

Hanna Dorottya Szabó*

Is Fairyland for Everyone? Mapping online discourse on gender debates in Hungary

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Abstract: Over the past decade, Hungary has become a noteworthy example of democratic backsliding, marked by a pronounced shift towards conservative values and traditional gender roles within government policies. This trend, centred around Christian principles, has manifested in political campaigns actively opposing LGBTQ+ rights and the challenging of normative family structure. The resultant media campaigns and policy implementations have ignited extensive public discourse on gender and sexuality, prominently visible on social media platforms. This study conducts a qualitative analysis of the online discussion surrounding the LGBTQ+ children's book, *Fairyland Is for Everyone*, to explore the contemporary gender discourse in Hungary. By examining social media comments under Hungarian online news articles, the research identifies three prevailing discursive lenses—heteronormative familism, neocolonialism, and diversity and inclusion—illustrating both the concurrent rise of anti-gender movements and the fortification of LGBTQ+ allyship in Hungary, while also considering broader transnational trends in LGBTQ+ rights and visibility.

Keywords: anti-gender campaigns; popular feminism; social media; discourse; Hungary

1 Introduction

The sociopolitical environment in Hungary has been characterised by the strengthening of right-wing conservative political agendas over the past decade. In 2014, Viktor Orbán, Hungary's prime minister, publicly embraced this new ideological direction in his governance of an illiberal democracy (Rosenblatt, 2021). Since then, the government has increasingly championed traditional gender roles. Political campaigns have largely focused on emphasising the country's Christian foundations, which are used to promote the traditional family model. These efforts also emphasise Hungary-centred views, for example, against European Union (EU) pressure to

*Corresponding author: Hanna Dorottya Szabó, Institute for Media and Communication Studies, Freie Universität Berlin, Garystr. 55, 14195 Berlin, Germany, E-mail: hanna.szabo@fu-berlin.de.
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5535-8251>

accept immigrants into the country and to combat a growing population decline, which is strongly incentivised by tax breaks (Grzebalska and Pető, 2018; Kováts, 2018; Vida, 2019; Zimanyi, 2020). Anti-gender movements have grown significantly across Europe (Kováts, 2018), and while anti-genderism has spread rapidly through public legacy media, scholars have also highlighted that these campaigns make remarkable use of social media platforms for mobilisation (Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018, p. 13).

In this complex sociopolitical climate, several events have sparked online discussions that shed light on how the meaning of gender is negotiated within the Hungarian speaking online sphere. The polarisation of opinions leads to a dynamically mediated environment in which perceptions of gender are debated and shaped by divergent sentiments. Given the complexity of the topic, in this article, I explore how the meaning of gender in social media comments is constructed in the Hungarian sociopolitical environment. I present a case study of the debate regarding the publication of a children's book, *Fairyland is For Everyone*¹ (*Meseország Mindenkié*), which became the central interest of public and political opinion in the autumn of 2020, for its LGBTQ+ themes. In this article, I ask: What are the key themes and arguments present in discussions about gender within the context of the children's book, *Fairyland is For Everyone*, on Hungarian Facebook?

To answer this, I first offer an overview of the online gender debate focusing on the various discursive themes that have been previously studied: anti-gender discourses, feminist discourses, and hybrid discourses. Second, I contextualise Hungary as an illiberal democracy, a form of democratic decline in which the focus on liberal values shifts towards nationalist values (Verloo, 2018, pp. 47–51). Here, I define anti-gender movements in Europe in general and highlight how key anti-gender concepts have become central to the Hungarian government's communication strategy and policymaking. Empirically, I then present a case study of the online debate regarding the children's book *Fairyland Is for Everyone*. Through a qualitative thematic analysis, I offer three discursive lenses to understand the underlying argumentation within the gender debate in the Hungarian-speaking social media sphere: heteronormative familism, neocolonialism, and diversity and inclusion. The results illustrate that discourses exceed mere dichotomous categorisations of supportive versus antagonistic groups, and it becomes apparent that social media users employ diverse discursive strategies to negotiate their arguments. These strategies are often centred around specific conceptualisations of gender, which are used to support their claims.

¹ The editor translated *Meseország Mindenkié* to *Fairyland Is for Everyone*. The official English translation of the book was published in October 2022 with the title *A Fairy Tale for Everyone*. This article uses the former.

2 The gender debate on social media

Anti-gender movements have emerged in several European countries over the past decade, with the rise of a conservative and partly fundamentalist social sentiment against the perceived threat of “gender ideology” at their core (Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018). The movements are based on opposition to women’s and LGBTQ+ rights and target gender equality policies, gender mainstreaming, and gender studies. As Kováts (2018) aptly put it, the movement’s followers condemn “everyone who focuses on these issues, and they are seen as a single homogeneous group and an organised lobby” (p. 2). Anti-gender discourses can be categorised across three broad dimensions (Darakchi, 2019; Wilhelm and Schulz-Tomančok, 2023).

First, anti-gender discourses are concerned with sexism, particularly defending traditional gender roles and gender hierarchies (Wilhelm and Schulz-Tomančok, 2023). These arguments often involve justifications rooted in the questioning of the legitimacy of gender as a concept based on biological claims (Sanders and Jenkins, 2022). Anti-gender movements oppose the core idea of gender as a social construct, and insist on biological essentialism, promoting its reinforcement through policies.

Consequently, the defence of traditional gender roles draws closely upon religious claims. Studies indicate that anti-gender groups are often influenced by a combination of religious and political ideologies. Scholars argue that resistance to “gender ideology” originates from religious beliefs, particularly within Christianity. Consequently, anti-gender groups frequently align with the conservative Christian concept of the “natural” family, which emphasises the inherent link between family structure, heterosexuality, and procreation (Righetti, 2016). Right-wing actors employ Christian values to uphold traditional gender roles and hierarchies, opposing liberal and progressive ideologies (Evolvi, 2023).

