



‘Pro-Life Feminism’? Contemporary Rhetoric of Organized Abortion Opposition in Germany

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SPECIAL ISSUE

RESEARCH

HUP HELSINKI
UNIVERSITY
PRESS

ABSTRACT

Opposing abortion with arguments centered around the supposed best interest of women might seem counter-intuitive but has been identified as a common strategy of ‘pro-life’ movements around the globe. Drawing from interviews conducted with German ‘pro-life’ women, this article proposes to analyze a ‘pro-life feminist’ rhetoric, in which specific ideas of equality, structural discrimination, empowerment, and care-work serve to incriminate abortion in new ways. Adapting to current subjectivities while at the same time holding on to traditional views on gender, sexuality, and family allows for ‘pro-life’ activists to strive toward a future in which they wish abortion to no longer exist.

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KEYWORDS:

Abortion; Pro-Life
Movement; Sexual Politics;
Social Movements;
Germany

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Brillet Reutter, Juliette.
2025. “Pro-Life Feminism”?
Contemporary Rhetoric
of Organized Abortion
Opposition in Germany.”
*Redescriptions: Political
Thought, Conceptual History
and Feminist Theory* 28(1):
22–39. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/rds.446>

On a sunny afternoon in Munich, Germany, in the spring of 2023, Königsplatz is filling up for the third annual ‘March for life’ against abortion. Different ‘pro-life’ groups, families, and people in religious or traditional attire are calmly gathering in front of a stage, accompanied by typical German brass music. From the other side of the square, loud techno music is being blasted through speakers by feminist counter-protestors. On stage, the moderator comments ironically: ‘Our biggest fans are here’. The opposition between ‘pro-life’ and ‘pro-choice’ movements, constitutive of conflicts over abortion, is palpable in this space. This observation, however, is rapidly complexified by the fact that it is not only ‘old, white men’ who are protesting abortion but that women, as leaders, speakers, or marchers, are playing a central role and using arguments centered around women to incriminate abortion in new ways.

Drawing on fieldwork conducted between 2021 and 2023 with young ‘pro-life’ activists in Germany, this article aims to analyze ‘egalitarian’ and ‘feminist’ rhetoric in arguments against abortion.¹

Abortion opposition appeared in many countries in contexts of politization of sexuality and reproduction in the 19th and 20th centuries. Mobilizations using the specific term ‘pro-life’ emerged in the USA in the 1960s and identified themselves as a catholic, non-violent, peace and justice movements against all threats to human life (Williams 2016), framing the issue of abortion as one of human rights and appropriating the rhetoric and tactics of the anti-war movement (Hughes 2006). Only later did evangelicals and the New Right massively join US anti-abortion mobilizations and shift their agenda toward sexual morality and cultural backlash (ibid., 543). Today, movements that call themselves ‘pro-life’ in Europe have partially claimed the terms and methods of their US counterparts and encompass organizations and initiatives that not only advocate against abortion but also against assisted suicide, fertility treatments, assisted reproduction, prenatal testing for illnesses and disabilities, human embryo research, surrogacy, sometimes organ donation, and certain forms of contraception.² While national organizations have their specificities across various European countries (e.g., Crosetti 2022; De Zordo, Mishtal and Anton 2016), they are recognized to be part of larger, transnational networks (e.g., Datta 2018). Previous studies have explored the different strategies of anti-abortion movements, which range from operating crisis pregnancy centers (e.g., Kelly 2012), influencing media (e.g., Mort 2023), and applying medical strategies (e.g., Sanders, Achteik and Jentsch 2018) to taking direct action (Maxwell 2002), using ‘commandos’ (e.g., Youngman 2003), conducting political harassment (Doan 2007), and carrying out violent guerilla actions (e.g., Mason 2002), along with analyzing their arguments based on religion (Knecht 2006), perspectives on motherhood (e.g., Luker 1985), and antifeminism (e.g., Sanders, Jentsch and Hansen 2014).

1 I use the term ‘rhetoric’ in the sense of a tool in debates that has the aim of convincing a public of one’s argument. As a category of linguistics, rhetoric has been under-used and conceptualized in sociology (e.g., Knoblauch 2009).

