

Theorizing Feminist Struggles in the Triangle of Neoliberalism, Conservatism, and Nationalism

Anna Elomäki*¹ and Johanna Kantola²

With the figure of a triangle as our analytical tool, we analyze the challenges that the convergence of neoliberalism, conservatism, and nationalism poses for gender equality and feminism. Focusing on the current Finnish political context, we argue that feminist critique of these three gendered political projects is compartmentalized: women's organizations and feminist actors focus on one point of the triangle of neoliberalism, conservatism, and nationalism instead of engaging with the intersections and coalitions of the three projects. Compartmentalization leads to limited feminist analysis of the political context and policies.

Introduction

Since the economic recession in 2008, the European Union (EU) and a number of member states have opted for strict austerity politics to tackle the crisis. Such austerity politics have signified the intensification of previous neoliberal policies, including cutting down welfare services and public sector jobs. The implications have been gendered, as illustrated by a number of studies from different parts of Europe (Bargawi, Cozzi, and Himmelweit 2017; Bettio et al. 2012; Kantola and Lombardo 2017; Karamessini and Rubery 2014). Despite commitments to gender mainstreaming, neither the EU nor its member states have evaluated the gendered impacts of the policies let alone changed them to a more gender equal direction (Jacquot 2017). Instead, due to the new priority given to the economy and austerity, feminist analyses and debates have found it difficult to enter the public and political agenda and have an impact on the adopted policies (Cavaghan 2017). At the same time, the increasing popularity of conservative and right-wing populist parties promoting “family values” and traditional understandings of gender as well as the

¹Department of Cultures, Faculty of Arts, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

²Gender Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Tampere, Tampere, Finland

*anna.elomaki@helsinki.fi

emergence of a broader “anti-gender” movement has further sidelined gender equality as a political goal (e.g. Kovàts and Poim 2015; Köttig, Bitzan, and Petö 2017; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). In many countries, the neoliberalization of economic and social policies has been accompanied by the strengthening of their conservative aspects, for instance through maternalist family policies or restriction of abortion rights (e.g. Lombardo 2017; Szelewa 2014). The increasing anti-feminism in public discourses has been closely linked to the exclusionary nationalism and racism of the emerging right-wing populist parties (Keskinen 2012).

The dire political situation has had the paradoxical effect of strengthening, instead of undermining, feminist struggles and critique in some countries. Despite the fact that financial resources have been cut from traditional feminist actors as a result of austerity politics, for instance in Spain, feminist activists have played a central role in the new social movements and populist left parties which have responded to the government’s austerity politics (Lombardo 2017). At the same time, the plans in Spain, Poland, and other European countries to restrict abortion have sparked street protests and solidarity movements across Europe (Zbyszewska 2017). Furthermore, following the example of the Swedish Feminist Initiative party, feminist and women’s equality political parties have been established in Finland and in the United Kingdom (Elomäki and Kantola 2017; Evans and Kenny 2017).

We explore these dynamics in one political context, namely Finland, where the right-conservative-populist government in power since 2015 has significantly intensified austerity politics, weakened gender equality policy, and harshened immigration policy. Our article is based on the insight that Finnish political context and the government’s policies are underpinned by three political projects—neoliberalism, conservatism, and nationalism. These gendered projects converge in public policies and discourses in a manner that poses particular challenges for gender equality and feminism. Much of the feminist literature on the relationships between these three projects has focused on the combined effect of neoliberalism and conservatism (e.g. Andrew and Maddison 2010; Brown 2006; Cooper 2017; Phipps 2012; Porter 2012). We, however, explore how various policies in Finland draw not just on neoliberalism and conservatism but also on nationalism to ensure their success. In other words, we explore a political moment where the three political projects of neoliberalism, conservatism, and nationalism come together to form a “triangle” informing public politics.

With the figure of a triangle as our analytical tool, we analyze the particular challenges that the convergence of neoliberalism, conservatism, and nationalism poses to feminism. Finland has a strong state feminist tradition where the women’s movement has co-operated closely with the state (manifested in patterns of state-based funding, practices of consultation and hearings on legislative and policy proposals, and close personal networks between actors), which has made the movement strongly co-opted to state discourses and practices

(Holli 2003; Kantola 2006). Parts of the women's movement have furthermore become not only increasingly professional but also specialized. The country has an established set of women's organizations that work on their specific niche issues: mainstream gender equality policy, minority women, sexual equality, or human rights. Each has specialized in advancing certain forms of equality or challenging particular inequalities. In such a context, the new dynamics created by austerity politics, and increased visibility of conservative values and anti-immigration stances need to be analyzed.

Our key research question then becomes: how does feminism engage with the gendered forms of neoliberalism, conservatism, and nationalism that underpin the politics of the Finnish government? To answer this question we have gathered an extensive body of data of the public statements and press releases of key actors from the years 2011 to 2016. The material consists of about 300 texts from seven actors. Our key finding is that feminist critique is compartmentalized: actors focus on the points of the triangle instead of engaging with the intersections and coalitions of the three political projects. Compartmentalization has severe repercussions: feminist critique is co-opted to conservatism and neoliberalism, and the critique of nationalism is marginalized. Our analysis suggests that the ability of women's and feminist movement actors to address the triangle as a whole depends on the degree to which they pay attention to intersectional inequality.

While mindful of the fact that the political projects of neoliberalism, conservatism, and nationalism are each highly context specific, we draw broader conclusions about how feminist and political theorists should address these political projects. Our key theoretical argument is that these three political forces that shape the current political context—in Finland and in other configurations in other parts of the worlds—are often discussed in pairs, for instance at the intersections of neoliberalism and conservatism, or conservatism and nationalism. We argue that instead they should be conceptualized as a triangle, where each point and side are co-constitutive of the others. In other words, understanding the possibilities and limitations of feminist critique in the current economic and political context shaped by neoliberalism, conservatism, and nationalism requires a holistic analytical approach that addresses the convergence of and coalitions between the three political projects.

