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Caring for the elderly in the family or in the nation?

Gender, women and migrant care labour in the Lega Nord

FINAL DRAFT BEFORE PUBLICATION

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Abstract

This article aims at gendering our understanding of populist radical right ideology, policy and activism in Italy. It does so by focusing on migrant care labour, which provides a strategic site for addressing the relationship between anti-immigration politics and the gendered and racialised division of work. Three arrangements and understandings of elderly care are analysed, whereby care work should be performed ‘in the family and in the nation’, ‘in the family/outside the nation’ and ‘in the nation/outside the family’. Party documents and interviews with women activists are used to show how the activists’ views and experiences partly diverge from the Lega Nord rhetoric and policy on immigration, gender and care work. The article locates populist radical right politics in the context of the international division of

reproductive labour in Italy and suggests the relevance of analysing gender relations in populist radical right parties in connection with national care regimes.

Keywords: populist radical right, gender, migrant care workers, Lega Nord, activism, nation.

This article aims at gendering our understanding of contemporary populist radical right¹ (PRR) policy, ideology and mobilisations in Italy. It does so by focusing on the issue of migrant care/domestic labour, which provides a strategic site for addressing the relationship between anti-immigration politics and the gendered and racialised division of work in this country. With one of the highest rates of elderly inhabitants in the world (United Nations 2012) and generous monetary transfers supporting the demand for private home-based elderly care, Italy has attracted considerable scholarly attention, and has been identified as exemplifying a form of ‘migrant-in-the family system’ (Bettio, Simonazzi and Villa 2006), where cash-for-care allowances have resulted in families outsourcing care services to migrant paid carers. The important demand for reproductive labour – specifically for elderly care – is met by migrant – mostly female - workers. Otherwise restrictive Italian immigration policies are positive towards these workers, relying on massive regularisations of care-givers. The scholarship on the international division of reproductive labour² (Parreñas 2001) indicates that, through the outsourcing of domestic/care chores to migrant workers, social divisions of gender, class and ethnicity³ as well as dominant and racialised femininities (and masculinities) are reproduced in immigration societies (Andall 2000; Hondagneu-Sotelo,

2001). Thus international migration constitutes a central factor shaping the gendered division of work in European destination countries, in a context characterised by the restructuring of welfare state systems (Kofman and Raghuram 2015; Williams 2012). All this makes Italy a significant case to explore the connection between anti-immigration politics, migration and the gendered division of work.

The article is organised as follows. The first section presents existing studies of gender, activism and the PRR. The second section discusses, through the prism of migrant care labour, the gendered dimensions of the ideology and policy of the Lega Nord⁴ party as well as the discrepancies between them. Then, after a short methodological section, the analysis explores how female activists make sense of the gendered and racialised division of work in Italian society and how their views partly diverge from the gendered ideology and policy of their party. A conclusion discusses the main contributions of the article.

Gender, women and activism in PRR parties

So far little is known about women activists in right-wing organisations, including PRR parties. Most scholarly accounts of these male-dominated movements tend to dismiss women as apolitical members whose affiliation is channelled through men. Yet women are actively engaged in these organisations and may feel empowered ‘as women’ by their activism (Blee 1996). The participation of women in movements holding conservative views on the family is not ‘paradoxical’; indeed advocating a public role for women as biological and social reproducers of the nation can be experienced as emancipatory. Only some studies focus on gender and activism in the PRR (Avanza 2009; Blee and Linden 2012; Mulinari and Neergaard 2014), while most recent studies are mainly concerned with the parties’ ideology and political programmes or their electorate (Akkerman and Hagelund 2007; De Lange and

Mügge 2015; Mayer 2013, Meret and Siim 2013; Towns, Karlsson and Eyre 2014). The paucity of studies of PRR women's activism constitutes a significant gap in the literature, given the centrality of gender to nationalist political projects. Evidence from recent PRR studies (Towns, Karlsson and Eyre 2014) concurs with findings in the wider field of gender and nationalism, to show that women are mobilised as biological as well as cultural and social reproducers of the national community (Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989).