2 In this article, this is the definition I refer to when using the phrase ‘pro-life,’ accepting the terms of the field (see also: Data and Method section) and highlighting both the influence of the USA and international circulations of concepts as well as the fact that these organizations are more than ‘anti-abortion’ or ‘anti-choice.’ For better legibility, I will refrain from using quotation marks for the rest of the article. My interviewees used both the term ‘pro-life’ in English as well as the German word ‘Lebensschutz’ [protection of life].

There has been a growing interest in the role of women inside the Pro-Life Movement, either as activists ([Haugeberg 2017](#)) or as part of an argumentative shift. Since the 1980s and 1990s, their arguments have evolved from defending a 'right to life' for embryos and fetuses to also insisting on the purported harms of abortion to women. This 'woman-centered' ([Cannold 2002](#)) strategy employs gender and sexuality to problematize abortion innovatively. According to Susanna Mancini and Kristina Stoeckl, 'women-protective' arguments against abortion have appeared as a common strategy of collaborating pro-life organizations in Europe, Russia, and the USA, turning women 'from murderers into victims' ([Mancini and Stoeckl 2018, 227](#)). The underlying notion is that women do not genuinely want to get an abortion but are influenced by various factors. Singular pro-life personalities and certain US organizations describe themselves as 'pro-life feminist,' conflictingly claiming the heritage of feminist figures of the 'first wave' ([Browne 2022](#)). With feminist movements having been the driving force behind the legalization of abortion in many countries (e.g., [Schulz 2002](#)), the association between abortion opposition and feminism seems puzzling.

Germany presents a unique context with regard to abortion regulations, with abortion being regulated under the §218 of the criminal code as a criminal offense, only exempt from punishment under certain conditions, which include an obligatory counselling session 'in favor of unborn life.' As abortion was made legal in East Germany in 1972, this compromise was one of the points of contention of the German reunification and ultimately led to East German women losing the right to abortion ([Behren 2019](#)). While there have been practical liberalizations and reforms over time, many German pro-life activists have expressed satisfaction with the existing legislation and merely act as a conservative pressure group advocating for the status quo. In fact, opposing the definitive legalization of abortion in the name of 'compromise' is a well-represented position in the German political field, ranging from the Christian conservative parties CDU/CSU to the liberal FDP and the far-right AfD, where anti-abortion sentiments are openly expressed.

The German 'Lebensschutz' [protection of life] as an abortion opposition movement emerged in the early 20th century and culminated in the 1960s amidst political debates surrounding bodily emancipation ([Sanders, Jentsch and Hansen 2014, 43f.](#)). Today, it is a network of mostly Christian organizations and initiatives around the federation 'Bundesverband Lebensrecht,' operating since a renewal of the movement in the 1980s (*ibid.*, 46). All these actors, including those directly affiliated with the far-right and the remains of the German aristocracy ([Kemper 2014](#)), come together at annual 'Marches for Life' in different cities, held following the US model since 2002 ([Sanders, Jentsch and Hansen 2014, 48](#)). In recent years, new actors have emerged, heavily influenced by or directly affiliated with US organizations, such as '40 Tage für das Leben' [40 Days for Life] and 'Pro-Life Europe' (mimicking the US Students for Life), which have introduced novel forms of activism. These organizations signify a further generational shift within the German Pro-Life Movement and underscore its connections with international Christian and conservative networks.

Although this article will not assess whether pro-life mobilizations and their activists are to be classified at the far-right, I base my analysis on previous scholarship on right-wing sexual politics because they facilitate an understanding of the complexity of mobilizations around sexuality and (anti)feminism and constitutes an insightful approach on the implications of abortion opposition.

