as a public problem requiring state intervention (Pietrobelli et al., 2020). However, it took nearly twenty years for the first law against sexual violence to be adopted (Law 66/196). Other legislation followed in 2001 (domestic violence), 2006 (female genital mutilation) and 2009 (stalking). The adoption of these reforms was the outcome of the relentless work of feminist groups struggling with legislators over many years (Pietrobelli et al., 2020). The first national plan against GBV was adopted only in 2010 and was criticized by feminist networks for employing an emergency approach, thus not recognizing the structural nature of the problem (D.i.Re, 2018; Lanzoni, 2014). The 2017–2020 national plan took some distance from this approach. Developed with the involvement of feminist groups and women's centers and shelters, the plan proposed a more structural vision, which reflected the principles of the Istanbul Convention. Nonetheless, limited resources were allocated to the implementation of the plan and the financing of women's shelters remained a critical issue. Services aimed at supporting the victims of violence are largely provided by non-profit organizations and managed by feminist activists with limited involvement and support from the state. This is one of the main differences with Spain's state-based approach. Also missing is attention to the creation of a public system of prevention and campaigns aimed at increasing cultural awareness of GBV. Despite increased interaction between feminist and women's networks and state actors and institutions to set minimum standards for anti-violence centers, this relationship remains characterized by the tension between public desire to standardize and bureaucratize provisions and feminist approaches based on personalized interventions and the practice of the relationship between women (Pietrobelli et al., 2020).

Progress in the criminalization of GBV occurred later in Italy than in Spain, but it is especially in the field of services aimed at supporting women who are victims of violence that the two countries show striking differences. In Italy, the management of anti-violence centers remains a prerogative of autonomous feminist organizations with little support from the state. While this approach led to the development of a feminist empowering approach to attending victims of violence, the endemic lack of funding hampers the provision of continuous and comprehensive services across the whole territory. This situation also reflects developments within the Italian feminist movement and groups from the late 1980s and the turn towards a more autonomous form of organizing and a politics of women's differences (Beccalli, 1994). Thus, the interaction between the type of feminist movement (difference and autonomous in Italy, equality and state-oriented in Spain) and the greater closure of the political system to feminist demands obstructed change towards a progressive gender regime in Italy, resulting in a weak institutionalization of welfare support to victims. Finally, oppositional actors from center-right parties, the Vatican, RRPPs, and anti-feminist movements have blocked policy developments such as the 2021 bill on hate crimes against LGBT people (so called DDL Zan) (Feo, 2022).

In sum, the comparative analysis shows the development of a *public and progressive* gender regime in Spain, while in Italy the evolution of policies against GBV deploys rather features of a *public-conservative* gender regime (Table 5).

Table 5

Timeline of GBV policies' main developments in Italy and Spain.

Period	Spain	Italy
1980s	Penal Code reform (1989)	
1990s	First GBV Plan (1998)	Law on sexual violence (1999)
	Law on domestic violence (1999)	
	Development of shelters and helplines	
2000s	Comprehensive law on GBV (2004)	Law on domestic violence (2001)
	Specialized bodies on GBV in the public administration and the judiciary (2004)	Law on female genital mutilation (2006) and on stalking (2009)
	Regional laws on GBV	First GBV Plan (2010)
2010s	Istanbul Convention ratification (2014)	Istanbul Convention ratification (2013)
	State-wide cross-party agreement on GBV (2017)	Law on stalking, sexual and domestic violence (2019)
2020s	Penal Code reform on sexual violence (2022)	

Conclusions

There is no such thing as a Southern European gender regime. Our analysis of the evolution of gender-based violence (GBV) legislation from the 1980s until today leads us to conclude that Italy and Spain cannot be lumped together under the same model. GBV has entered the public domain in both countries, but only in Spain welfare support to victims is state managed, while it remains a more private matter left in the hands of feminist organizations in Italy. These developments show that if the Spanish gender regime has become increasingly public-progressive, the Italian one has remained public-conservative.