The limited number of qualitative studies of women and gender relations in PRR parties and right-wing movements is also significant if one considers the relevance of gender as a force that shapes collective mobilisations. Since the 1990s, feminist scholars have challenged and widened dominant understandings of activism. Ethnographic studies of gender and social movements have shown not only that the public/private divide structures the political socialisation and participation of women and men at macro-level, but also that this frontier comes to be re-drawn through activism at the micro-level (Taylor 1999). Other studies show how women's political work is appropriated and made invisible based on essentialist assumptions about women's 'natural' caring skills in the private sphere: the notion of the gendered 'division of political work' (Dunezat 2009: 246) has been used to show how gender is reproduced within social movements, through the activists' practices. For instance, in the Lega Nord women tend to be involved in activities and spaces which are associated with unpaid domestic work and constructed as apolitical, such as campaigning for the defence of the traditional family and the promotion of Padanian folklore (Avanza 2009). Gendered hierarchies are reproduced in daily practices in the activists' group: the overt expression of sexism serves to compensate for the activists' stigmatisation and class subalternity, and to celebrate hegemonic models of masculinity which are associated with national belonging (Dematteo 2007). While some women have positions of political responsibility in the Lega

Nord, this demands their adaptation to masculine models of engagement and does not challenge the gendered division of work in the party (Avanza 2009; Pajetta 1994).

Qualitative studies of rightist activism also point to the internal gendered social diversity of these social movements and to the ‘divergence between [...] the public facade and the internal dynamics of far-right groups’, emphasising the agency of the activists and highlighting that their views and experiences do not necessarily reflect the official ideologies of their organisations (Blee 1996; Blee 2007: 121). In this context, the potential for gender antagonism within collective mobilisations is linked to the different constituencies of identification which are made available by the social movements to their members. This can activate ‘competing identities and loyalties’ (Klandermans 2004: 367) which have been given little systematic investigation in the social movement literature, including from a gendered perspective.

These studies suggest that we need to know more about how PRR activists make sense of party gendered rhetorics and policy and how their gendered views diverge from official party proclamations, as well as about the processes through which gender and ethnicity are reproduced through activism within social movements.

In The Family/In The Nation Or In the Family/Outside the Nation? The Lega Nord Ideology and Policy on Elderly Care

In common with other PRR parties, the Lega Nord’s official discourse posits the traditional family as the base of the national social order. The necessity of protecting the family is directly linked to preserving the national identity, and demographic issues are key in the party’s anti-immigration discourse. Women are celebrated as ‘mothers of the nation’: in his autobiography, the former leader and party founder Umberto Bossi states that women must be the primary carers in the family and that they cannot be replaced in this role by the

head of the household (Bossi and Vimercati 1992). Elsewhere (Bossi and Vimercati 1993), Bossi writes that the state should support those who provide childcare at home in their own family. A similar view is expressed with regard to elderly care. The family is celebrated as the space where the elderly members of the nation should be cared for and where the national cultural identity is transmitted to the younger generations:

‘The Lega Nord identifies the family as the privileged space for the relationships of belonging and history which are transmitted across generations. The family represents the ideal environment for maintaining the quality of life for the elderly. (...) Our ‘grandparents’ feel the necessity of being useful to our society and their families, transmitting their precious heritage of culture, traditions and wisdom: it is necessary to provide economic contributions to those families which intend to maintain an elderly relative at home’ (Lega Nord 2013).

Yet this familistic rhetoric of the Lega Nord is ambivalent. While women are considered primarily responsible for social reproductive work within the family, their paid work outside the home is tolerated and even encouraged⁵ (Avanza 2009; Huyseune 2000). Bossi has explicitly acknowledged the necessity of a conciliation between women’s domestic responsibilities and their jobs (Bossi and Vimercati 1993). Recent party documents express the same position, emphasising the need for measures which enable working women to ‘fullfill their crucial role in the family’ (Lega Nord 2012). The party programmes include pronatalist measures as well as measures supporting women workers, although the party has taken no long-term initiatives to improve the participation of women in the labour market (Avanza 2009). This ambivalent position on women’s work is associated with Lega Nord’s specific nationalist discourse, which attributes masculine superiority to the Padanian people

(the ‘producers’) as a whole, as opposed to the lazy Southerners and the Roman parasites. This discourse assigns qualities socially constructed as masculine – such as work ethic, industriousness and rationality – to all members of the nation (Huysseune 2000).