Toward a Feminist Theory of the Triangle of Neoliberalism, Conservatism, and Nationalism

In this section, we draw upon feminist theories of neoliberalism, conservatism, and nationalism and their intersections to build toward a theoretical and conceptual framework to analyze the convergence of the three political projects and its effects for gender equality and feminism. Our suggestion—based on the Finnish case—is that while it has been useful in the past to provide

feminist critiques of neoliberalism, conservatism, and nationalism separately, understanding feminist struggles in the current political context requires a more holistic approach that pays attention to the interactions between the three political projects. We use the Finnish context to illustrate what we call “the triangle of neoliberalism, conservatism, and nationalism” and its gendered effects.

We recognize that the concepts of neoliberalism, conservatism, and nationalism are used in different ways and that the distinctions between the three political projects are not always clear cut. For example, in feminist literature conservatism has been theorized as a multifaceted phenomenon including elements connected to neoliberalism (Bryson and Heppell 2010), nationalism (Brown 2006), or both (Verloo 2016). We argue, however, that for the purposes of analyzing feminist struggles in the current political context, it is useful to address neoliberalism, conservatism, and nationalism as three distinct, yet partly overlapping and interconnected projects.

The political projects of neoliberalism, conservatism, and nationalism have long histories in the Finnish context. Their strength and way they may work in coalition became apparent when the economic liberal National Coalition Party, conservative Centre Party, and nationalist The Finns party formed a coalition government in May 2015. The three parties adopted a “strategic government program,” which put forward strict austerity politics and a harsher immigration policy. Feminist commentators were quick to point out the total sidelining of gender equality from the government’s agenda: gender equality was deemed both irrelevant and incompatible with the new policies and strategic governance (Elomäki et al. 2016).

Of the three political projects, the detrimental impacts of *neoliberalism*—marketization of public services, transferring of costs and risk from the state to individuals and families, employment and social policies that responsabilize individuals, and governance reforms that extend private sector management practices to the public sector—on the Finnish “women friendly” welfare state have been extensively explored (e.g. Heiskala and Kantola 2010; Julkunen 2010; Kantola and Kananen 2013). As elsewhere, the recent economic and financial crisis has provided opportunities to advance the neoliberal project (Kantola 2018; Walby 2015). The conservative-right-populist government implemented significant cuts in public services and benefits, including the dismantling of the hallmark of the women-friendly welfare state, namely the statutory right to public childcare for all children. It has also proposed to corporatize and marketize public social and health care provision and transfer costs from employees to private employers in order to increase international competitiveness (Elomäki and Kantola 2017).

The long-standing influence of *conservatism*, which we in this article define narrowly as a conservative stance on moral and ethical issues that involves the promotion of conventional family structures and gender roles, has meant that the Finnish welfare state has been weaker and less social-democratic than its

Nordic counterparts. The influence of conservatism is visible, among other things, in the Finnish care regime that provides financial incentives for parents to take care of their children at home as well as in the long-standing political neglect of intimate partner violence (Kantola 2006). The visibility of traditional views on gender and family has in recent years increased in public speech, and they now shape government's gender equality policies through the Centre Party and The Finns. The 2015 government program was the first in 20 years that did not mention gender equality as the goal of the government, and gender equality policy has been narrowed down with regard to the long-standing goal of more equal division of care between women and men (Elomäki et al. 2016; Elomäki and Ylöstalo 2017). The higher status given to the family is visible in that for the first time there is a designated government minister for family affairs. While the anti-abortion views of two of the three leaders of the coalition parties have not lead to new restrictions in the area of reproductive rights, the conservative agenda has gained visibility through a citizen's initiative to allow health care personnel to abstain from prescribing or performing abortions due to reasons of conscience.

The third political project informing government policy is *nationalism*, which we in this article define as an exclusionary politics of closed borders and racialized distinctions between "us" and "them" expressed in the growing support for far-right populist parties (see Norocel 2013).¹ Anti-immigration, anti-multicultural, and racist arguments have become more visible and acceptable in public speech since The Finns increased its support in the municipal elections of 2008 and gained the position as the third biggest party in the parliamentary elections of 2011 (Kantola 2018; Keskinen, Norocel, and Jørgensen 2016; Ylä-Anttila and Luhtakallio 2017). While strict immigration policy has been characteristic of Finnish policy for decades, the policies have substantially hardened since The Finns entered the government in 2015 and were able to set the political agenda and dominate the political discourse about immigration and multiculturalism in the face of the increasing numbers of refugees entering Europe. The party worked to ensure that Finland would not be an attractive country for refugees, reducing benefits, legislating on stricter rules on family reunification (Pellander 2015), and shaping Finland's EU relationship by refusing to agree to the common compulsory refugee allocation policy and a quota mechanism. The anti-immigration policies and the racist rhetoric have been gendered: Finnish women were to be protected from the violence of other culture's men (Keskinen 2012, 2013).

As evident from the Finnish case, gender plays a central role in all three political projects, and each of them poses challenges for gender equality and feminism. While neoliberal discourses and policies portray both women and men as rational economic actors and push women to the labor market, policies that dismantle the welfare state and re-privatize and informalize care rely on and intensify women's unpaid or poorly compensated work, increasing class-based and racialized inequalities among women (e.g. Bakker 2003; Bargawi,

Cozzi, and Himmelweit 2017; Brown 2015). Conservatism, in turn, can be seen as an explicitly anti-feminist force that relies on and promotes traditional views on gender and the family and resists changes in these areas (Verloo 2016). Gender relations play a crucial role in all nationalist projects (Yuval-Davis 1997), and racializing nationalist projects appropriate notions of gender equality and gendered violence for their own purposes and are closely connected to anti-feminism, misogyny, and views that “gender equality has gone too far” (Keskinen 2012, 2013; Mulinari and Neergaard 2014).