This article contributes to theoretical understanding of the political process behind gender regime change by focusing on the dynamic interplay of the *polity* and *civil society* domains and how it affected the development of GBV legislation in Italy and Spain. It also contributes to broadening the operationalization of gender regime theory by expanding the range of factors considered in both domains and including previously neglected actors such as the type of feminist movement, the role of anti-gender actors and RRPPs.

Our analysis showed that the moment of transition to democracy was a critical turning point for understanding the divergent path of the two countries. The postwar cold war context locked in the Italian political system on the ideology of conservative familism which further limited women's inclusion in formal political institutions, while feminist presence within left parties and pressure from the EU enabled a greater institutionalization of gender equality policy in Spain since the democratic transition in the 1970s. The feminist movement was a force of change in both cases, but the two countries show different configurations of dampeners and catalysts of change.

We identified the following key catalysts and dampeners of change in the *polity*: a) a *political party system* that generated a more favorable context in Spain in terms of mainstream center-right parties (and their il/liberal ideas), center-left parties (years in cabinet) and radical right populist parties (duration in government/party system); b) a '*deeper*' *democracy* in Spain in terms of women's political representation and a more limited influence of organized religion in policy-making; c) a weak *institutionalization of gender equality machinery and institutions* in Italy. In the domain of *civil society*, crucial catalysts and dampeners are the following: a) a *strong and state-oriented feminist movement in Spain vs. strong but autonomous Italian feminist movement* account for the weaker influence of feminist mobilizations in Italy and the lack of continuity of gender equality policy development that the presence of femocrats and feminists within left parties ensured in Spain; b) *the strength of anti-gender movements in Italy and their ties with conservative and right-wing political parties* explain their greater institutional access and policy influence; c) *public attitudes about gender roles* were more progressive in Spain, more conservative in Italy. Overall, the configuration of catalysts

of change favored a shift towards a *public-progressive* gender regime in Spain, while in Italy feminist and other progressive actors faced a hostile political environment and were less able to contrast strong conservative and anti-gender forces in both the polity and civil society.

This comparative study has investigated the political mechanisms explaining the divergent gender regimes of Italy and Spain through a focus on the polity and civil society domains, and their combined effect on the evolution of gender-based violence legislation. Future studies will need to consider the crucial role played by factors located in the domain of the economy, and issues related to knowledge, sexuality and the body (see also Verloo (2022a, 2022b)) to provide a more comprehensive understanding of gender regime change in Southern European states.

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank Sylvia Walby, Karen Shire, and Heidi Gottfried for the inspiring workshop on Gender Regime Change they organized in Berlin in April 2022 and for their and all participants' helpful feedback to our paper. We also thank editors and anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments. Emanuela Lombardo acknowledges Spain's Ministry of Universities for funding her research visiting through the Mobility for requalification of academic staff (Ref. MV24/21 29675) and the Scuola Normale Superiore in Florence and Cosmos group coordinated by Donatella della Porta for hosting the research stay.