The party has implemented policies which contradicts the idealised elderly care arrangement celebrated by its official documents. Since the 1990s, as a member of successive right-wing coalition governments, the Lega Nord has played an hegemonic role in shaping restrictive immigration policies and has contributed to politicise the immigration issue, forcing the mainstream right to adjust its position in the political space and take a more xenophobic direction (Rydgren 2003). In 2002 a new immigration law⁶ restricted the possibility of family reunion, shortened the duration of residence permits and made their renewal more difficult, by conditioning it on having a work contract. Yet at the same time, massive regularisations of migrant care-givers have been implemented by consecutive governments of which the Lega Nord has been a member. Initially opposed to these measures, the party gave in following pressure from the Catholic Church and its own electorate. The Lega Nord was eventually forced to accept a general amnesty, which was the most significant regularisation ever seen in Italy⁷. In 2008, the Minister of the Interior, Roberto Maroni (Lega Nord), proposed a law on Security that would make illegal immigration status a penal offence. A public debate developed across the government and in civil society on the need to ‘save’ those migrants employed as care workers from the enforcement of the law. The Lega Nord’s allies demanded that these people should benefit from special legal treatment through a ‘Care-givers’ rescue decree’. The party yielded to this selective regularisation in order to advance its project of fiscal federalism, also a key part of its agenda. About 300,000 care workers (commonly called *badanti*) were eventually regularised in 2009. Thus in the absence of a comprehensive policy on elderly care, anti-immigration positions yield to the popular practice of filling the gaps in limited state-funded

care provision by relying on migrant care labour (Van Hooren 2010). The importance of the demand expressed by Italian families overrules anti-immigration principles, leading to a pragmatic approach where migrant care workers appear to be singled out as a 'useful' category.

Indeed in Italy the familistic welfare state system and the high rates of elderly inhabitants combine with important inequalities in the division of care work between the sexes (Hausmann, Tyson, Zahidi 2012) to generate an important demand for care workers, which the Lega Nord – like other political forces – has had to accommodate with. The demand for migrant care labour is not expressed only by middle-class households but also working-class ones (Gallo and Scrinzi 2016). In 2012 the estimated number of care workers, including those working in the informal economy, ranged from 850,000 to 900,000 (Pasquinelli 2012). In 2010, 1,538,000 care workers were employed by Italian households, corresponding to a 42 percent rise compared with 2001: 82.6 percent were female and 71.6 were migrants (CENSIS 2010). The average profile of care/domestic workers in Italy is a young migrant woman, most likely Eastern European or from the Philippines (CENSIS 2010). Indeed the 2002 regularisation was associated with a substantial increase in migrants from Eastern Europe. Due to immigration legislation that forces them to sway between periods of legality and prolonged periods of illegality, care/domestic workers constitute a hyper-flexible labour force (Schuster 2005) displaying the traits of feminised non-skilled precarious labour. This gendered and racialised division of work is inscribed within the context of a highly segmented labour market along gender, ethnicity and class lines. While in some contexts the crisis has led some native working-class women to take on these jobs, there is no real competition between them and migrant women in the sector. Native workers tend to shun elderly care-giving jobs, which are mostly based on a co-resident arrangement, preferring baby-sitting and cleaning jobs by the hour (Di Bartolomeo and Marchetti 2014).

This pragmatic approach of the Lega Nord vis-à-vis the demand for migrant care labour contradicts not only its ‘zero tolerance’ discourse on immigration, but also the party’s familistic rhetoric which posits women as biological and social reproducers of the nation. Various scholars have analysed the gap existing between the Lega Nord anti-immigration rhetoric and its action while in political office: for instance, the party secured radical measures, such as bio-metric controls on non-EU citizens and the use of the navy in fighting illegal migration, which attracted great media visibility yet were scarcely applied (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2010). However the contradiction between these immigration policies and the party familistic rhetoric has been rarely examined.

The party’s pragmatism vis-à-vis migrant care labour also is also evident in the activities of some Lega Nord administrations which, in recent years, have been involved in promoting the quality of elderly care services and in strengthening the links between local institutions and non-profit associations. This has included organising training courses for *badanti* and establishing official lists of registered qualified *badanti* that can be accessed by potential employers. Other administrations have developed residential care services and home-based care services for the elderly. For instance, the Vigevano City Council (Lombardy) created a residence for self-sufficient elderly people. The Veneto regional council set up a service through which it is possible for volunteers to ‘adopt’ an elderly person performing basic care chores for him or her. These initiatives have been promoted based on a rhetoric emphasising the need to recreate communal relationships and mutual support in society, and to go beyond the existing arrangements of residential care and the *badanti*⁸.