Although neoliberalism, conservatism, and nationalism are gendered in different ways and pose distinct challenges to gender equality and feminism, they may work against gender equality in mutually reinforcing ways. Feminist theorists have conceptualized the relationships between the three political projects mainly in pairs, focusing on the relationship between neoliberalism and conservatism. One of the most well-known accounts is Brown’s (2006) analysis of the convergence of the “economic-political rationality” of neoliberalism and the “moral-political rationality” of conservatism. In different national contexts, the coalition between neoliberalism and conservatism has been seen to lead to doubly unfavorable conditions for the women’s movement (Andrew and Maddison 2010; Knight and Rodgers 2012). It has also been suggested that due to the convergence of neoliberalism and conservatism, it has become difficult for feminists to reject one without embracing another (Phipps 2012, 12). In addition, neoliberalism and conservatism have been found to find common ground in questions of family responsibility in a manner that has reinforced traditional family values (Cooper 2017).

The relationship between conservatism and nationalism and its significance for feminism has been addressed mainly in research on right-wing populism, in which conservative views on gender and the family meet a harsh anti-immigration stance and racism (e.g. Köttig, Bitzan, and Petö 2017). The links between neoliberalism and nationalism have been explored in research on the connection of “welfare chauvinism” targeting migrants to the neoliberal restructuring of the state (e.g. Keskinen, Norocel, and Jørgensen 2016), but the significance of this connection for gender equality and feminism remains to be analyzed. Theoretical debates which would bring the three political projects together are scarce.

We argue that in the current political contexts it is crucial to understand how neoliberalism, conservatism, and nationalism converge in posing challenges for gender equality and feminism. In order to make visible the interconnections between the three projects and the significance of their convergence for feminist struggles, we conceptualize the relations between neoliberalism, conservatism, and nationalism as a triangle, where each point and each side are connected to others. As an analytical tool, the idea of the triangle goes beyond acknowledging the simultaneous presence of the three political projects in specific geographic contexts: it draws attention to how

neoliberalism, conservatism, and nationalism may, despite their differences, form coalitions and converge in public discourses and policies.

The Finnish case demonstrates how the three projects intertwine in informing policies in different fields, including austerity, gender equality, and immigration policy. In austerity politics, conservatism coincides with neoliberalism in the restriction of statutory childcare rights while the home care allowance has been kept intact. In gender equality policy, conservative tendencies interact with neoliberalism and nationalism: neoliberal governance reforms and austerity policies have shaped the proposed policy measures, and certain gender equality problems—including division of care—are portrayed as problems of migrant families rather than structural problems concerning the society as a whole (Elomäki and Ylöstalo 2017).

Notably, we understand neoliberalism, conservatism, and nationalism as “political projects” instead of for example “ideologies” or “governance strategies” (for different understandings of neoliberalism, see Larner 2000; Ferguson 2009). As political projects, they aim at the transformation of social structures, practices, and relations and have certain core principles they seek to extend to different spheres of society. These projects are advanced by multiple actors and involve high levels of contestation and struggle (cf. Connell 2010; Walby 2009). As political projects, neoliberalism, conservatism, and nationalism are dynamic, changing, and contextual. For example, the process of neoliberalization has been historically and geographically contingent (e.g. Peck and Tickell 2002), and conservatism in a particular European country is not the same as conservatism in the US context (Verloo 2016).

We further emphasize that the relationships between the three projects as well as the sites of their convergence are constituted through particular national and local coalitions (cf. Porter 2012). Therefore, the triangle of neoliberalism, conservatism, and nationalism and the relationships it entails are temporary, contextual constellations. In line with this understanding, our focus is on how the three projects manifest themselves in political discourses and policies in a specific geographic context, how they work in coalition with one another, and how they are resisted.

Feminism is as a contested concept as the three political projects discussed above. Feminism too can be understood and defined in a number of different ways. Its opponents call it an “ideology” that blinds its proponents (see Ikävalko and Kantola 2017). For feminist scholars, in contrast, it is a set of theoretical approaches, which are ontologically, epistemologically, and methodologically diverse but share certain ethical and sometimes political commitments to transform unjust gender relations (see Ackerly and True 2011). Like neoliberalism, conservatism, and nationalism, feminism too can be understood as a political project that aims at societal change and that takes multiple, contextual forms and involves struggle and contestation. As a political project feminism often opposes, critiques, and struggles against neoliberalism, conservatism, and nationalism as their effects on gender equality can be so

detrimental. However, feminism can also become co-opted by or complicit with the other political projects either willingly—using them strategically—or unwillingly (e.g. de Jong and Kimm 2017).

Feminism is a controversial term in Finland as in other countries and, in public discourse, there is a strong distinction between “good” gender equality and “bad” feminism (Holli 2012). Some of the women’s movement and feminist actors studied in this article are explicitly feminist and others understand themselves in terms of “women” or “gender equality.” To illustrate these dynamics we follow the self-definitions of the actors and pinpoint whether the critique comes from an explicitly feminist perspective or is rather framed as a women’s or gender equality issue. Women’s and gender equality actors are clearly part of the feminist political project, but our analysis suggests that whether the actors frame themselves as feminist has crucial repercussions for their ability to respond to the triangle of neoliberalism, conservatism, and nationalism.

Research Material and Methodology

To analyze empirically how Finnish women’s movement and feminist actors have responded to the triangle of neoliberalism, conservatism, and nationalism, we have collected an extensive research material of publicly available statements, documents, position papers, and press releases. Included in the research material are seven actors (see table 1) representative of the different parts of the women’s and feminist movement. The research material consists of nearly 300 individual texts.