Most anti-gender groups emerged in Europe around 2012 in reaction to the legalisation of same-sex marriage by several governments (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017). Despite being perceived by political figures and media as a passing phenomenon or social disruption, these groups experienced significant growth in European nations with predominantly Catholic populations (Evolvi, 2023). Accordingly, the defence of traditional gender roles often references historical contexts. Subsequently, research has highlighted the neocolonial aspect of anti-gender discourses (Korolczuk and Graff, 2018). This perspective suggests a rhetoric of victimisation, portraying Western “gender supporters” as a shared enemy and colonial influence over “the common people” (Evang, 2022).

The second typical theme of anti-gender discourses can be related to homophobia (Korolczuk and Graff, 2018). Across various contexts, anti-gender movements have stemmed from opposition of marriage equality and contestations of “rainbow

families" (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017). Previous research has pointed out the discursive anti-gender strategy that centres children who need to be protected from gender ideology, which in turn reinforces heteronormative family constructs (Linnamäki, 2022). This argumentation has been particularly strong by the Hungarian government (Zimanyi, 2020).

A third prominent theme in research on anti-gender discourse is that of gender mainstreaming, typically presented in debates regarding language use, policy-making, and gender studies as an academic and educational field (Grzebalska and Pető, 2018; Martinsson, 2020). Research in this field has shown that anti-gender discourses often frame gender as a powerful force that attempts to enforce change through policymaking, especially through gender mainstreaming and sex education. Anti-gender actors perceive the family role and patriarchal reproduction as threatened through critical academic discussions about heteronormativity (Rohde-Abuba et al., 2019). Additionally, LGBTQ+ sex education is perceived to be threatening to children, further strengthening the perceived importance of heteronormative families (Venegas, 2022).

On the other end of the gender debate, scholarly work focuses on feminist and pro-LGBTQ+ online discourses. Anti-gender campaigns can be understood as a pushback against the increasing visibility of feminist thought that questions cis-heteronormativity. Feminist communication spaces have flourished within digital media. Online media is a vital tool for connecting people, especially young women, to feminism and other feminists in local and global contexts, as it provides familiar, easily accessible information for participating in feminist politics (Jackson, 2018).

Scholars have focused on the significance of the #MeToo movement, which created a global and mainstream visibility for the feminist struggle (Mendes et al., 2018). While feminists assume the role of challengers, aiming to attract the attention of established political figures and mainstream media outlets, they are not isolated on social media networks. Instead, they strategically position themselves within the core of progressive networks, thereby shaping the broader public discourse (Siemon et al., 2024). Banet-Weiser (2018) goes as far as to contend that feminism has become integrated into the progressive mainstream. Popular feminism is a phenomenon where media-friendly manifestations such as celebrity feminism and corporate feminism are gaining prominence. While popular expressions of feminism highlight gender inequalities, they fail to adequately challenge patriarchal systems and address issues of racism and violence (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Popular feminist ideas emphasise individual responsibility and gains, disregarding systemic modes of oppression, marginalisation, and cisgender normativity. The increased visibility of popular feminism has given rise to online political activism. Although online activism has been widely criticised for its passivity, symbolic actions play an important role in contemporary social movements (Penney, 2015). Passive forms of online

activism include symbolic actions such as changing Facebook profile pictures to show support for a cause or resharing posts by influential figures on Instagram (Gerbaudo, 2015). Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognise that virtual support, even if intangible, is still support and that digital activism can eventually lead to concrete offline actions (Vie, 2014).

Research on LGBTQ+ online activist discourses points towards two broad directions; first, the increased visibility of LGBTQ+ people and issues through social media networks, and second, the algorithmic struggles of LGBTQ+ visibility that are inherent to social networking sites. With physical spaces for queer communities diminishing, the internet has emerged as a vital space (Byron, 2024; Lucero, 2017; Robards et al., 2018). Among the earliest adopters of online platforms, LGBTQ+ individuals have used the internet for identity exploration and socialisation (Gray, 2009). Today, digital platforms are deeply ingrained in LGBTQ+ culture, serving as avenues for community building, particularly for younger generations (Jenzen, 2022). Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, also play pivotal roles in LGBTQ+ activism and political mobilisation (Ayoub and Brzezinska, 2015; Duguay, 2023).

On the other hand, scholarly focus on the implications of platform algorithms for LGBTQ+ users have gained prominence (Myles et al., 2023). Research highlights how algorithms can inadvertently expose LGBTQ+ individuals online (Cho, 2018), perpetuate cisgender normative assumptions, and lead to harassment (Scheuerman et al., 2018). Additionally, automated content moderation strategies often exhibit biases against LGBTQ+ content, impacting visibility (Dias Oliva et al., 2021; Duffy and Meisner, 2023). Changes in content moderation policies can negatively affect LGBTQ+ online communities and their ability to socialise outside of normative environments, raising concerns about safety and censorship. Overall, emerging scholarship underscores the broader issues of algorithmic governance and the lack of control LGBTQ+ communities have over online regulations (Myles et al., 2023).

Lastly, an important segment of scholarly work on online gender discourse have highlighted the complex interplay of different stances (Reinhardt, 2022). Rather than viewing the discourse as a simplistic pro-versus-anti dichotomy, it proves beneficial to examine the diverse strategies employed to position oneself, whether as supportive, oppositional, or perhaps in a negotiated stance where certain aspects of the gender concept are embraced while others are rejected. Such configurations underscore how argumentations draw upon various legitimisation tactics, incorporating elements from broad anti-gender or mainstream feminist discourses, as well as from perspectives such as trans-exclusionary radical feminism (Willem et al., 2022) or homonationalism (Rekhviashvili, 2022).