Thus the official party rhetoric connects nativism and identity politics with familism – to the extent that the family (and implicitly unpaid feminine care work) are posited as the ideal elderly care arrangement. The party press and communication portrays care work as the ‘natural’ mission of women; and the family *and* the national community as the proper realm

of elderly care provision. In this view, elderly care work should be carried out inside the family (by female family members) and inside the nation (by female members of the nation). However the discourse of some Lega Nord local administrators diverges from this idealised view. Further, the Lega sustains, through its policy at the national and local levels, diverse arrangements of elderly care that are differentiated from this idealised model. In reality in fact this arrangement coexists with the widespread practice of ‘commodified defamilialisation’ (Saraceno and Keck 2011: 387) based on migrant care labour, which the party has to accommodate. Thus the party supports a gendered and racialised division of work whereby migrant women are assigned to paid care work outsourced by Italian families (an arrangement in which elderly care is performed ‘in the family/outside the nation’) but also alternative arrangements whereby elderly care is performed by (Italian) volunteers and social workers (‘outside the family/in the nation’).

Methodology

Qualitative methods applied to the study of PRR activism enable us to grasp its cultural dimension: in their attempts to recruit and mobilise members, parties provide (gendered) symbolic frames that people can use to make sense of their private life and political engagement. Ethnography also provides insight into the discrepancies between the party discourse and how this is enacted by its members (Blee 1996). Finally, ethnographic data can be used to explore the social divisions that are internal to the party and that involve conflicting views and interests (Blee 2007), such as gender antagonism; these are typically obscured by PRR organisations in their attempt to represent the party as a united national community without social hierarchies.

This article relies on biographical and semi-structured interviews with twenty female party members aged 46 to 84 and active in the Lombardy region. The informants were accessed through the party and through snowballing. With regard to class backgrounds, the sample is in line with the average profile of Lega Nord members, who are often independent workers and artisans and – increasingly – manual workers with intermediate levels of education, and who rarely hold university degrees (Passarelli and Tuorto 2012). The sample was also diverse with regard to the activists' seniority and the informants had different degrees of commitment. In addition, documentary sources such as leaflets and website pages, leaders' writings and official party documents were used to assess the official discourse on elderly care of the Lega Nord. The data were collected through two research projects [INFORMATION REMOVED] between 2010 and 2013. The interviews were conducted in Milan, which hosts the Lega Nord headquarters, as well as in smaller towns in the region, which constitute the historical Lega Nord electoral stronghold.

The data were analysed through identification of key themes and relationships between them. The 'open' approach of life-history interviews enabled the researcher to elicit narratives which are structured according to the informants' relevance systems. This was fruitfully combined with the topical interview method, where the focus is set by the researcher's concerns. Taking up Kathleen Blee's (1996) remarks, I tried to minimise my intervention and did not ask any specific questions during the biographical interviews; I encouraged the informants to provide a full exposition of their life. At the end of the narration, I asked a series of open-ended questions aiming to collect information on topics such as the informants' role in the organisation, employment, family, etc., as relevant.

Outside The Family/In The Nation: An 'Alternative' To The *Badanti*?

How do female Lega Nord activists make sense of their role as primary unpaid carers, and of the presence of migrant female care-givers in Italian households? How do they respond to the ambivalent politics of their party vis-à-vis immigration and elderly care? A contradiction exists between the support of these women for anti-immigration politics on the one hand, and their gender position on the other, because of the central role played by migrant women as paid care work providers in Italy. Care work, celebrated as a feminine mission for the good of the nation, symbolically provides women with a valued social role in nationalist political projects. Female PRR activists would be expected to prefer not to delegate this role, especially to racialised women. At the same time, Italian women have to carry the ‘triple burden’ of the unequal gendered division of care work, combining their jobs with childcare and elderly care.

The political engagement of many informants was contingent on their domestic responsibilities. For instance, one woman became an activist only once her children had grown up and after she had cared for her elderly parents. Another became politically active after she was widowed. Overall all my informants expressed regret for and dissatisfaction with the widespread practice among Italian families of hiring migrants for elderly care jobs. At the same time, some of them admitted me that, in some cases, they had been forced to rely on migrant paid care workers as the only available option. While these women adopt a pragmatic position, they still tend to see unpaid care provided by family members as the best arrangement.