On the one hand, antifeminism and restrictions of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHRs) are an integral part of right-wing sexual politics. Historically, gender and the symbolical reproductive function of women have been central to the nationalist ideology (e.g., [Yuval-Davis 1997](#)). More recently, the term ‘anti-genderism’ ([Hark and Villa 2015](#)) or ‘anti-gender campaigns’ ([Kuhar and Paternotte 2017](#)) has been coined to describe how the concept of ‘gender ideology’ is being used to contest LGBTQIA rights, gender equality, as well as SRHRs. Many scholars have taken on the different ways in which ‘gender’ is being vilified by multiple actors and the various political projects, networks, and alliances this contributes to (e.g., [Ayoub and Stoeckl 2023](#); [Datta 2018](#); [Kahlina 2022](#)). In Germany, ‘anti-genderism,’ for instance, manifested in the form of ‘*Demo für alle*’ in 2015, a mobilization against sex-education encompassing a multitude of actors, including pro-life groups ([Rhode-Abuba Vennmann and Zimenkova 2019](#)). Functioning like a ‘symbolic glue,’ the concept of ‘gender’ can also serve as an umbrella term for the rejection of the (neo) liberal world order ([Grzebalska, Kovats and Petö 2017](#)). The rhetorical tool of ‘gender ideology’ allows for constructing a new conception of ‘common sense’ and to offer an attractive alternative to the individualism and atomization caused by neoliberal policies: a society based on traditional values of family and religion (ibid.). This has been observed in Germany, where ‘anti-gender’ actors blame gender mainstreaming and Gender Studies for (perceived) precarization processes induced by transformations of capitalism ([Motakef, Teschlade and Wimbauer 2015](#)). In this first strand of right-wing sexual politics that includes classic nationalist ideology, antifeminism, and more recent ‘anti-gender’ resentment, SRHRs are being restrained and gender-binarity and -essentialism are emphasized. However, right-wing sexual politics in Europe have significantly shifted in a way that may seem contradictory with this first strand.

On the other hand, a ‘sexual democracy’ ([Fassin 2010](#)) has developed in Western Europe, meaning that questions of gender and sexuality are being publicly discussed and that some actors are using them to depict ‘others’ as threats to a supposed Western sexual modernity. Using sexual liberty and equality as markers of national identity, the rhetoric of a sexual democracy involves offering a ‘modern’ justification to conservative and right-wing anti-immigration politics (ibid., 513). Insisting on liberal sexual values of feminism and LGBTQIA-friendliness to support nationalist, imperialist, or neoliberal policies has also been discussed under the terms of ‘homonationalism’ ([Puar 2013](#)) and ‘femonationalism’ ([Farris 2017](#)). In this second strand of right-wing sexual politics, (limited) sexual liberty, sometimes ambiguously including the right to abortion, has increasingly become a part of the self-perception of the ‘West’. In Germany, this phenomenon has been described as ‘sexual exceptionalism’ ([Dietze 2019](#)), allowing unexpected connections to be established between feminism and the New Right.

The two strands of right-wing sexual politics introduced here seem contradictory but work together in a paradoxical way. As Dombrowski and Hajek ([2021](#)) have pointed out, the gender politics of the German far-right oscillate ‘between Femonationalism and anti-genderism,’ meaning these actors can participate in mobilizations striving to roll back women’s rights and at the same time claim to champion gender equality. The simultaneous existence of these two approaches has been made possible by a binary and essentialist understanding of gender and motherhood (ibid.). In an era of ‘post-truth,’ in which ideological coherence is not relevant for the success of right-wing parties, the paradoxes of right-wing sexual politics prove to be particularly effective ([Möser, Ramme and Takács 2022, 5](#)). More generally, this framework allows

one to grasp how (partial) positive stances on women's and LGBTQIA rights and emancipation can serve political projects that are not necessarily progressive.

In the proposed analysis for this paper, the Pro-Life Movement is situated within this field of tension between the two strands of right-wing sexual politics. While pro-life activists oppose feminism and primarily seek to dramatically restrict the access to abortion, they also express interest in issues that, on the surface, would align with feminist concerns. To make sense of this puzzling phenomenon of opposing abortion while employing 'egalitarian' or even 'feminist' rhetoric, I will analyze passages of four interviews conducted with young German pro-life women. In the following sections, I will explore four discursive strands of what I propose to call a 'pro-life feminist' rhetoric. These findings will then be discussed with regard to discourse premises revealing the wider pro-life worldview and political agenda.

With this contribution, I aim to shed light on one example of how pro-life movements are adapting their arguments to contemporary contexts in which gender, feminism, and their different meanings are integral to ongoing struggles.