The online gender debate illustrates that divergent worldviews are steadily gaining more exposure through social media. Social media create an environment

characterised by dissonance and disconnectedness, and it is to be expected that opposing ideologies will be prominently displayed on the same platforms. The convergence of online communication and mobilisation, traditionally used to advocate left-liberal positions, and populist movements proposing alternative media have increased the noise in public discourse (Pfetsch, 2018). While diverse perspectives are essential to public debate in politics and civil society, we are witnessing increased negative campaigns and political polarisation.

3 Hungary: Illiberal democracy and the anti-gender movement

While scholarly investigations into anti-gender discourse have focused on the Central Eastern European region, particularly Hungary, the emphasis has largely gravitated towards analysing the roles of prominent political figures such as Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, governmental policies, and mainstream media narratives (Political Capital, 2022; Vida, 2019). However, there is a notable gap in our understanding of how social media users interpret and engage in gender-related discussions within online spheres in this context. A comprehensive understanding of online discourse requires an understanding of the broader political context within which it unfolds.

In 2014, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán declared that Hungary should turn away from liberalism and towards Hungarocentrism.² This speech has been regarded as the first time Orbán alluded to Hungary as an illiberal democracy (Plattner, 2020, p. 47). Illiberal democracies emerge in countries that do not seek authoritarian rule but maintain multi-party systems and free elections while obstructing liberal institutions that guarantee individual rights. As Plattner (2020) has argued, no national leader would proudly refer to their regime as such, but Orbán's speech was a turning point in this respect. Although he did not use the exact terminology at the time, Orbán undoubtedly embraced the characteristics of such a regime, citing Russia and China as examples of economic success and declaring his intention to break with "ideologies that have been adopted by the West."

Four years later, Orbán adopted the terminology and advocated Christian democracy as a desirable alternative³. By focusing on Christianity, he aimed to

² For an English translation of Orbán's speech on July 26, 2014, see <https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-speech-at-the-25th-balvanyos-summer-free-university-and-student-camp> (accessed July 19, 2023).

³ For an English translation of Orbán's speech on July 28, 2018, see <https://2015-2022.miniszterelnok>.

protect “the ways of life springing from Christian culture,” declaring that he wanted to defend “human dignity, the family and the nation.” Orbán insisted that Christian democracy is inherently at odds with liberalism, which he demonstrated through three aspects: First, liberal democracy favours multiculturalism instead of giving “priority to Christian culture”; second, liberal democracy “is pro-immigration, while Christian democracy is anti-immigration”; and third, it “sides with adaptable family models,” unlike Christianity.

This emphasis on the traditional family formed the basis for new policies that have alienated and pathologised the Hungarian LGBTQ+ community, igniting debates about gender and sexuality in public discourse. The messages propagating these ideas have been prominent in the government-owned public media in recent years (Vida, 2019). Political campaigns have also flooded Hungarian social media, while government-affiliated media have continuously thematised the LGBTQ+ community and cast it in an unfavourable light, using vocabulary and arguments often associated with anti-gender movements. The rationale for the illiberal democratic framework is deeply intertwined with gendered debates “reliant on a certain gender regime—constructions of gender as well as institutionalised relations of power between them—which transforms the meaning of human rights, women’s rights and equality in a way which privileges the rights and normative needs of families over women’s rights” (Grzebalska and Pető, 2018, p. 164).

In Hungary, the first anti-gender discourse emerged in 2008 following the publication of a book on the country’s gendered history by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour under the then-ruling socialist-liberal government, triggering a reaction from church representatives, right-wing politicians, and the media (Kováts and Pőim, 2015). Kováts and Pető (2017) highlighted the specificity of Hungarian anti-genderism. They argued that until 2017, anti-gender discourse had no organised movement because “there is nothing one can protest against—and the state of affairs with the current government, which nearly eliminated all [nongovernmental organisations] NGOs that could be advocates for gender equality” (p. 124). Since then, however, the significance of the anti-gender movement in Hungary has grown. The reason for this steady growth is evident in various aspects of life, as the emergence of different conservative and pro-family foundations, government-organised NGOs and media outlets is unmistakable. The government’s prominent anti-EU discourse has supported and encouraged this development, while the voices of progressive actors are weak. The illiberal structure enables anti-gender and anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments. By emphasising the importance of Christian values

while downplaying the significance of human rights, the government portrays new policies as family-friendly and Hungarocentric to preserve both national identity and the national population.

Examining the discourse surrounding a children's book featuring LGBTQ+ characters within the Hungarian context offers compelling insights. In this topic various elements central to anti-gender campaigns converge: gender dynamics, LGBTQ+ representation, family structures, childhood upbringing, educational paradigms, and media influence. In light of this, this study seeks to investigate how Hungarian Facebook users engage in discussions regarding the concept of gender, focusing particularly on their debates surrounding the children's book *Fairyland is For Everyone*. The research question asks: What are the key themes and arguments present in discussions about gender within the context of *Fairyland is For Everyone* on Hungarian Facebook?

The significance of the research lies in its potential to enhance scholarly understanding of anti-gender discourses, revealing the intricate interplay of various discursive tactics that uphold or challenge feminist and anti-gender ideologies and movements. The results highlight three discursive lenses, and the underlying rationales behind arguments supporting, opposing, or negotiating the meaning of gender and the legitimacy of *Fairyland is For Everyone*, namely: heteronormative familism, neocolonialism and diversity and inclusion.

4 Case study: *Fairyland Is for Everyone*

This study examines the social media debate about the children's book *Fairyland Is for Everyone*, published in the autumn of 2020. The book contains 17 well-known fairy tales, reimagined with diversity in mind, featuring special-needs, Roma, and LGBTQ+ protagonists (for specific details on the book and its contestation see, Rédai, 2023). The publication immediately sparked a debate in Hungary, when a far-right nationalist Hungarian member of Parliament, Dóra Dúró, condemned it by shredding a copy of the book publicly (Haynes, 2020a). The book, and its politically charged condemnation have put the LGBTQ+ community more than ever in the media, political, and public spotlight (Haynes, 2020b).