While she was the mayor of a small town, Ilaria tried (without success) to secure public funding to offer a salary to (Italian) non-professional care-givers – and remunerate those women who provided elderly care in their families. For her, this is the ideal solution in terms of maintaining both the moral and cultural integrity of the nation and its economic stability.

Creating part-time jobs to pay the daughters or daughters-in-law of the elderly people cared-for would cost very little, she argues, in comparison with promoting residential care.

‘Today the family is disattending its obligation vis-à-vis the elderly. I have had my parents as well as my parents-in-law at my place and I have always cared for them even when they were not living in my house. I have taught my daughters to do the same. Today there is a growing number of *badanti* who do this full-time to hoard money and then leave to go back home. We are responsible to some extent, because if the family still had that value we would not have this problem. The care services are not enough and they are too expensive so we need to go back to those values. I have done my share of sacrifices’ (Ilaria, female activist, 60 years old).

Nadia, who is an active member of the party’s feminine association, seems to have benefited from a more egalitarian division of domestic and care work than the rest of the informants. She tells me proudly that she has never had to recruit a *badante* and that she has managed to ensure that both her own elderly parents and her husband’s parents were cared for in the family.

‘My husband helps me a lot. We have tried to handle the issues of elderly care in the family. Two of our elderly have died this year, there is one left. We have done everything to be collaborative and to arrange care chores and times, to avoid delegating them to these *badanti*... My mother lives with us, before it was my father who lived with us. We try to care

for them ourselves but it is not easy because in Italy the state does not support the families that do so' (Nadia, female activist, 54 years old).

Another activist, Giovanna, criticises the current demand for migrant care workers based on the idealisation of the past: an important dimension in the experience and narratives of PRR activists (Klandermans and Mayer 2006), here it is applied to the issue of care. The demand for the *badanti* is explained through the decline of the family and moral values, and the *badanti* are seen as a threat to the nation. Similarly, the responsibility for the moral decline which led to the practice of outsourcing care needs outside the family is attributed to feminism and the attack on the family it perpetrated. Of middle-class background, Giovanna relied on Italian labour force to care for her own parents, who died a long time ago. Due to her own current illness, she has recruited a part-time Filipina domestic worker who cleans, shops and cooks for her.

'Today the woman no longer wants to do this work of care. The Western woman does not want to do this because she does not think that she is going to get old herself... they believe they are staying 50 or 60 years old forever... Today those feminists who participated in [the] 1968 demonstrations are 70 years old. They realise now the outcome of their destroying the family, the sense of responsibility that comes with it and the elderly people. Elderly homes did not exist before feminism' (Giovanna, female activist, 84 years old).

Paola too presents herself as the reluctant employer of a migrant care worker. She is one of the few women who have achieved a high-ranking position in the party. She has no children

but has had to combine her political career with providing unpaid care for her elderly mother. Although she had assistance from her siblings, the worsening of her mother's condition and Paola's own political engagement made it necessary to recruit a paid carer.

'My mother was not at ease with the *badante*, it is much better for an elderly person to stay at home with her family members even if this means a sacrifice of time and money for them. (...) Mummy or granny are people that you would always like to have nearby, at least in normal families it is like that, so we have to change this mentality of 'parking' the elderly with somebody else' (Paola, female activist, 60 years old).

Female activists also mobilise ideas of 'feminine' elderly care work to make sense of their political engagement, transferring their domestic roles to the public sphere: using familistic metaphors to describe the national community, they explain their engagement in the party on the basis of their responsibilities in the private sphere. Veronica has recently had experience of caring for her elderly parents, who have now both died, and conceives her activism in the Lega Nord as a battle to defend 'our elderly people'.

'One day I heard at the radio that the Municipality of Milan gave priority to the migrants on the waiting lists for social housing and that only the Lega Nord at the city council had been against this decision which clearly penalized our elderly people who are those who have always paid their taxes here. It seemed to me like a really grave injustice! So I have decided to give my own little contribution to this battle which seemed to be lost from the start, given

that there was only one party against all the others. I checked up the Lega Nord website and I became a member' (Veronica, female activist, 60 years old).