DATA AND METHOD

This article is the result of fieldwork conducted between 2021 and 2023 in the scope of my Ph.D. project on abortion-opposition movements in France and Germany. In total, I conducted 22 interviews with pro-life activists in both countries, engaged in observant participation at two marches, and facilitated a focus group. The analysis presented here is based on a case study of four selected German interviews. By focusing solely on one country, I was able to delve into the arguments and reserve the comparison of two distinct national contexts for future endeavors. The participants were selected through their response to different calls sent to major German pro-life organizations or through snowballing. Given the wide dissemination of the call, responses were scarce, but those activists who did participate were motivated to take part in a scientific project and eager to speak their minds. The interviews were conducted via video call with the semi-structured method of the episodic interview, allowing for precise questioning while also permitting participants to offer longer elaborations (Flick 2011). Following the qualitative methodology of Grounded Theory (Corbin and Strauss 1990; Glaser and Strauss [1967] 2010), the data were systematically coded until consistent concepts emerged, allowing for an understanding of discourses on feminism and the use of a 'pro-life feminist' rhetoric.

The four cases studied for this article represent four different kinds of organized abortion opposition in Germany³ and offer insights into various organizations and modes of activism. I selected four women to challenge the common stereotype that women opposing abortion would act 'against their own interest.'

Karina is a 30-year-old employee of a major German pro-life organization that focuses on counseling women. After obtaining a degree in philosophy, she decided to

³ This article is the result of my presentation at the conference 'Democracies in Flux' in June 2023 in Paris. Many thanks to the participants of the research seminar at the chair of Paula-Irene Villa Braslavsky for their insightful comments on the cases that informed my analysis.

professionalize her already existing activism and work at a job that ‘makes sense’ to her. She is the only ‘professional activist’ of my overall sample.⁴

Laura (29 years) is a board member of another major German youth organization specialized in political lobbying, where she does strategy work. She is from a non-religious upbringing and encountered pro-life circles later in life, after having converted to Christianity, which is not common in the rest of the sample. Besides her pro-life activism, Laura works as a lawyer at a big firm.

The third case contributing to this study is Julia, a 37-year-old mother with a degree in economics. Inspired by US pro-life media and frustrated with the ‘old ways’ of major German organizations, she launched a blog disseminating innovative content, contributing to the generational renewal described above. Her content is often shared by major pro-life organizations; she nevertheless stands out as one of the rare figures embracing the phrase ‘pro-life feminism’.

At 22 years old, Lisa is the youngest case in the overall sample. She has many siblings, an upbringing that according to her sparked her interest in pro-life mobilizations. As a nursing school student, Lisa is not affiliated with any pro-life organization but actively participates in the annual March for Life and engages in discussions about pro-life issues with fellow church members. Lisa’s case is relevant as it exemplifies a common, more diffuse mode of pro-life activism, where participation is occasional.

Like most of the overall sample, all four cases identify as Christian, but religious arguments are rarely invoked during the interviews.

As part of the broader research project, the interviewees were asked about their connections to other political and social movements, including feminism. It was observed that, while they rejected the methods and arguments of their pro-choice opponents, they themselves employed feminist-sounding or women-friendly arguments.

The analysis presented here represents one perspective on the data and is based solely on the discourses of interviewees. The aim is not to verify veracity, sincerity, or to define who gets to call themselves a feminist. The issue is rather to comprehend the meaning of feminism to them and its implications for the broader pro-life worldview.

Following Martina Avanzas’ emic approach (2018) drawing on the work of Ziad Munson (2008), I chose to distance myself from a movement–countermovement framework that would characterize pro-life mobilizations as a mere reaction to feminism. Instead, an ‘internalist’ perspective is adopted, characterizing pro-life mobilizations as distinct social movements, enabling the generation of hypotheses from the fieldwork and accepting to use terms coming from the field.

FOUR DISCURSIVE STRANDS OF ‘PRO-LIFE FEMINIST’ RHETORIC

With pro-choice feminist ideas standing as a perceived adversary to anti-abortion mobilizations, I sought to explore the interviewees’ views on feminism. In picturing

⁴ Names, ages, and occupations of all interviewees were modified to protect their anonymity. All participants gave their informed consent to the recording, anonymization, analysis, and citation of their interviews. Many thanks to everyone who took the time to talk to me and made this project possible.

pro-choice feminism as ridiculous, obsolete, violent, dogmatic, and decadent, the discourse of the four women entailed elements of classic Antifeminism (e.g., [Lamoureux and Dupuis-Déri 2015](#)) as a 'reactionary rhetoric' ([Hirschman 1991](#)) that, in itself, is not specific to pro-life mobilizations but is present in many fields and characteristic of German right-wing politics (e.g., [Lang 2014](#)). I won't dive into the specifics of antifeminist rhetoric here but rather focus on the interview excerpts where the interviewees articulated their own interpretations of what 'real feminism' or 'self-determination' would mean. Through detailed analysis of these passages, four discursive strands of 'pro-life feminist' rhetoric emerged, shedding light on how these arguments are employed to incriminate abortion.