In response to the public shredding, Prime Minister Orbán commented on the book, stating that Hungary was a "tolerant and patient" country but that there was a "red line: leave our children alone" (Campbell, 2020). This statement definitively established the government's stance and its homophobic and transphobic views. During this period, the government has taken several measures to curb the rights of LGBTQ+ individuals. For example, in December 2020, the government amended the

constitution to reinforce normative gender roles and the traditional family model and passed the Adoption Act, making it harder for same-sex couples to adopt. The government's focus on LGBTQ+ issues has continued, and despite widespread national and international protests, a so-called "paedophile law" was passed in the summer of 2021. This law originally introduced new criminal codes against perpetrators of sexual crimes against children, but the draft was amended to include anti-LGBTQ+ clauses that conflated homosexuality and paedophilia. In addition, this new law prohibits sexuality-related media content and stipulates that sex education must not cover topics about gender identity or homosexuality (Szopkó, 2021).

The government's mission against "genderism" became even more apparent as the Hungarian National Assembly voted to hold a referendum on LGBTQ+ in 2022 (Euronews, 2021). The referendum included four questions on voter support for "teaching and promotion of sexual orientation." The wording of the questions and the accompanying campaign tacitly suggested that there were "right" and "wrong" answers. Holding the referendum on the same day as the general election underscored the issue's importance and the government's efforts to keep it at the forefront of public discourse. By positioning LGBTQ+ as a threat to the nation, the Hungarian government has clearly embraced the anti-gender movement.

5 Methodology and material

This study used mixed deductive and inductive qualitative content analysis to examine how Hungarian social media users make sense of gender through their argumentation and symbolism. The analysis explored topics that emerged from Facebook comments and embedded the themes in a broader social discourse. In this study, Hungarian discourse is examined based on language rather than geographical location. Hungarian language comments were included in the sample, and the analysis and interpretation of these comments were conducted in Hungarian. Selected comments, translated into English, are used as examples in this article.

As Paolo Gerbaudo (2016) explained, it is necessary to conduct qualitative analyses of digital political phenomena to gain a deeper understanding of social media content with respect to quantitative analysis. His framework, data hermeneutics, proposes an approach in which social media texts are no longer considered as data points but as "symbolic interactions which cannot be understood without taking into account the subjective viewpoints of those involved" (p. 99). This perspective allows for a qualitative analysis that leverages the vastness of social media data while using systematic sampling and interpretative strategies to analyse texts to understand political discourse in its social context.

This study's analysis aimed to interpret, reconstruct and explain the overarching narratives underlying social media conversations. First, I chose a four-month period starting on September 20, 2020, when the debate on the book began. The period ended in mid-January 2021, when Budapest's administration declared that the publisher had engaged in unfair business practices by failing to indicate on the cover that the book contained non-traditional tales, which propelled a new discourse on the role of publishers.⁴

Relevant news articles were selected through a Google News search in January 2022. The sampling method used was that of Shaban Darakchi (2019), who analysed anti-gender sentiment in Bulgaria. First, specific news items were identified by searching for the book's title on Google News, which resulted in 128 articles. Twenty-one foreign news items were excluded, as were another 12 articles whose subject matter was not related to the book or LGBTQ+ issues. The remaining 95 items were then identified on the official Facebook page of the respective media outlet. As not all news articles' corresponding Facebook posts were available or commented on, 69 Facebook comment sections were retrieved, yielding 14,395 public comments. In line with data hermeneutics, the corpus was too large for qualitative analysis. Given that a significant portion (65 %) of comments originated from three news sites, efforts were made to ensure diversity in the selected comment sections. This was achieved by including at least one article from each of the 21 media portals identified on Google News, covering the entire period. This resulted in the selected 38 Facebook comment sections, yielding 5,035 comments (for an overview see, Appendix, Table A1).

The Facebook comments were read from the web page using a custom JavaScript script. The posts were read and stored in a JSON data structure in order to preserve the nested threads. The comments were manually cleaned and anonymised before the analysis. After the comments were retrieved, they were analysed using MAXQDA. I followed Gerbaudo's (2016) three-step protocol for close data reading. First, the comments were read as "rows in a data set" (p. 195), which allowed for the text to be read in its rawest form to assess the discussion topics of each comment as well as "the form they were expressed in, such as the use of certain types of language imagery, tone or specific rhetorical figures" (p. 106). Second, the comments were placed back in their original environment, and the discussion was examined as part of a larger social media conversation to reveal meaning about "the mood of the Internet community" and the discourse that emerges from online interactions (p. 106). The third step was to assess the deeper structures of meaning by connecting the utterances to the broader context. Gerbaudo called for validating emerging

⁴ Humen, Online News Site, <https://humenonline.hu/a-fogyasztovedelem-dontese minden-lmbtq-konyvet-indexre-tenne/> (accessed July 19, 2023).

themes by continuously contrasting findings from different posts while progressively refining the interpretations.

I applied the qualitative rigour framework to ensure a structured qualitative analysis (Gioia et al., 2013). I conducted the first-order analysis using a coding protocol without a primary coding framework to organise the comments. During the first reading, I labelled the comments based on categories that emerged directly from the comments, adhering to the terms used in the original texts (p. 20). As the analysis progressed, the codes were grouped and redefined as second-order themes. These formed the basis for building a data structure and identifying aggregate dimensions through a mixed inductive and deductive analysis while considering existing studies and critically assessing possible additional themes that emerged from the data.