Thus Veronica expresses feelings of injustice because of what she considers the predatory presence of migrants at the expenses of the Italian elderly people; anti-immigration political engagement is for her a quest for justice to protect the welfare of 'our' elderly people. In this respect, we observe that the motives of PRR activists are gendered: existing studies in sociology and social psychology (Klandermans and Mayer 2006) point to the relevance of mechanisms of self-victimisation in collective and individual identity-building in PRR membership. Veronica's narrative shows that female activists not only may feel personally threatened by the racialised Other, but they also extend their feelings of fear and frustration to those that they are expected to care for, such as their children, as indicated by existing studies (Blee 1996), but also the elderly.

Other activists adopt a radical stance. This is the case of Morena, a long-time activist of the Lega Nord. She is the founder of a satellite association of the party, whose volunteers provide home-based care services such as transportation for the elderly and the disabled in several towns in Lombardy. The association has a partner social cooperative which also provides home-based care services. Morena's activism is typical of the kind of activities connected with the defence of the family and with the social issues that are assigned to women in PRR organisations. While these issues are given visibility in the Lega Nord rhetoric, women who act to promote them do not hold relevant roles within the party. Morena described herself as someone with an early interest in social issues and an innate desire for helping those in need. Of middle-class background, she has lived most of her life in the small village where she was born sixty-five years ago. Holding a professional bachelor degree, she

worked in administrative jobs, then quit after her children were born, as the family relied on her husband's income. The couple met Bossi in the late 1970s, long before the party was founded: at that time he was campaigning to launch the Lombard Autonomist League, the precursor to the Lega Nord. She sympathised with his ideas of autonomy from the central State and his localistic claims to safeguard cultural and linguistic regional specificities; she shared the criticism of the political élites and the financial burden attributed to Southern Italian migrants and the unproductive South of Italy which was expressed by the League.

Morena did not, however, become an activist until she was forty years old, when her children had grown up. When she was about thirty, she became a fervent Catholic and convinced her husband to quit his job and embrace a more 'spiritual' life with limited economic resources. They moved to the mountains, where they ran a restaurant. At the weekends, she worked as a care-giver for the elderly. In 2001 they closed the restaurant and returned to the village, and Morena became a full party member, soon followed by her husband. Morena has acted as a city councillor and run as a candidate for the Lega Nord on several occasions; she regularly intervenes on the Lega Nord radio station, *Radio Padania*. With Bossi's support, she founded the social cooperative and the association to provide care services in her local community.

In Morena's story, religious conversion and the choice of a new life as an alternative to the materialism of contemporary society appear closely intertwined with the decision to become involved in the Lega Nord. Activism has provided a space where her religious beliefs are materialised through her voluntary work. Through her political engagement she has also managed to make a living for herself and created job opportunities for her children, all employed by the cooperative.

Like other Lega Nord female activists, she holds a naturalising view of gender and claims a moral superiority for women: she considers women to be hard-working, headstrong, selfless and concrete – qualities that the populist party rhetoric typically celebrates as distinctive of the Lega Nord as opposed to the corrupted political élites. Women, she says, are better endowed with these qualities than men, because of their so-called natural role as mothers.

‘Women are strong, otherwise God would have not given her maternity. We have something more than men (...). Women have a 360 degrees vision, while men are partial. I think this is in their nature and also because women have always had to take care of many things, small things such as shopping, but also big issues such as children, the health, all of this has been put on the women’s shoulders’ (Morena, female activist, 65 years old).

In contrast with this rather traditional view of women, Morena’s trajectory suggests that her activism has involved the acquisition of skills and roles in the public sphere which led to a renegotiation of the gendered division of care and domestic work in her own life. Today, she says, she devotes all her time to her voluntary and political activities; her husband takes care of the house and the cooking in addition to helping her in her projects. She also says that her children accept she has little time to help them in caring for her grandchildren. Thus Morena, while subscribing to the view of the family promoted by the party, does not fully embrace such norms in her own life. Further, and more importantly, some of the activities Morena is involved in can be seen as a challenge to the party’s official rhetoric on elderly care, as well as an implicit criticism of its politics on immigration.