A RHETORIC FAVORING EQUALITY

Interestingly, alongside the rejection of feminism, there exists a form of 'egalitarian rhetoric,' where the interviewees acknowledge and adopt certain achievements of feminist struggles as normalized or as fixed aspects of 'culture' or 'common sense.' These include women's participation in wage work, their financial independence, as well as protection from violence. Such developments are seen as positive and irrevocable.

For instance, when questioned about feminism, Karina cites certain rights that she considers self-evident:

(...) That I'm allowed to work without asking my husband, right? That my husband is no longer allowed to beat me, that's how it once started!

Lisa says she wants to combine 'traditional values' that she describes in a commonsensical way ('that there is man and woman, and that the woman can get pregnant') with 'something modern': 'I'm not saying that a woman has to do all the housework at home, because I don't believe in that.'

Julia occupies a unique position in the field, asserting her support for most premises of feminism and acknowledging that 'there is not only one [idea of] feminism' but rather certain fundamental attitudes. For her, 'so-called reproductive rights' are not necessarily one of them. Instead, feminism, in her view, is about recognizing the inherent value of every human being and fighting discrimination. Following her logic, embryos and fetuses are considered another discriminated group, in a rhetoric mirroring intersectional feminism that accounts for different forms of discrimination (e.g., [Crenshaw 1991](#)). Therefore, a 'rhetoric of equality' serves to introduce another discriminated group and push the pro-life agenda.

This 'egalitarian rhetoric' demonstrates that pro-life mobilizations have adopted the language of Sexual Democracy, where issues pertaining to gender and sexuality are addressed by the political sphere ([Fassin 2006, 125](#)). This 'Ordinary Antifeminism' rhetorically making feminism obsolete ([Guionnet 2017](#)) or idealizing past feminist movements after the fact has simultaneously proven effective in right-wing and conservative sexual politics in Germany and elsewhere, docking onto modernization and equality discourses while still holding on to the gender binary and supposedly natural differences between men and women ([Sauer 2019, 344](#)). In different words, this rhetoric adapts to feminist interventions in the public sphere that made being broadly 'in favor of equality' (within a cis-gendered, heterosexual framework) consensual but rejects any aspiration that would go further than that. It is therefore effective for pro-life discourses aiming to demonstrate their women-friendliness.

GENDER-ESSENTIALIST ARGUMENTS: HELPING WOMEN BECOME THE MOTHER THEY ALREADY ARE

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*Redescriptions: Political
Thought, Conceptual
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Theory*
DOI: 10.33134/rds.446

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The second discursive strand of ‘pro-life feminist’ rhetoric revolves around the idea that abortion constitutes structural discrimination against women. In this narrative, the portrayal of women as victims of abortion is being reframed using feminist terminology. Abortion is seen as undermining women’s biology, meaning their natural inclination for fertility, pregnancy, and motherhood. As Julia articulates:

But I also see abortions as—yes, I also see [them] as structural discrimination against women because their nature is not valued as a result, because it is suggested that there is somehow a problem with women’s nature, with women’s biology, with [their] fertility. That is a threat to equality, to freedom, to self-determination.

In other words, the possibility of abortion is perceived as a threat to women’s self-determination, hindering them from following their true nature.

Karina emphasizes that, for her, the frame of ‘self-determination’ is not adequate to describe why women interrupt a pregnancy. She states ‘it has nothing to do with self-determination’ when a woman is coerced into an abortion by her family or her partner.

The ‘structural discrimination’ that is abortion also arises from the idea that motherhood and parenthood are not sufficiently appreciated by society at large. Consequently, the interviewees advocate for society to find solutions for pregnant women to be able to carry a pregnancy to term and become the mother that they already are. This support could be provided through material assistance from the government, pro-life organizations themselves, as well as through ‘psychological counseling’ to help women prepare for motherhood. For Lisa, ‘real feminism’ would involve assisting pregnant women who ‘feel overwhelmed’ to guide and help them through an unwanted pregnancy.