We have selected the three key traditional women’s movement actors, namely the Feminist Association Unioni (*Naisialiitto Unioni*, an explicitly feminist and since 2014 also anti-racist, autonomous association with individual membership established in 1892), the National Council of Women of Finland NJKL (*Naisjärjestöjen Keskusliitto*, an umbrella organization established in 1911, whose nearly 60 members include traditional women’s organizations and some political women’s organizations), and the Coalition of Finnish Women’s Associations NYTKIS (*Naisjärjestöt Yhteistyössä*, a cross-party organization for political parties’ women’s organizations established in 1988 that also includes as members Unioni, NJKL, and the Finnish Gender Studies Association). We have also included the Council for Gender Equality TANE (*Tasa-arvoasiain neuvottelukunta*), which is a consultative parliamentary council for gender equality representation of all parliamentary political parties. NYTKIS and TANE are examples of the way in which the Finnish women’s movement has been closely integrated into the state and which have been previously shown to be powerful in setting the agenda for gender equality policy (Holli 2006).

Table 1. Women's and feminist movement actors and collected material per year

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	Total
Feminist Association Unioni (<i>Naisialiitto unioni</i>)	3	3	6	11	19	13	55
National Council of Women of Finland NJKL (<i>Naisjärjestöjen Keskusliitto</i>)	5	7	4	8	17	12	53
Coalition of Finnish Women's Associations NYTKIS (<i>Naisjärjestöt Yhteistyössä</i>)	6	11	11	7	16	11	62
Council for Gender Equality TANE (<i>Tasa-arvoasiain neuvottelukunta</i>)	11	11	21	19	9	12	83
Monika—Multicultural Women's Association (<i>Monika-Naiset Liitto</i>)				1	2	8	11
TASAN!					14	5	19
Feminist Party (<i>Feministinen puolue</i>)						10	10
Total							293

Unlike previous studies, we have included in our case selection three recently established women's movement and feminist actors. Monika—Multicultural Women's Association (*Monika-Naiset Liitto*) is a growing NGO that provides services and advocates for immigrant women. It was recently taken into the state budgetary frame and receives direct state funding. TASAN! is a new feminist actor created in 2015, which has chosen not to become an association in line of Finnish tradition but operates as a network of individuals. We have also included the Feminist Party established in 2016 that won its first seat in the municipal elections in 2017. The latter two have been formed in clear reaction against the current political context. Inclusion of these new actors adds complexity to the analysis and brings to light new dimensions about Finnish feminist struggles that would be overlooked if the focus was only on traditional women's organizations.

A key criterion selecting the actors has been the extent to which they seek to influence government policy and the triangle of neoliberalism, conservatism, and nationalism underpinning it. This has meant leaving out smaller and more local actors, which do not aim at influencing government policies to the same extent as the ones selected. We have also left out our own academic feminist struggles, which we have discussed extensively elsewhere (Elomäki et al. 2016; Elomäki and Kantola 2017).

The research material covers the years 2011–2016. This time frame contains the gradual introduction of austerity policies as well as the development of The Finns into a major political party. The material was collected from the websites of the organizations in January 2017. It covers all documents that reflect the position of the organizations on topical issues.² Because what

organizations include on their websites is subjective and because material might have been lost due to website changes, the collected material may not reflect all the activities of the organizations.³

Our methodology combines quantitative analysis with qualitative content analysis. For the purposes of quantitative analysis, we have categorized the documents according to whether they critically address neoliberalism, conservatism, and nationalism. Different gender equality themes (e.g. gender equality policy and legislation, work–life balance, equality at work and equal pay, violence against women, human trafficking and prostitution, decision-making, gender equality in education) can be framed in different ways (see Lombardo et al. 2009). They can be discussed in connection to one or several of points of the triangle or without any reference to the three political projects.

The struggles against neoliberalism, conservatism, and nationalism can either take the form of opposing something (e.g. policy, values) or being in favor of something. In our categorization, critiques of neoliberalism cover critical references to austerity measures, structural reforms, and values and practices connected to the neoliberal project, as well as efforts to portray economy in non-neoliberal terms. Struggles against conservatism cover critique of policies and ideas underpinned by conservative understandings of gender and the family, as well as proposals to change gender and family orders. Finally, struggles against nationalism cover critique of exclusionary nationalism, racism, and strict immigration policies, as well as pro-EU and pro-immigration views. We have used quantitative analysis to track changes in the frequency of references to the different points and sides of the triangle over time in general as well as for each actor.

Qualitative content analysis makes it possible to discern what forms the critique of conservatism, neoliberalism, and nationalism takes among women's and feminist movement actors and how the actors understand the connections between the three political projects. The following questions have guided our qualitative analysis: How are the statements and activities of the selected actors located in relation to the points and sides of the triangle of neoliberalism, conservatism, and nationalism? How have their respective positions as regard to the triangle changed over time? To what extent do organizations react to the key events related to the political context and frame their positions on gender equality issues in terms of the political context?

Compartmentalization of Feminist Struggles

We have structured our analysis and key findings under three themes: (i) compartmentalization of feminist struggles, (ii) co-optation to conservatism and neoliberalism, and (iii) marginalization of the critique of nationalism. We discuss each in turn. In this first section, we show that Finnish women's and

feminist movement actors rarely engage with the intersections of the three political projects. Using the idea of the triangle of neoliberalism, conservatism, and nationalism as our analytical tool, we argue that the actors focus on the points of the triangle and pay less attention to its sides or the triangle as a whole. We call this tendency the compartmentalization of feminist struggles. Our two other analytical findings—the co-optation to conservatism and neoliberalism, and marginalization of the critique of nationalism—are closely connected to compartmentalization.

Our analysis reveals that critiquing different manifestations of conservatism is at the heart of Finnish feminist and women's movements (see table 2). Opposition to conservatism was by far the most dominant way of framing these struggles in the beginning of 2010s and it has retained its centrality. Core gender equality issues dominate the articulations of critiques of conservatism: challenging gender stereotypes or the illusion of gender neutrality; challenging traditional gender roles, gendered structures and practices in education, politics, and economic decision-making; and calls for equal division of care responsibilities between women and men. Violence against women and prostitution are resisted through the lens of conservatism too. The focus on conservatism is understandable, as conservatism is closely linked with patriarchy and the inequalities connected to it, which have historically been the main target of women's and feminist movements.