The cooperative conforms to the party's familistic ideology celebrating the role of elderly people in the local community. Its website includes the motto: 'The community's life is based on the elderly's wisdom'. However, because care work is carried out by employees and volunteers outside the families of those cared for, these practices acknowledge that care work cannot always be provided by family members and often needs to be externalised, entirely or partially. Further, the association supports the project of creating a co-housing community which is sustainable with regard to both environmental protection and care provision. This was Morena's idea originally. The village should correspond to a local community of people who live together and care for each other: in this community, a member in need of care could access it in exchange for the provision of other services; in exchange for providing care, another member could be given a flat. The village should gather together different categories of fragile people: the elderly, the disabled, and the sick as well as single-parent and deprived families. Morena eagerly advocates this project as a concrete alternative to the current crisis of moral values, the exploitation of nature and poverty. She defined the village as 'not a ghetto for the elderly but a large family'⁹, and as a solution to the economic crisis. According to the project brochure, in this conservative right-wing model of alternative sustainable living, elderly people should become valued members of the community as 'representatives of our history' and the 'carriers of our tradition'; and the children should grow up with better values to bring about future social change.

In Morena's vision, elderly care work does not necessarily have to be provided by family members but should indeed be provided by members of the community or local volunteers – members of the Padanian nation. Morena emphasises the local/ethnic dimension of the village community. In this respect, the project seems to implicitly criticise the party's laxer politics on immigration and aims to recreate a community where migrant care workers are not

needed. This village is explicitly presented as an elderly care solution alternative to residential care and to the *badanti*:

‘There are still some Italian families which assist their elderly relatives, even if there are only few left, because the women work. Italian women are more expensive as care workers, migrants are cheaper (...). Sometimes you are lucky if you find one who does her job with love, sometimes you are not lucky and you have problems; if you regularise her then it is expensive, and if you have to replace her it is complicated... In my view this [the village] is the only solution, it is different from residential care where you become an object in the hands of others and lose your autonomy, and it is an alternative to the *badanti*’ (Morena, female activist, 65 years old).

The *badanti* are seen as an option of last resort. On a *Radio Padania* broadcast, Morena describes migrants as welfare scroungers and promotes a fundraising meal organised by the association to help ‘our people’ (23rd November 2013). This ‘welfare-chauvinistic’ and radical position on the issue of migrant care labour does not however prevent Morena and the other volunteers from helping those families who request it to look for a *badante*; also, the association distributes food to local families in need, including some migrants’ families.

Thus Morena’s project aims at recreating an idealised past where the crisis of moral values and the family can be redressed and the racialised Other is absent. She argues that by sharing unpaid care services outside the family, national solidarity is strengthened and national moral values are restored through effective transmission to younger generations. Despite the Lega Nord’s pragmatic politics, Morena hopes to be able to convince her party to change direction

by funding the construction of the village. This would be very expensive and Morena is tireless in approaching politicians and advocating her cause. However, despite her established relations with leading party representatives, she has not yet found substantial support.

If the village were to become reality, it would contradict not only the Lega Nord immigration policy but also the party's familism, thus reflecting recent developments in local-level party policy which promote (native) volunteer work to benefit the elderly such as 'adopting' an elderly neighbour. In the village, reproductive labour would become a resource to be shared 'publicly' among members of the local national community, rather than provided within one's family in the private sphere. This would involve making care work visible beyond the private sphere and acknowledging its value for the whole national community. The elderly care arrangement that this Padanian association advocates is thus located 'outside the family/in the nation'. This could be empowering for the women of the national community. Their status as social reproducers of the nation would no longer be usurped by migrant workers. At the same time, positing care work as a resource which can be exchanged with other goods among all members of the community could lead to changes in the gendered division of work and challenge the perception of care as non-valuable non-work. In fact, this is what happened in Morena's own life after she became involved in the Lega Nord. However Morena does not seem to consider this as a key aspect of the project. While she thinks that expanding the realm of elderly care work beyond the private sphere of the family is necessary, her narrative does not criticize the unequal gendered division of care work. Instead, her concern is for the declining morality of the Padanian nation, which she identifies with divorce, single-parent families and the delegation of elderly care work outside the household. She firmly claims for women the role of social and biological reproducers of Padania. While she never says so explicitly, it can be argued that in her view it is women who should be expected to perform most of the care chores in the village.

Conclusion

Addressing different levels of analysis, this article has explored the gendered dimensions of PRR ideology, policy and activism in the specifics of the Italian context, as well as the discrepancies between them. Gender is as central to apprehending such discrepancies. Three main arrangements and understandings of care work emerge from the analysis. First, the official party discourse provides its members with gendered symbolic frames, celebrating a normative ideal arrangement where native women act as unpaid care providers in the family ('in the family and in the nation'). Second, in practice, the party implements policies whereby racialised women are called to take on care chores delegated by native women in Italian families ('in the family/outside the nation'). In recent years, this pragmatic policy approach has included also the promotion of a care arrangement 'alternative' to the *badanti* whereby (Italian) social workers and volunteers are called upon to recreate mutual relations of support 'in the nation' but 'outside the family'. Third, female activists express regret for the predominance of the 'outside the nation/inside the family' care arrangement in Italy, even if some of them pragmatically rely on migrant care labour. Echoing the recent developments in the Lega Nord policy on elderly care at the local level, one of the informants supports instead a radical view whereby elderly care should no longer be carried out by non-native women nor confined in the private sphere but in the national community ('outside the family/in the nation').