So, it’s not—the role is not to point a finger at someone or to say, yes, ‘that’s the right way to do it’, but rather to actually be there with open arms and say okay, we want to help you, we want the best solution for you and your child.

She advocates for ‘the right to have children’ instead of erasing the very essence of what makes a woman, which encompasses fertility, pregnancy, and motherhood. Following this rhetoric, women are being addressed by the Pro-Life Movement as (potential) mothers.

Interestingly, intersectional feminism and its concept of ‘reproductive justice’ (e.g., [Sister Song Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective 1994](#)) has in a similar manner addressed the structural discrimination of certain groups of women when it comes to their right to have children. In the pro-life rhetoric mirroring these arguments, the aspect of choice concerning abortion is, however, absent, and the parameters of race and class are not considered. Instead, essentialist ‘pro-life, pro-woman’ arguments, as Trumpy (2014, 165) discusses in her US-focused study, reinforce the idea that abortion must necessarily be imposed on women. Abortion then is never a choice because pregnant women are already considered mothers. The adoption of intersectional feminist vocabulary by the German and American abortion opposition shows that an international circulation of feminist rhetoric is at play. However, the

gender-essentialism underlying the arguments analyzed here is constitutive of right-wing sexual politics, and the idealization of women's (potential) reproductive function is not the same thing as supporting their reproductive rights.

NEOLIBERAL EMPOWERMENT AND INDIVIDUALISTIC SELF-DETERMINATION

The third discursive strand of 'pro-life feminist' rhetoric places the responsibility of avoiding unwanted pregnancies squarely on the individual women. Karina, Laura, and Julia emphasize the importance of women taking responsibility for their sexuality, knowing their bodies, and tracking when they can get pregnant. Karina and Julia call for schools to teach young girls how to track their menstrual cycles and 'empower' them through these skills. Once women have the necessary knowledge about their own bodies and on the possible outcomes of sexuality, they can decide for themselves with whom and how often they have sex. If pregnancy, then, does occur, it is seen as the woman's responsibility to accept the consequences.

For Karina, taking responsibility for one's actions is 'real self-determination':

I mature from it, it makes me grow up; I take responsibility, it does something to me. I become strong, I become resistant, I build up resilience, and I don't make myself guilty.

Laura expresses it in this way:

So, here in Germany, we all go to school for quite a while, and everyone somehow has the chance to understand how contraception works, and I think that, if a person has not managed that, then you can expect them to be responsible enough to say 'I'm carrying this child to term'. Nobody has to keep it in the end, it's easy to be like 'okay, I'll give it up for adoption afterwards,' but you can at least expect that much from a person. You can have sex in a self-determined way, you have—so whatever happened there, I think you can, if you want to, use contraception effectively.

If the pregnancy is unwanted despite precautions or occurs in challenging circumstances, Julia believes that women have the power to find the necessary resources within themselves: 'I think so much of women that I expect them to take responsibility for what happens in their body'.

It is striking how compatible these points are with the socioeconomic conditions of neoliberalism that have partially integrated into feminist discourses, as observed in the case of Germany by Bröckling (2002) with the figure of the gendered 'entrepreneurial self.' McRobbie (2009) describes the emergence of a new 'sexual contract' promoted by governments and popular culture in several Western countries. In this contract, young girls are supposedly already equal to men and urged to be perfect subjects of female success through constant 'self-perfectioning.' This also entails the idea that the newly found sexual freedom for women comes with the responsibility to control one's fertility. For Gill (2018), 'postfeminist subjectivities,' meaning contemporary ideas around the overtaking of feminism, are compatible with the ideal-typical neoliberal subjectivity of autonomy, entrepreneurialism, self-discipline, and free will in which the body and the self are handled as 'projects.'

The subjectivities described by Bröckling, McRobbie, and Gill tend to render existing inequalities invisible and place the burden of their consequences on the individual while simultaneously normalizing austere public health policies as implemented in Germany. In the ‘pro-life’ rhetoric examined here, women and their sexuality are not only held responsible for an unwanted pregnancy, but cases in which sex is not consensual or contraception does not work for any reason are rendered invisible. Men play a minimal role in this rhetoric, although they are vaguely called upon to ‘take responsibility’ for their actions as well. This underscores the perception that fertility and pregnancy are of the realm and expertise of women. As in right-wing sexual politics, this discursive strand allows pro-life arguments to adapt to contemporary gendered subjectivities. On the one hand, the pro-life rhetoric of neoliberal empowerment is compatible with essentialist ideas of gender and sexuality; on the other hand, it allows one to coopt the concept of an already achieved equality, rendering feminism and the critique of larger economic structures obsolete. This underscores the idea that a feminist rhetoric is compatible with a multitude of political projects.