When examining posts on the public Facebook pages of news media, it is assumed that Facebook users who comment are actively and explicitly participating in the conversation and are aware that their comments are visible to the public. However, social media analysis has its limitations, including a lack of knowledge about users, the deletion of comments, threads and posts, and the possibility of organised trolls disrupting the discussion. To ensure that individual users could not be identified from the corpus, personal data—including names, locations, or other personal characteristics—have been redacted, and only translated and paraphrased comments have been used in this report.

First-order inductive coding yielded 71 designations, which were grouped into themes, and the recurring themes were then connected through narrative lenses. The findings are presented through commonly used phrases and expressions that are not linked to specific comments but are present throughout the dataset, and complete comments are quoted to further illustrate arguments.

The analysis revealed three lenses through which the debate on the children's book is framed: heteronormative familism, neocolonialism, and diversity and inclusion.

6 Findings

The heteronormative familism lens

The first discursive lens, heteronormative familism, is concerned with the perceived threat of gender, especially to children, and traditional family values. The underlying idea is that the children's book discusses dangerous concepts, namely non-normative understandings of gender. According to commenters, the very introduction of these concepts poses a threat to children and thus to heteronormative families.

Why burden young children with unnecessary information? At this age, they need to learn the basics, that there is a father, mother, girl, boy, flower, tree, bird, butterfly, etc. It would be unnecessary and troublesome to teach this in kindergarten. (hirado_1)

This view is firmly rooted in the belief in the innocence of childhood, the traditional family, Christianity and the importance of biological sex. This, in turn, stems from the asexualised notion of children.

The discursive reasoning is traceable in the way commenters perceive the interconnected roles of families, educational institutions, and the government in the education of children. Parents have the primary right to decide what to show and discuss with their children and the values they are raised with. Commenters differ in their opinions on the place of the book in schools. Some propose nuanced restrictions, stating that “[the book] is not for 3- to 6-year-olds, but rather for 13–15 [year-olds]” (nlc_1). Others insist on a “complete ban” or claim that “the book itself is a form of child abuse.”

The solution to the problem the book presents lies in the hands of the government. The state is called upon to regulate both the education system and the production of such content through legislation, especially by protecting children’s rights: “Nobody talks about what rights children have. They have a right to be brought up in a normal environment, to have a normal parenting role model, to grow up to be healthy adults” (szeretlekm_1).

Thus, many comments refer to the “normal family” and “normal childhood” and directly link them to heterosexuality. From this perspective, introducing LGBTQ+ individuals to children is harmful, as it could “mess with the natural development of young minds” and pose a threat to the “healthy and natural upbringing of children.” A prominent discursive argument highlights the importance of normative sexuality in sustaining the national population: “I don’t think that a healthy family model starts with Prince 1 ‘taking as wife’ Prince 2. Please, let’s be sober. The survival and development of the nation are based on the family model” (24_1).

By claiming that heterosexuality is the “normal” and “healthy way of life,” LGBTQ+ individuals are implicitly or explicitly labelled as “sick,” further underscoring “the dangerously infectious” effect of “genderism.” Such beliefs may also be connected to Christianity, as commentators use biblical examples and refer to LGBTQ+ individuals as “sinners” or “devilish,” further emphasising the social and environmental causes of sexuality: “The sin is publishing this storybook. It is a perversion against our grandchildren who are still receptive to everything ...” (hetek_1).

This calls into question the concept of gender, and commenters point to the importance of biological sex by associating it with the “normal” and “natural” way

of being. In this regard, the government is responsible for resolving the issues raised in the debate over the children's book. The state should stop producing and distributing projects like *Fairyland Is for Everyone* by banning them or ensuring that trigger warnings are used. Most arguments are therefore in favour of a complete ban on the book and subsequently on any discussion of gender and sexuality in schools in order to "protect children" and thus families.

The neocolonial lens

The second discursive lens is the neocolonial lens, which views gender as a modern instrument of Western colonisation and sees it as a threat to Hungarian sovereignty. The findings suggest that gender is seen as an intentional Western propaganda tool. This propaganda pushes liberal values, such as "genderism" and LGBTQ+ visibility, which implicitly threaten sovereignty. At its core is the idea that transnational organisations such as the United Nations, especially the EU, are attempting "to tear the Hungarian nation apart" by imposing liberal ideologies on its citizens. This is seen as a specific neocolonial type of control, using economic incentives and propaganda to control the population and force them to conform to these values. A widely held view is that the children's book is just the beginning of the "forceful gender lobby" that ultimately aims to disrupt nation-states by changing the "normal sexual orientation" of children and reducing birth rates. In this context, LGBTQ+ and feminist ideas are seen as powerful "Western weapons" that global alliances "force" on small nations to destroy them:

All these decadent ideologies started in the USA and made their way to Europe. Of course, it's not ordinary people who invent these trends. They were pushing and pushing homosexuality, now transgender, this kind of gender, that kind of gender ... They must force this because the majority doesn't care about it, and it shouldn't even be a public issue anyway. (24_3)

In line with this argument, Facebook users proclaim that transnational organisations use gender to control the reproduction of Hungarians. Western propaganda targets the foundation of a strong sovereign state, namely the family, by "turning people into LGBTQ+" and "women into emancipated feminazis." This is seen as weakening the Hungarian nation and controlling its citizens while also "undermining the Christian conservative government." Comments echoing such sentiments assert that the main problem with the LGBTQ+ community is not that it is "undeserving of equal rights" but that LGBTQ+ issues are "forced" upon the heterosexual majority by the "Western gender lobby":

I don't mind homosexuals living happily ever after, but it's a bit boring that in the EU, for example, they're pushing that LGBTQ people must be supported because otherwise, you can't be a state of law. That liberals just want to impose their own principles on everyone. [...] I think that's where the hate comes from when they want to impose things on people! (444_2)

As the comment highlighted above shows, the commenters in this narrative lens believe that the lobby enacted by the EU is largely based on values derived from Western Europe and the United States. These values are often imposed on strong sovereign states like Hungary through both hard and soft power. Hard power can take the form of legislation and economic incentives, such as “Western-funded” educational programmes, while soft power often takes the form of popular media, such as children’s books or television shows, for example by stating that “more and more cartoons are introducing [LGBTQ+] sensitisation” (hirty_1).