The article suggests the relevance of analysing gender relations in populist radical right parties in connection with national care regimes. As exemplified by the migrant care labour issue, in Italy the international division of reproductive labour structures the macro-context in which PRR mobilisations take place and affects the parties' strategies. Tolerating the

presence of migrant care workers because of the need for reproductive labour expressed by an ageing society is one of the compromises which the Lega Nord had to acquiesce to while in political office. In this context, the Lega Nord provides its members with gendered sources of identification as well as with opportunities for celebrating these gendered collective identities – for example sub-organisations focusing on ‘feminine’ issues such as care, which are deemed as apolitical and are marginalised in the party. Yet the data suggest that these same spaces can be used by party members to elaborate alternative views on issues which are key for them.

Gender also crucially shapes PRR female activists’ individual practices, narratives and trajectories. More specifically, the gendered and racialised division of work which characterises the Italian context defines the gendered contours of anti-immigration activists’ motives and identity-building. Through the prism of migrant care labour, the article explores the ambivalent role played by anti-immigration female activists, who, in common with other women, face the difficult task of combining domestic, professional and political responsibilities. Female members of the Lega Nord struggle to find a balance between fulfilling the traditional feminine roles celebrated by their party’s ideology and negotiating the presence of the racialised Other in their communities and families. In negotiating the contradiction between their gendered position and their anti-immigration engagement, these women construct gendered and racialised boundaries across the public/private sphere while also reasserting their political belonging. For example, the responsibility for the decline of family ties and the ‘immoral’ practice of outsourcing care chores ‘outside the nation’ is attributed to the party’s political opponents (‘the feminists’). The interviews with female activists were used to show the discrepancies between the activists’ practices and experiences on the one hand and the Lega Nord rhetoric and policy on the other, as well as the women’s implicit criticism of the Lega Nord’s practice of compromising in the field of both

immigration and social policies. Female activists claim the role of social reproducers for themselves. Yet at the same time some of them become (reluctant) employers of migrant care workers. Others devise an alternative model to both the party policy and rhetoric, whereby care work would no longer be carried out by migrant women, nor confined to the private sphere. The article shows that female members of the Lega Nord identify with the national male-dominated collectivity; at the same time, based on their position in the gendered and racialised division of work, their views may diverge from the discourse and policy of their own party.

¹ These are defined by their nativist, populist and authoritarian ideology (Mudde 2007).

² ‘Reproductive labour’ is key to social reproduction, defined as ‘the array of activities and relationships in maintaining people both on a daily basis and inter-generationally’ (Glenn, 1992: 1).

³ Gender and ethnicity are primary and intersecting social divisions in contemporary societies, based on and reproducing both symbolic hierarchies and material inequalities in resource allocation and consumption (Anthias 2001).

⁴ The inclusion of the Lega Nord in the PRR party family has been debated, because of its liberal positions in early years. Also, some authors stress that populism and regionalism are key to the Lega Nord, which grounds a claim for the independence of Northern Italy, which it calls Padania, on an alleged common Northern Italian ethnic identity (McDonnell 2006). Over time the anti-immigration struggle – targeting Muslims more specifically – became a core element of the Lega Nord agenda and its electorate shifted to the right (Masseti 2009).

⁵ Instead, other PRR parties claim that women should return home to fill their ‘natural’ role as mothers.

⁶ 189/2002.

⁷ About 700,000 were regularised, half of which were domestic and care workers.

⁸ ‘Affido anziani, approvata la legge regionale. Lazzarini: “Passo avanti nella solidarietà”’, 18th February 2015, <http://www.leganord.veneto.it/2015/02/18/affido-anziani-approvata-la-legge-regionale-lazzarini-passo-avanti-nella-solidarieta/>

⁹ Morena’s communication on *Radio Padania*, 28th September 2013.

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