Resistance to neoliberalism and nationalism has become part of the Finnish women's and feminist movement's agenda in the 2010s, reflecting changes in the political context. We can discern an urgent effort to engage with economic policy and make visible the gendered consequences of austerity measures and neoliberal structural reforms. A more qualitative content analysis illustrates, however, the thinness of the critique of neoliberalism (see section "Co-optation to Conservatism and Neoliberalism"). Resisting nationalism has emerged as a stronger trend in the last two years of the time frame. While some actors have addressed the exclusionary nationalism of The Finns party and the tightening immigration and refugee policies and seen these as feminist issues, this critique is limited to a few actors and for most parts remains weak (see section "Marginality of Critique of Nationalism").

Table 2. The percentage of all documents addressing neoliberalism, conservatism, and nationalism per year

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Neoliberalism	32%	34%	24%	39%	45%	42%
Conservatism	80%	59%	67%	83%	51%	61%
Nationalism	20%	6%	10%	2%	26%	37%
Multidimensional	24%	13%	17%	30%	30%	31%

Table 3. The percentage of documents of different actors addressing neoliberalism, conservatism, and nationalism

	Neoliberalism	Conservatism	Nationalism	Multidimensional
Feminist Association Unioni	24%	71%	33%	25%
Coalition of Finnish Women's Associations	53%	74%	23%	40%
National Council of Women of Finland	29%	55%	8%	16%
Council for Gender Equality	29%	80%	10%	25%
Monika—Multicultural Women's Association	0%	18%	36%	0%
TASAN!	25%	60%	15%	20%
Feminist Party	40%	60%	80%	50%

The women's and feminist movement actors have distinct profiles in relation to critiquing the three political projects (see table 3). Critiquing conservatism is the most important frame for the traditional women's movement organizations (NJKL, NYTKIS, TANE, Unioni) as well as for one of the new actors (TASAN!). Interestingly, resisting nationalism and racism as its manifestation is the main struggle not just for Monika, the multicultural women's association, but also for the new Feminist Party. In addition, one of the established organizations, the explicitly feminist Unioni, has significantly increased its critical engagement with nationalism in 2015 and 2016. Critiquing neoliberalism is not a relative priority for any of the organizations although two of the established actors (NYTKIS and TANE) and the new Feminist Party articulate its gendered effects relatively often. It is evident that, apart from Unioni, resisting nationalism is not central to the established women's organizations or to TASAN!. In turn, the multicultural women's association Monika does not address neoliberalism at all.

Our findings suggest that although many Finnish women's and feminist movement actors have begun to acknowledge the significance of neoliberalism and nationalism for feminist struggles, their resistance remains compartmentalized: most actors focus on resisting points of the triangle instead of addressing the intersections and convergences of the three political projects and their combined effects. Although women's and feminist movement actors are making increasing efforts to address more than one point of the triangle at once, multidimensional analysis remains rare and weak. There are significant differences between the actors as regards to how often they engage in multidimensional analysis, which sides of the triangle they address, and how they understand the relationships between the three political projects.

We argue that the differences between the actors as regards to whether and how they engage with neoliberalism, conservatism, and nationalism as well as their intersections are connected to their self-understandings as organizations and to the degree to which they pay attention to intersectional inequalities. Actors that identify as women's or gender equality organizations and have a strong white and middle class profile are likely to focus on conservatism and be less critical of neoliberalism and nationalism. In contrast, actors that are explicitly committed to feminism and take intersectionality seriously are more equipped to address all three projects and their combined effects.

It is rare for Finnish women's and feminist movement actors—both old and new—to address the triangle of neoliberalism, conservatism, and nationalism as a whole. For established organizations, joint statements by many human rights organizations are often needed before the threefold political context becomes visible and before all three political projects are resisted at once (e.g. NYTKIS 8/2014, Unioni 3/2015). The way neoliberalism, conservatism, and nationalism work together against gender equality is most clearly articulated in a joint statement on violence against women from the United Nations (NYTKIS 4/2016). In addition to addressing problems related to conservatism (e.g. definition of rape), this statement points out how racism and austerity disrupt efforts to combat violence against women:

During the fall of 2015 a new far-right anti-immigrant group, Soldiers of Odin, began patrolling cities in Finland. Among Soldiers of Odin, there are members with criminal record, often linked to VAW. By claiming that Soldiers of Odin protect women's integrity ('naisrauha'), they are actually hijacking the concepts of activism against VAW and putting it in use in a racist discourse. . . . At the same time, due to the austerity policy women's organizations monitoring the implementation of international and regional treaties and conventions are facing cuts to their state funding. (NYTKIS 4/2016)

In contrast and underlining the importance of joint action, an almost identical statement issued by one of the organizations alone leaves out the discussion on racism (NYTKIS 9/2016).

The new Feminist Party most consistently connects neoliberalism, conservatism, and nationalism. For instance, the Party's press release on the visit of Gudrun Schyman, the leader of the Swedish Feminist Initiative party, makes visible how the three political projects simultaneously shape the political context:

Austerity has weakened in particular the situation of women, immigrants and disabled people across the EU. In Finland non-discrimination laws have been left on the table one after another. Racism has increased and borders are being closed in front of those in need of help. (FP 4/2016)

Resistance to the triangle as a whole is best articulated in the Party's views on economic policy, where opposition to austerity is combined with an understanding of economic policy as a tool to change conservative family leave arrangements and decrease racism (FP 5/2016).