Facebook commenters see the children’s book as a “tool being used covertly to push Western ideals onto young and impressionable children.” This agenda is interpreted as an effort to promote liberal progressive values in popular media in general, for example, through film and television, intending to “replace the traditional Christian culture.” Thus, the commenters consider promoting inclusion and diversity a propaganda instrument to support certain leftist and liberal political views. This implies that the public sees the popular media as a platform for propagating a particular political viewpoint.

Consequently, Western propaganda undermines Hungarian society and conservative politics. Both citizens and politicians “ought to fight this” to “protect the nation.” In this respect, Orbán is seen as the “last man standing” in Europe who is “still sane” and has the “right ideas” to lead the country.

The diversity and inclusion lens

The third lens, diversity and inclusion, presents a different, supportive perspective on gender, implying that the pursuit of gender equality is both a political project and a societal issue that can only be achieved through the introduction of books like *Fairyland Is for Everyone*. While the two discursive lenses above hold the view that “gender” has a detrimental effect on society, this lens concentrates on its potential for positive social impact and perceives gender as a concept that fundamentally strives for human rights and equality. However, it focuses on societal values rather than framing the escalating anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment sparked by the children’s book as a human rights issue. Although this lens diverges from the other two in its interpretation of gender as a construct, it highlights its profound political implications and its ability to transform societies.

The diversity and inclusion lens highlights the view that gender is a core social value that Hungary “ought to adopt in order to remain a democratic state” that is “rooted in liberal values.” In this social project, the book aims to “sensitise people from a young age,” which is seen as a fundamental principle for a more equal and just democratic society. Most of the positive comments on the book emphasise that purchasing it is not compelled by any “external force” but that it is the individual’s decision to approve or disapprove of the children’s book. Accordingly, those who are not interested in the book’s content “can simply ignore” it.

Your child will be fine. If anything, your kid will be more accepting. Is that so bad? Or does it bother you subconsciously that you will have questions that you can’t answer objectively, without emotion? But use your discretion. However, that’s no reason to start shredding books. If we don’t like it, we put it back on the shelf, find another one. Not to mention that this must be the biggest moral problem in this country? (index_2)

At the same time, this lens further posits that the family is a complex and dynamic concept and that the “traditional definition of a family is no longer applicable” today. It is not limited to the traditional definition of a husband, wife and children but also “includes same-sex couples, single parents and other non-traditional family structures.” This lens not only underlines “the importance of sensitivity education to children” about non-heteronormative gender and sexuality but also sees this book as a step towards the “integration of rainbow families” into existing societal structures.

Through this, it is primarily argued that the children’s book is a great opportunity to “talk to young people about different marginalised groups” and not just sexuality. It points to the need to create “a society that is free from gender-based discrimination and violence” and talk more openly about such issues. This perspective also directly challenges the two views mentioned above: First, the definition of a family is based on a heteronormative understanding, and second, the EU is pursuing a deliberate agenda to promote gender and weaken the Hungarian nation.

In contrast, this perspective claims that the “Hungarian government is, in fact, pushing propaganda,” serving “to turn the LGBTQ+ community into a scapegoat.” This strategy allows the government to “divert attention from other pressing social issues that need to be addressed,” such as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic at the time or the government’s misuse of public funds: “The public got their red herring for a few weeks! But it’s simple: If someone wants the book, they should buy it; if not, they shouldn’t, and that’s that!” (origo_1).

The “LGBTQ+ community is used as a “political tool” to shift public attention away from the issues that must be addressed to “improve the country’s social and economic environment.”

Furthermore, this perspective argues that the anti-gender propaganda of the Hungarian government is rooted in fear and misinformation. By creating an “other,” the government has “successfully been able to instil fear” in people and thus “divert attention from the real issues.” This argument states that the government highlights LGBTQ+ matters for political purposes and that the politicisation of the book is a tool to create a new scapegoat:

It's a lame homophobic argument to refer to children. A child has more sense than many adults because a child's head is not yet full of delusions. Who's next? The left-handers? They should learn to govern for once and not cover up incompetence and theft by appointing scapegoats. (444_1)

It was broadly agreed that the debate and the government's response led to increased discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community and a generally hostile attitude in the country. The perspective also highlights the “hypocrisy of the Hungarian government”: While claiming to protect Hungarian families on the one hand, it “has failed to address other pressing social issues such as poverty, unemployment, and a lack of access to healthcare” on the other.

At the same time, the “West” is perceived as aspirational and more democratic because LGBTQ+ rights and inclusion are seen as more “developed” there. This inference is evident in social media comments where users express their desire to “immigrate to the West” and “leave Hungary”:

In many cases these same-sex couples can do a lot more in parenting than hetero couples, because as we know it's not about having two fathers or two mothers, it's about being loved. Thank God that in normal countries they see it this way, and more orphaned children can be helped. But of course I am not surprised by the Hungarian way of thinking, I am grateful every day that I am so lucky to have moved out of there with my family at a very young age and to see it through the American way of thinking. I thank God every day for that, but I feel very sorry for you who stayed at home and live your lives with such a poor way of thinking. (szeretlekm_1)

However, a striking characteristic of the debate was the lack of overt visibility of the LGBTQ+ community in public social media discourse during this initial period. Of the comments analysed, only a handful of users actively disclosed identifying as part of the community. Additionally, commenters supporting the children's book and the LGBTQ+ community, did not actively call upon the inclusion of LGBTQ+ voices and experiences in the debate.