References

- Alonso, A., & Lombardo, E. (2018). Gender equality and de-democratization processes: The case of Spain. *Politics and Governance*, 14, 460–482.
- Alonso, A., & Espinosa, J. (2021). Blitzkrieg against democracy: Gender equality and the rise of the populist radical right in Spain. *Social Politics*, 28(3), 656–681.
- Alonso, S., & Field, B. (2021). Spain: The development and decline of the Popular Party. In T. Bale, & C. Rovira-Kaltwasser (Eds.), *Riding the populist wave. Europe's mainstream right in crisis* (pp. 216–245). Cambridge: CUP.
- Andreuccioli, C., Borsi, L., Frati, M., & Maragnani, L. (2018). Parità vo cercando. Senato della Repubblica, Ufficio di Valutazione Impatto. Available at https://www.senato.it/application/xmanager/projects/leg17/Focus_8_marzo.pdf accessed 29 August 2022.
- Bale, T., & Rovira-Kaltwasser, C. (Eds.). (2021). *Riding the populist wave. Europe's mainstream right in crisis*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Beccalli, B. (1994). *The modern women's movement in Italy*. NLR 204 March-April.
- Bellè, E., & Donà, A. (2021). Power to the people? The Populist Italian Lega, the anti-gender movement and the defense of the family. In B. Vida (Ed.), *Gender and the politics of crises in times of de-democratization: Opposition to gender+ equality policies* (pp. 135–152). London: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Bustelo, M. (2016). Three decades of state feminism and gender equality policies in multi-governed Spain. *Sex Roles*, 74, 107–120.
- Colella, D. (2021). Femotionalism and anti-gender backlash: The instrumental use of gender equality in the nationalist discourse of the Fratelli d'Italia party. *Gender & Development*, 29(2–3), 269–289.
- Cornejo, M., & Pichardo, J. (2017). From the pulpit to the streets: Ultra-conservative religious positions against gender in Spain. In R. Kuhar, & D. Paternotte (Eds.), *Anti-gender campaigns in Europe. Mobilizing against equality* (pp. 234–251). London: Rowman & Littlefield.
- D.i.Re. (2018). *Implementation of the Istanbul Convention in Italy, Shadow Report of women's NGOs*. Rome: D.i.Re.
- Feo, F. (2022). Legislative reforms to fight discrimination and violence against LGBTQ+: The failure of the Zan Bill in Italy. *European Journal of Gender and Politics*, 5(1), 149–151.
- Ferrera, M. (1996). The “Southern model” of welfare in social Europe. *Journal of European Social Policy*, 6(1), 17–37.
- Ferrer, V., & Bosch, E. (2014). Gender violence as a social problem in Spain: Attitudes and acceptability. *Sex Roles*, 70, 506–521.
- FRA. (2014). *Fundamental Rights Agency report on gender based violence*. Brussels: FRA.
- García, J. (2015). *Feminismos en tiempos de resistencias a la austeridad y confluencias por la ruptura con el 78. Anuario Movimientos Sociales 2014*. Available at. Fundación Betiko accessed 15 August 2021 <http://fundacionbetiko.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Movimiento-feminista-2014.pdf>.
- George, A., & Bennett, A. (2005). *Case studies and theory development in the social sciences*. Cambridge, UK: MIT Press.
- Gottfried, H. (2023). Multi-scalar geographies of inequalities: Trajectories of gender regimes in a world regional perspective. *Women's Studies International Forum*. This issue.
- Guerrina, R. (2014). (Re)presenting women: Gender and the politics of in contemporary Italy. In K. Celis, & S. Childs (Eds.), *Gender, conservatism and political representation* (pp. 161–182). Colchester: ECPR Press.
- Gracia, E., & Merlo, J. (2016). Intimate partner violence against women and the Nordic paradox. *Social Science & Medicine*, 157, 27–30.
- Kittilson, M. (2013). Gender and party politics. In G. Waylen, K. Celis, J. Kantola, & L. Weldon (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of gender and politics* (pp. 536–553). Oxford: OUP.
- Krizsán, A., & Roggeband, C. (2021). Reconfiguring state-movement relations in the context of de-democratization. *Social Politics*, 28(5), 604–628.
- Kuhar, R., & Paternotte, D. (2017). *Anti-gender campaigns in Europe. Mobilizing against equality*. London: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Lanzoni, S. (2014). *Rapporto sull'attuazione della Piattaforma d'Azione di Pechino Rilevazione quinquennale: 2009–2014*. Rome: Fond. Pangea.
- Lavizzari, A., & Prearo, M. (2018). The anti-gender movement in Italy: Catholic participation between electoral and protest politics. *European Societies*, 21(3), 422–442.
- León, M., Pavolini, E., Miró, J., & Sorrenti, A. (2021). Policy change and partisan politics: Understanding family policy differentiation in two similar countries. *Social Politics*, 28(2), 451–476.