As regards the sides of the triangle, women's and feminist movement actors mainly address the relationship between conservatism and neoliberalism. For most established organizations and for TASAN! this is clearly the most important side of the triangle. The simultaneous presence of conservatism and neoliberalism in Finnish politics is acknowledged in various ways. In statements commenting on the results of the 2015 parliamentary election, some key established women's organizations voiced a concern for the remasculinization of politics as well as for the looming expenditure cuts (NJKL 2/2012; NYTKIS 4/2015). In a comment on the government program, concern for the sidelining of gender equality is placed side by side with concern for the gendered effects of spending cuts (NYTKIS 9/2016). Although the simultaneous influence of neoliberalism and conservatism on political agenda is acknowledged, the two are seen as separate forces rather than as interconnected projects working in unison against gender equality.

The strongest analysis of the current political context in terms of conservatism and neoliberalism comes from one of the new actors, namely the campaign-based network TASAN! A blog post clearly outlines the convergence of conservative values and neoliberal goals:

Family-centered values and the view that everyone should manage by oneself are visible in the media. The restriction of statutory childcare rights is part of neoliberal politics visible in Finland, where care responsibility is being transferred from the public sector to individuals and families. (TASAN! 3/2016)

Much less attention has been paid to the links between conservatism and nationalism and neoliberalism, and in both cases mainly by explicitly feminist actors. The relationship between conservatism and nationalism comes to the fore in observations on how sexism, anti-feminism and the marginality of gender equality converge with racism and right-wing populism (FP 4/2016, FP 10/2016, TASAN! 1/2016, Unioni 9/2014, Unioni 3/2015). Critique of conservatism and critique of nationalism come together also in discussions on the disregard of human rights. For example, the harshening views toward sexual and gender minorities are connected to the harshening views toward ethnic minorities, the paperless, and refugees (Unioni 3/2015). The ability to resist conservatism and nationalism as interconnected projects rather than as distinct forces is thus connected to an intersectional approach, where LGBTI rights and anti-racism are seen as key feminist issues.

The Feminist Party is the only actor to connect neoliberalism and nationalism. The Party takes an intersectional approach when analyzing the effects of austerity, arguing that in addition to women, immigrants too have been

particularly hit (FP 4/2016, FP 10/2016). Furthermore, the Party portrays austerity as one reason for increased racism and encourages public spending on activities countering racism:

Feminist economic policy understands that everything that decreases discrimination, inequality, and racism is an investment in the future. It is short-sighted to set the dispossessed against each other through cutting from the poor and thus build ground for hate and racism. (FP 5/2016)

The lack of feminist analysis of the intertwining of neoliberalism and nationalism—despite the strong discourse of welfare chauvinism that supports cuts in public spending in Finland—tells that it is easier for Finnish women's and feminist movement actors to link conservatism to neoliberalism and nationalism than to connect points of the triangle that are less important for their self-understandings and agenda.

Our analysis thus reveals that it is difficult for both old and new women's and feminist movement actors to address the intertwining of neoliberalism, conservatism, and nationalism. Rather, they criticize these political projects that shape the political context and inform specific policies as separate forces and do not see them as equally important for their struggle. The ability of actors to address the interconnections between the three projects depends on the degree to which they pay attention to intersectional inequalities.

Co-optation to Conservatism and Neoliberalism

In this section we ask how critiques of the different points and sides of the triangle might paradoxically be co-opted to the very political projects which are being fought against. Co-optation has been a recurrent theme in particular in debates about the effects of neoliberalism on feminism (e.g. [de Jong and Kimm 2017](#); [Fraser 2013](#)). We find significant levels of co-optation toward all three political projects, in particular in the texts of the established women's movement and gender equality actors. One reason for this is that political parties across the political spectrum—including the economically liberal, conservative, and nationalist ones—are represented in their decision-making bodies.

Co-optation to neoliberalism is present in the lack of explicit critique of austerity, in the concepts and vocabularies used in discussions about the economy, as well as in usage of arguments based on efficiency and costs and benefits. The established women's organizations' resistance to neoliberalism does not question the overall necessity of austerity. They merely critique some of its gendered consequences. For instance, some of these organizations did not question the restriction of the statutory right to childcare as such, but merely called for gender impact assessment (NJKL 3/2016, NJKL 11/2016; NYTKIS 14/2015). We have suggested elsewhere that calls for gender impact assessment make the critique of austerity technical ([Elomäki and Kantola 2017](#)). It creates

the impression that the policy would be legitimate if only a gender analysis was undertaken. The feminist actor Unioni is the only established organization that has explicitly taken an anti-austerity stance and rejected proposed expenditure cuts. The critique of neoliberal austerity policies has been curtailed by the presence of government parties in the organizations' decision-making bodies (Elomäki and Kantola 2017).

Furthermore, established women's movement actors have to a large extent adopted the concepts and framings of the government, which waters down their critique. For instance, instead of talking about "austerity" or "spending cuts" (*talouskuri, leikkaukset*), many organizations use the terms favored by the government: "savings" (*säästöt*) and "adjustments" (*sopeutukset*). Women's movement actors do not question the dominant discourse about the crisis which is used to justify austerity and neoliberal reforms. They regularly refer to "difficult economic times," "recession," or "current economic situation," thereby accepting the dominant interpretations of the economic conditions for government policies.

Third form of co-optation to neoliberalism are arguments that draw attention to the economic benefits of gender equality and follow the neoliberal, economized logic of efficiency and cost-benefit calculation. Framing gender equality in terms of economic benefits is not as common among Finnish women's and feminist movement actors as in many other contexts (e.g. Elomäki 2015), but appears to be increasing. One established women's movement actor argues in its critique of the government's gender equality action plan that "gender equality creates a sustainable basis for economy and growth" (NJKL 6/2016), and another backs up its concern for women's poverty with a macroeconomic argument about the importance of women's purchase power for public finance (NYTKIS 2/2015). One of the new actors was explicitly built on arguments about "gender equality as a national success factor" and about the need for a "competitiveness leap in working life" (TASAN 1/2015, 3/2015).