In summary, this lens provides a divergent conceptualisation of gender that sees it as an influential idea for achieving positive societal change. The lens challenges the other two views: the traditional definition of family, and the view that the “West” has a deliberate agenda to push “gender ideology” and weaken the nation.

It shares a strong sentiment that diversity and inclusion are core societal values that Hungarians should adopt, and that acceptance of marginalised groups is of utmost importance. As such, the book is considered a powerful tool for introducing the topic of marginalisation in general and the LGBTQ+ community in particular to young people.

7 Discussion

Gender is of great political relevance because it directly impacts everyone and is thus a readily exploitable tool for mobilising radical-wing voters (Darakchi, 2019). It is the “symbolic glue” of illiberalism that connects the various aspects of this political ideology (Kováts and Pőim, 2015). As Grzebalska and Pető (2018) argued, the illiberal political transformation is deeply gendered, shifting the “meanings of human rights, women’s rights and equality in a way that privileges the rights and normative needs of families” (p. 164). While Grzebalska and Pető highlight this as a shift away from women’s rights, previous research has widely noted the entanglement of the anti-gender movement with anti-LGBTQ+ notions (Darakchi, 2019; Korolczuk, 2020; Lavizzari and Siročić, 2023). Far-right parties worldwide have harnessed political opportunism and legitimised their activities by establishing themselves in an anti-gender context (Köttig et al., 2017). Democratic backsliding and anti-gender movements are interconnected; as such, “gender backlash” and the weakening of democracy are mutually reinforcing (Biroli, 2019 in Bogaards and Pető, 2022, p. 3). Underlying mechanisms include supplanting individual rights with rights for narrowly defined families.

This empirical analysis shows that in the Hungarian Facebook sphere as well, anti-gender discourse is deeply rooted in homophobia. Arguments against the publication of the children’s book, *Fairyland Is For Everyone*, use two main lines of reasoning: protecting the heteronormative family and children, and defending the nation-state against the neocolonial rule of the EU, manifested through the “gender propaganda.” Even the discursive strategies that support the publication of the book highlight the profound political implications of gender and its transformative potential for societies. Supportive arguments emphasise free choice and the integration of LGBTQ+ people into heteronormative structures rather than questioning the foundations of existing systems rooted in traditional gender roles.

In this analysis, the lens of heteronormative familism shows that gender is understood as a threat to children and thus to the heteronormative family model, which is assumed to be the backbone of a strong nation. By introducing the topics of non-heteronormative sexuality and gender to children, for example, through

books, established family structures are threatened. This fear is felt in rallies across countries to protect children against “gender ideology” in Croatia (Hodžić and Štulhofer, 2017), France (Harsin, 2018), Ireland (Browne and Nash, 2020), and Latin America (Zarembert et al., 2021). LGBTQ+ children’s books in particular have always been controversial (Knox, 2022).

Enyedi (2020) described this process as “paternalist populism,” which positions the heterosexual, married family as the primary support base. As a result, this leads to the marginalisation of the LGBTQ+ community and creates a distinction between the illiberal concept of “us” as a heteronormative household responsible for its offspring’s “healthy” and heteronormative upbringing. Katinka Linnamäki (2022) has referred to this as “illiberal familism,” suggesting that the Hungarian government strategically employs it to stigmatise LGBTQ+ individuals and reject their values. The “instrumentalization of family values clearly shows how familial relationships are influenced by patriarchy and, in this case [Hungary’s] especially, by heterosexism” (p. 23). The portrayal of LGBTQ+ individuals as unfit parents and the promotion of the heteronormative nuclear family are reinforced by linking family values to national values.

The empirical analysis highlighted how linking families to national values within “illiberal familism” builds on Christianity. As evidenced by previous research, anti-gender groups are often driven by religious and political ideologies, particularly within Christianity (Hodžić and Štulhofer, 2017). Scholars suggest that resistance to “gender ideology” stems from Christian beliefs that emphasise traditional family structures, heterosexuality, and the protection of procreation (Evolvi, 2023). In line with this, Facebook users in this analysis recurrently used Christianity and biblical imagery to support traditional gender roles and oppose the children’s book, for example by referring to the publication and LGBTQ+ people as “sinful.”

Defending traditional gender roles is tied to Christianity and operates within a specific historical context to oppose LGBTQ+ visibility. Research has pointed out the neocolonial nature of anti-gender discourses (Korolczuk and Graff, 2018), which depicts Western “gender supporters” as a common enemy and colonial influence, portraying them as oppressors of the public (Evang, 2022). This empirical analysis further highlights that through the neocolonial lens, transnational organisations such as the EU are portrayed as deliberate movements to dissolve small nations, such as Hungary. In this argumentation, the EU uses LGBTQ+ visibility to attack the very foundation—the family—of nation-states to dissolve them from within. Comments included in the analysis underscored that some perceive the European Union as a major influence on local LGBTQ+ politics through both soft and hard power. The EU exerts soft power by embedding pro-LGBTQ+ views in media, popular culture, and educational policies. It also uses hard power by imposing sanctions on the country on the one hand, and financially supporting LGBTQ+ causes on the other

(Stubbs and Lendvai-Bainton, 2020). Consequently, opponents of LGBTQ+ equality view the EU as undermining Hungary's sovereignty. Illiberal actors make recourse to post-colonial arguments by reframing geopolitical inequalities as instances of "colonialism" and promoting their eradication through nationalist means (Graff, 2021; Paternotte, 2019). Hungary's complex relationship with the "West" is conceptualised as part of a post-socialist discourse in the CEE region. On the one hand, the country is being attacked by the "West" and colonised by imperial powers with liberal democratic values that threaten the nation and can only be countered by consolidating national values. On the other hand, the "West" is looked up to as an aspirational force where democracy and liberalism are to be copied without considering the national context (Pető, 2021).