- Lombardo, E. (2017). The Spanish gender regime in the EU context: Changes and struggles in times of austerity. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 24(1), 20–33.
- Lombardo, E. (2004). *La europeización de la política española de igualdad de género*. Valencia: Tirant lo Blanch.
- Lombardo, E., & Alonso, A. (2020). Gender regime change in decentralized states: The case of Spain. *Social Politics*, 27(3), 449–466.
- Lombardo, E., & Del Giorgio, E. (2013). EU antidiscrimination policy and its unintended domestic consequences: The institutionalisation of multiple equalities in Italy. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 39, 12–21.
- Lombardo, E., & Bustelo, M. (2012). Comparing the Europeanization of multiple inequalities in Southern Europe: a discursive-institutionalist analysis. In E. Lombardo, & M. Forest (Eds.), *The Europeanization of gender equality policies* (pp. 121–144). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- McBride, D., & Mazur, A. (2010). *The politics of state feminism*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Mendilow, J., & Peleg, I. (Eds.). (2014). *Corruption in the contemporary world: Theory, practice and hotspots*. New Jersey: Lexington.
- Merry, S. (2016). Cultural dimensions of power/knowledge: The challenges of measuring violence against women. *Sociologie du travail*, 58(4), 370–380.
- Montella, T., Picchi, S., & Fiorletta, S. (2019). Il piano femminista contro la violenza di genere dalla performatività dei corpi alla presa di parola: il movimento femminista Non Una Di Meno in Italia. *Studi sulla questione criminale*, 14(1–2), 259–276.
- Naldini, M., & Saraceno, C. (2008). Social and family policies in Italy: Not totally frozen but far from structural reforms. *Social Policy & Administration*, 42(7), 733–748.
- Naldini, M., & Jurado-Guerrero, T. (2013). Family and welfare state reorientation in Spain and inertia in Italy from a European perspective. *Population Review*, 52(1), 43–61.
- Pastor-Gosálbez, I., Belzunegui-Eraso, A., Calvo-Merino, M., & Pontón-Merino, P. (2021). La violencia de género en España: un análisis quince años después de la Ley 1/2004. *Revista Española de Investigaciones Sociológicas*, 174, 109–128.
- Pavan, E. (2020). We are family. The conflict between conservative movements and feminists. *Contemporary Italian. Politics*, 12(2), 243–257.
- Pietrobelli, M., Toffanin, A., Busi, B., & Misiti, M. (2020). Violence against women in Italy after Beijing 1995: The relationship between women's movement(s), feminist practices and state policies. *Gender & Development*, 28(2), 377–392.
- Prearo, M. (2020). *L'ipotesi neocattolica. Politologia dei movimenti anti-gender*. Milano: Mimesis.
- Roggeband, C. (2012). Shifting policy responses to domestic violence in the Netherlands and Spain (1980–2009). *Violence Against Women*, 18(7), 784–806.
- Saraceno, C. (1994). The ambivalent familism of the Italian welfare state. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, 1.1, 60–82.
- Shire, K. (2023). Social democratic imaginaries of transformation in conservative gender regimes. *Women's Studies International Forum*. This issue.
- Shire, K., & Nemoto, K. (2020). The origins and transformations of conservative gender regimes in Germany and Japan. *Social Politics*, 27(3), 432–448.
- Valiente, C. (2013). Gender equality policymaking in Spain (2008–11): Losing momentum. In B. Field, & A. Botti (Eds.), *Politics and society in contemporary Spain* (pp. 179–195). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Valiente, C. (2008). Spain at the vanguard in European gender equality policies. In R. Silke (Ed.), *Gender politics in the expanding European Union* (pp. 101–117). New York: Berghahn.
- Verge, T. (2013). Regulating gender equality in political office in Southern Europe: The cases of Greece, Portugal and Spain. *Representation*, 49(4), 439–452.
- Verloo, M. (Ed.). (2018). *Varieties of opposition to gender equality in Europe*. London: Routledge.
- Verloo, M. (2022). *Gender regimes and gendered bodies: A reflection on the politics of bodies, physical reproduction, sexualities and kinship in Europe. Paper presented at the Workshop on Gender regime futures*, Berlin, 21–22 April 2022.
- Verloo, M. (2022b). Can we see a gender regime transformation in Europe? *Global Dialogue*, 12(1), 22–23. DIALOGUE.
- Verloo, M., & Paternotte, D. (2018). The feminist project under threat in Europe. *Politics and Governance*, 6(3), 1–5.
- Walby, S. (2009). *Globalization and inequalities: Complexity and contested modernities*. London: SAGE.
- Walby, S. (2020). Varieties of gender regimes. *Social Politics*, 27(3), 414–431.