All actors utilize arguments about efficiency and costs in debates connected to all three political projects. For example, the lack of political will to combat violence against women is challenged with arguments about the costs of violence (e.g. Unioni 12/2015, NYTKIS 4/2016, FP 8/2016), and austerity measures are resisted on the grounds of them not leading to the desired cuts in spending (e.g. NYTKIS 14/2015, TANE 5/2015, Unioni 17/2015). While the usage of arguments about economic costs and benefits can be interpreted as a further sign of co-optation to neoliberalism, their comparatively rare usage also tells that Finnish women's movement and feminist actors have little experience of strategic use of neoliberal framings in order to influence policy-makers.

Although critique of conservatism is central to the Finnish women's movement, a closer analysis reveals high levels of co-optation to conservatism. These co-optations are closely connected to the insider position of women

from conservative political parties in the established women's movement organizations: in the 2010s, three of the four established organizations have had representatives of conservative parties in their decision-making bodies.⁴

Although the presence of parties advancing the conservative project has not prevented women's movement actors from framing key feminist issues such as violence against women in anti-conservative terms (e.g. through stressing consent as the main definition of rape), it has led to visible silences on sexual and reproductive rights and LGBTI questions. While the explicitly feminist women's movement actor *Unioni* has consistently defended abortion and sexual and reproductive rights (*Unioni* 3/2013, 10/2014, 18/2015), other established women's organizations have neither criticized Finland's already strict abortion law nor commented on the recent citizens' initiative on granting health care personnel the right to refuse to participate in abortion. Furthermore, although questions about gender identity and gender diversity (gender as nonbinary), transgender rights and law, same-sex marriage, and other LGBTI issues have gained in prominence in the agenda of Finnish women's movement and feminist actors over the recent years, they still remain controversial. For example, unlike the feminist *Unioni*, *NYTKIS* and *NJKL* have not issued statements or press releases in support of the reform of the trans law or the equal marriage act. Co-optation to conservatism thus significantly narrows down the spectrum of issues that can be discussed and resisted. It also makes it harder for established women's organizations to question binary gender and see LGBTI issues as an integral part of feminist struggle.

The combined effect of compartmentalization and co-optation is that Finnish women's movement, and feminist actors are not able to grasp and criticize the way neoliberalism, conservatism, and nationalism intertwine in shaping the political context and informing government's policies. For example, established organizations have been either unable to see or unable to voice the role of conservatism in some neoliberal austerity policies, and their reactions have often shifted attention away from the conservative underpinnings of these policies. For instance, the lack of progress in reforming the parental leave system tends to be linked to the unwillingness of the government to allocate resources for the purpose in times of austerity (*NYTKIS* 6/2016, *Unioni* 7/2015), although the main reason for inaction is the resistance of the conservative coalition partners, in particular *The Finns* party. A common way to frame the critique of limiting the statutory right to childcare is that the curtailment is an ineffective saving method: the savings estimated by the government are not realistic and increased bureaucracy might even increase the costs (*NYTKIS* 14/2015; *TANE* 5/2015; *Unioni* 17/2015). Only the feminist *Unioni* has challenged the dominant interpretation of the restriction of statutory childcare rights as a neoliberal expenditure cut and pointed out that the decision is also underpinned by "moral arguments about daycare being unnecessary when one parent can take care of the child at home" (*Unioni* 1/2014).

Marginality of Critique of Nationalism

Finnish feminism and the women's movement have been prone to charges of having an uncontested and unproblematized relationship to Finnish nationalism. This history can be seen in the weak position that critiquing nationalism has in the research data as mentioned above in relation to [tables 2 and 3](#). The critique of nationalism by women's movement and feminist actors has clearly increased in the 2010s, in particular after the entry of the right populist party The Finns to government and the so-called refugee crisis in 2015. However, nationalism and racism and strict immigration policy as its manifestations are explicitly mentioned only by some feminist and women's movement actors, and resistance to it creates distinct profiles for actors. A peculiarity of the Finnish system, where political parties are represented in the decision-making bodies of key women's organizations, is that The Finns' women's organization The Finns Women (*Perusnaiset*) is represented on the board of NYTKIS and the party's MPs sit on the Council for Gender Equality (TANE), giving them insider roles in the Finnish women's movement.

For most traditional women's organizations, critique of nationalism remains marginal in comparison to the critique of conservatism and neoliberalism: some of these organizations address nationalism in only 10 percent or less of their statements ([table 3](#)). Furthermore, traditional women's organizations rarely issue statements in which the struggle against nationalism, for example denouncing increasing racism or challenging stricter family reunification policy, is the main focus. The only such statements are on the rights of undocumented migrant women (NYTKIS 2/2013) and refugee women (NJKL 15/2015) and could be characterized as weak statements that do not address the problems of immigration policy and require changes to it. Violence against women is the one issue in relation to which the traditional women's organizations regularly mention rights of immigrant and ethnic minority women. Feminist researchers have indeed pointed out the tendencies to culturalize violence against women in this way, framing it as a problem of certain minority cultures only ([Rolandsen Agustín 2013](#)).

The marginality of critique of nationalism for established women's organizations is evidenced by other aspects as well. First, organizations are more likely to address nationalism and make demands regarding immigration policy in joint statements with other human rights organizations rather than when acting alone (e.g. NYTKIS 8/2015). Second, the pressure to resist racism often comes from the international commitments, for example from the need to report to the UN on the national implementation of various human rights conventions, including the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) (e.g. NYTKIS 2/2015; NYTKIS 5/2013). However, the fact that some statements on the implementation of ICERD either mention racism only in passing (TANE 20/2013, TANE 7/2011) or not at all (NJKL 5/2015)

is a good example of how unimportant resisting racism and its different manifestations in Finnish society is for these organizations.

Resisting nationalism and racism and strict immigration policy as its manifestations are not thus seen as political priorities, which would require their own independent demands on the public discourse or political system. The marginal position of nationalism means that Finnish women's organizations fail to see how the difficult political context for gender equality is not only shaped by conservatism and neoliberalism, but by nationalism as well, and how nationalism informs neoliberal and conservative policies. For example, the racialized consequences of austerity policies and the nationalist underpinnings of the weak gender equality policy are left unaddressed.