The continued construction of the "West" as aspirational is evidenced by the increasing prominence of the discourse of self-colonisation, which emphasises the pursuit of catching up with its imagined standards (Gagyi, 2016). The empirical analysis of the study also highlights this in the diversity and inclusion lens, in which Western European and North American countries are portrayed as superior and exemplary models of liberal democracies. In the context of LGBTQ+ rights and gender equality, the analysis reveals that legislative adaptation is frequently emphasised in the comment sections. However, supporters of the book see the anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric that it has ignited as a matter of societal values rather than a concern for human rights. While there are also voices in the comment sections that emphasise the need for inclusion and respect for different sexualities, gender identities and expressions, the focus remains on homosexuality, recognition of same-sex marriage, and rainbow families. It advocates for a societal shift that accepts homosexuality and gives equal rights to same-sex couples but does not question the heteronormative foundations of marriage and family. As highlighted in previous research, this sentiment supports same-sex parenthood and aligns with the post-gay agenda, that integrates LGBTQ+ lives into existing structures, however, it neglects to question the legitimisation of established institutions (Forbes and Ueno, 2020). While the LGBTQ+ discourse is seen as an important social value, heteronormative assumptions persist within LGBTQ+ discourses, particularly concerning parenting (Lasio et al., 2019). The comments in this lens recognise the limitations of traditional gender roles, the unequal power dynamics they bring, and the need to challenge these roles and power dynamics.

Furthermore, the most salient arguments of the book's proponents are strongly linked to individualism. Overwhelmingly, the book's advocates simply argue that there is no "compulsion" to buy the book. This also ties the feminist standpoint to a strong popular and neoliberal feminist awakening that emphasises individual choice and responsibility and does not critically examine the embeddedness of political structures and institutions in gendered debates (Banet-Weiser et al.,

2020). Moreover, this widespread argument in support of the book embraces liberal values such as freedom of expression but condemns conservative actions, such as the destruction of the children's book, perpetuating anti-gender sentiment.

While there is undoubtedly an increased visibility of LGBTQ+ people and issues on social media (Carrasco and Kerne, 2018; Fox and Warber, 2015; Robards et al., 2018), LGBTQ+ individuals are selective with their social media engagement. This selectivity is often driven by the pervasive negative public opinion and the nature of social media itself, which can foster hostility and aggression towards marginalised groups, as highlighted in previous research (Myles et al., 2023). Consequently, many LGBTQ+ individuals may avoid openly participating in public comment sections, such as the ones analysed in this study, to protect themselves from potential backlash and harm. The lack of visible LGBTQ+ engagement is particularly significant in contexts like Hungary. Although *Fairyland Is for Everyone* has garnered extensive support both online and offline (Rédai, 2023), in this analysis the supporters of the book have not actively called for including LGBTQ+ voices or attempted to emphasise the importance of lived experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in Hungary, especially at such a critical time for their rights and recognition. This omission underscores a broader issue: While support for LGBTQ+ rights may exist in abstract terms, there is often a reluctance or failure to prioritise the voices of those directly affected. This gap in representation and advocacy highlights the ongoing challenges faced by LGBTQ+ communities in achieving not just visibility, but also meaningful participation and influence in public discourse.

8 Conclusion

Qualitative analysis of Facebook comment sections carries inherent limitations. The data selected for analysis does not cover all Hungarian-language news outlets and related Facebook posts that covered the publication of *Fairyland is for Everyone*. Furthermore, the nature of data obtained from Facebook comment sections poses challenges, as users and the platform may edit or delete comments, leading to incomplete or altered datasets, affecting the replicability of the current study. Moreover, privacy concerns may arise, potentially restricting access to certain comments or demographics, limiting the comprehensiveness of the analysis. These limitations underscore the importance of cautious interpretation and acknowledgement of potential biases in qualitative analyses. Despite the inherent limitations of the material and qualitative nature of the study, the article offers a worthy perspective on online gender debates in the Hungarian context, as previous research has mainly focused on the governments' policies rather than the public discourses.

By drawing on previous literature on anti-gender movements, this study examined the characteristics of the discourse surrounding the debate on gender and sexuality on social media in Hungary. Through the analysis, it becomes evident how diverse criticisms of the book draw upon distinct aspects of the overarching anti-gender and feminist discourses. Social media users selectively employ these aspects to substantiate their stance, whether advocating for or against the book's publication, or negotiating on suitable contexts, environments, and target audiences for its dissemination.

The hybrid discourses are intertwined with the diversity of Hungary's historical and political context. The analysis reveals three dominant discursive lenses within the debate: heteronormative familism, neocolonialism, and diversity and inclusion. These lenses reflect both anti-gender and feminist notions of allyship, and the case study shows how the different ideological frameworks coexist within the same debate on social media. A prominent underpinning of the discourse is the strong sense that heteronormativity is prevalent in both anti-gender and feminist allyship discursive strategies.

This empirical study sheds light on the multifaceted conceptions of gender in relation to family, children, education, and legislation that go beyond the commonly researched areas of women's and LGBTQ+ rights. The findings indicate that gender is a contested topic in Hungarian society, connecting a variety of discourses. On the one hand, there is opposition to LGBTQ+ equality, often linked to traditional family values and resistance to Western influence. On the other hand, there is increasing acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals as a necessary component of a liberal democratic society. It is important to note that while the debate is framed differently across the three lenses, a common thread runs through all of them: gender is seen as a powerful and potentially destabilising force that must be managed. The implications of these findings are far-reaching, provide insight into the way gender is discussed and understood, and show how government discussions of gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights have gained traction. However, the impact of growing anti-gender sentiment extends beyond human rights and policy issues and points to a broader cultural shift in attitudes and perceptions of gender-related issues.

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