- Walby, S. (2023). Authoritarianism, violence, and varieties of gender regimes: Violence as an institutional domain. *Women's Studies International Forum*. This issue.
- Whittier, N. (2018). *Frenemies: Feminists, conservatives, and sexual violence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Woodward, A. (2003). Building velvet triangles: Gender and informal governance. In T. Christiansen, & S. Piattoni (Eds.), *Informal governance in the European Union* (pp. 76–93). Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Emanuela Lombardo is Associate Professor of Political Science and member of the Institute of Feminist Research at Madrid Complutense University, Spain. Her main research lines are on gender equality policies -particularly in the European Union and Spain- and currently on feminism and democracy within the Horizon Europe [CCINDLE](#) project (Ref. 101061256, 2022-2026) as PI of a work package and of the Madrid Complutense University research team. Her latest monographs are *Gender and Political Analysis* (with Johanna Kantola, Palgrave, 2017) and *The Symbolic Representation of Gender* (with Petra Meier, Ashgate, 2014). Recent articles can be found in *Social Politics, Policy & Politics*, *International Political Science Review*, *Journal of Gender Studies*, *European Journal of Political Research*, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, and *Policy and Society*. She co-directs the research group Gender and Politics ([GEYPO](#)) with María Bustelo and has been coordinator of the evaluation of gender research projects in the area of social science for the Spanish Ministry of Research (2018–2021). Researchgate https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Emanuela_Lombardo.

Alba Alonso is Senior Lecturer in Political Science at the University of Santiago de Compostela. Her main area of research refers to gender and politics, with a particular emphasis on the implementation of equality policies, the study of federalism and territorial dynamics from a gender perspective, and more recently, the analysis of radical right parties. She has been a member of the QUING Project and of various EU-wide studies launched by the European Institute for Gender Equality. Most recent works appeared in journals like *Social Politics, Politics and Gender*, *European Political Science*, and *European Journal of Women's Studies* as well as in collective books like the *Handbook on Gender, Diversity and Federalism* edited by Jill Vickers, Joan Grace and Cheryl Collier (Edward Elgar Publishing).

Rossella Ciccía is Associate Professor of Social Policy at the University of Oxford. Her research interests lie in field of comparative social policy with a particular focus on issues relating to social inequalities, gender, care and paid work in Europe and Latin America. She has been the PI of the Marie Curie Project AGenDA and the recipient of the Emma Goldman Award for substantial contributions to the study of feminist and inequality issues in Europe. She has co-edited several special issues and books, included a recent one on the Feminist Intersectional Alliances: the ideas, practices and politics of intersectional solidarity. Recent articles can be found in the *Journal of Social Policy*, *European Journal of Social Policy*, *Work, Employment & Society*, *Social Politics, Policy & Society*, *Quality and Quantity*, *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, *Gender and Politics*, *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis*, *Social Policy & Administration*.