Our analysis illustrates that an explicit commitment to feminism makes a critique of nationalism as well as an understanding of the racialized dynamics of neoliberalism and conservatism more likely. In addition to the multicultural women's association *Monika* that regularly draws attention to the needs of migrant women and shortcomings of immigration and integration policies, only the explicitly feminist actors regularly address nationalism. Of the established women's organizations, the feminist and anti-racist *Unioni* issued or participated in a significant number of statements focusing on nationalism in 2015 and 2016, the topics of which ranged from organized racism, treatment of refugees and small refugee quotas, restrictive right to family reunification to protecting Roma women sleeping rough on the streets in the winter (e.g. *Unioni* 1/2016, 3/2016, 8/2016, 12/2016). For the new Feminist Party, nationalism is a far more important political opponent than conservatism and neoliberalism: 80 percent of its statements address nationalism in some way (table 3). Nationalism and racism are key parts of the party's analysis of the political context (e.g. FP 1/2016), and some of its first public statements addressed family reunification, racism, and war in Syria and Syrian refugees (FP 2/2016, 6/2016, 7/2016). As regards austerity, the party does not exclusively focus on gender impacts and takes into account the impacts on minorities as well (FP 4/2016, 9/2016).

Indeed, both feminist actors explicitly represent feminism as an opposing force to nationalism. Whereas *Unioni* argues that "feminism is the antidote of nationalist and racist ideology" (*Unioni* 4/2015), the Feminist Party "understands that the society is at the moment very divided and that the dividing line is between nationalist and feminist worldview" (FP 10/2016). This juxtaposition of feminism and nationalism, which follows the example of the Swedish Feminist Initiative party, introduces a new way to frame feminist struggle in the Finnish context and distinguishes these two feminist actors from other women's movement and feminist actors.

Conclusions: Compartmentalized Struggles

In this article, we have analyzed how Finnish feminist and women's movement actors engage with the gendered forms of neoliberalism, conservatism,

and nationalism that underpin contemporary politics in Finland. Our theoretical aim has been to conceptualize the idea of the “triangle of neoliberalism, conservatism, and nationalism” and how these three political projects converge in informing policies and posing challenges to gender equality and feminism. We have argued that understanding the possibilities and limitations of feminist critique in the current economic and political context requires a holistic analytical approach that addresses the convergences and coalitions of the three political projects. Our key empirical finding is that feminist struggles are compartmentalized: most women’s movement and feminist actors focus on one point of the triangle instead of engaging in intersections and coalitions of the three political projects. The ability of actors to engage with the triangle as a whole is connected to differences within their feminisms and to the degree to which they take intersectional inequalities into account.

Our analysis suggests that compartmentalization has several repercussions for feminist struggles. It leads to limited analysis of the political context and policies simultaneously underpinned by neoliberalism, conservatism, and nationalism and limited or even wrong interpretations of reasons behind the adoption of these policies. For example, as regard to austerity measures, more intersectional approaches to the gendered consequences are marginalized, and the conservative underpinnings of the some of most problematic expenditure cuts from a gender perspective, such as the restriction of statutory childcare rights, remain unchallenged. Compartmentalization may also make women’s and feminist movement actors vulnerable to co-optation by the three political projects. For example, limited critical engagement with neoliberalism means that critiques of conservatism and nationalism may be based on neoliberal arguments about efficiency and economic costs and benefits. Finally, compartmentalization is closely connected to the marginality of nationalism. Opposing nationalism is an emerging trend for Finnish women’s and feminist movements, due to the increasing visibility of nationalist and racist agendas in political and public debate. However, critique of nationalism is limited to some actors only and remains marginal and weak for most established women’s organizations.

The findings of the article further illustrate that in particular traditional women’s organizations have difficulties addressing the joint impact of neoliberalism, conservatism, and nationalism on gender equality. Their close relationships to political parties that advance these political projects make voicing a strong critique impossible and lead to co-optation and silences that can be interpreted as support. The political context shaped by the triangle of neoliberalism, conservatism, and nationalism has also provided a fertile ground for new feminist actors that do not shy away from directly opposing the three political projects and are also more interested in resisting the combined effects of neoliberalism, conservatism, and nationalism. Our analysis also suggests that explicitly feminist actors that take intersectional approach seriously are more likely than traditional women’s organizations to engage with the intersections

of the three political projects and treat nationalism and racism as core feminist concerns.

Notes

Anna Elomäki is a post-doctoral research fellow in Gender Studies at the University of Helsinki. Her research interests are related to the interconnections between gender, politics, and the economy. Her current research project focuses on the economization of gender equality policies and advocacy in the European Union.

Johanna Kantola is a professor of Gender Studies at the University of Tampere. Her books include *Gender and Political Analysis* (with Lombardo, Palgrave 2017), *Gender and the European Union* (Palgrave, 2010), and *Feminists Theorize the State* (Palgrave, 2006). She is one of the editors of *Gender and the Economic Crisis in Europe* (Palgrave, 2017), *The Oxford Handbook on Gender and Politics* (2013), and Palgrave's *Gender and Politics Book Series*.

1. While some theorists of nationalism hold that nationalism and racism are completely separate phenomena (Anderson 2006), we draw on those who consider discourses of nation and race as connected and contend that nationalist political movements, in particular in already constituted nation states, have often racism underlying them (Balibar 1991).
2. For TASAN!, which has issued only few official statements or press releases and emphasizes the contribution of individuals, blog posts have been included.
3. We can see, for example, that Monika has not included all statements on the website. The material includes joint statements that have been signed by Monika, but could not be found from Monika's website.
4. NYTKIS and TANE have representatives of conservative-value parties (Centre Party, Christian Democrats, The Finns) in their decision-making bodies. NJKL was chaired by a conservative Centre Party woman MP from 2007 to 2015.

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