ANXIETIES AROUND ‘CARE’

The fourth discursive strand of ‘pro-life feminist’ rhetoric is characterized by a critique of existing working and living conditions that make having children and taking care of vulnerable members of society difficult. The overall argument posits that, in contemporary Western societies, productivity and careers are valued more than ‘life’ and that there is insufficient consideration for what could be described as ‘care-work.’⁵ This last aspect did not exclusively emerge in the interview passages about feminism but certainly aligns with feminist debates surrounding ‘Care.’

Right at the beginning of her interview, Laura cites this ‘unease’ as the first reason why she is pro-life:

For me, [being pro-life is] actually about valuing life in all its facets, and it’s not about achieving something. It’s not saying, ‘as a person, I have to fulfill this and that for me to be a part of society.’

She later elaborates on the challenges faced by couples in balancing full-time work with childcare responsibilities and cultivating their own relationship, emphasizing that having children also means ‘to do without something’ financially.

Karina refers to the pressures of the job market that are being put on women and the fear of losing one’s job due to a pregnancy. Lisa wants it to be easier for women to go back to work after pregnancy and not have to be ‘bound to the stove’ for the rest of their lives.

Julia recounts her public support for a feminist petition advocating for a better-paid maternity leave. She does not reject the possibility to work with feminists on certain issues:

5 Activities necessary to human existence and reproduction, such as housework, child-rearing, and education, tending to the sick and vulnerable, and taking care of each other emotionally, have been subsumed by a rich corpus of feminist scholarship under the term of ‘Care.’ This literature entails a critique of the systematic devaluing of these activities in contemporary societies as well as their naturalization as the realm of women (e.g., Gilligan 2009; Tronto 2013).

When it comes to certain things, especially family policy and things like that, care-work, and so on, we're on the same page; we want the same thing.

The anxieties expressed by the four women indeed reflect the specific conditions of the German economy, in which the unequal distribution of care-work poses risks of extreme inequality (e.g., [Bücker 2020](#); [‘Erwerbs-Und Sorgearbeit Neu Verteilen’ 2017](#)).

There appears to be a (discursive) proximity between pro-life rhetoric and ongoing discussions about the challenges surrounding care-work in society. As Paula-Irene Villa Braslavsky describes, ‘Care,’ essential for the survival of humans and the economy, is either commodified, privatized, or rendered entirely impossible in capitalist societies ([Villa 2020](#), 438). Hajek ([2017](#)) describes the German situation of care-work as a ‘crisis of reproduction,’ in which the restructuring of the welfare state in the 1990s led to increasing precarization and deterioration of working conditions. With women simultaneously entering the workforce alongside men, families are no longer able to adequately take on care-work. Politically, the only solutions offered to this crisis are the externalization of care-work onto poorer women or a re-traditionalization of family models, leaving no space for an actual critique of working conditions (*ibid.*). As a result, the far-right, leaning into racist anxieties around the weak German demography resulting from this crisis (*ibid.*), as well as anti-gender actors ([Motakef, Teschlade and Wimbauer 2015](#)), are joining the pleas to reinforce traditional ideas of family and gender roles.

The interviewed women too express this unease about the contradictory injunctions caused by the impossibility of ‘Care.’ Ultimately, this ‘pro-life feminist’ argument draws from anxieties induced by the working and living conditions of neoliberal capitalism to cast abortion in a new light. However, unlike feminist approaches of ‘Care,’ the interviewees only superficially question the gendered nature of care-work and do not call for radical societal change. Instead, they suggest that women, through better recognition or compensation for care-work, would be in the best state to carry a pregnancy to term and not resort to abortion. Similar to the gender-essentialist ‘pro-life feminist’ rhetoric, the idea is to help women as women to overcome difficulties in their (impending) motherhood.

A CONTRADICTIONARY RHETORIC?

Although the four women who were interviewed come from different backgrounds and organizations, similar patterns of ‘pro-life feminist’ rhetoric can be found in their comments. The four analyzed discursive strands of ‘pro-life feminist’ rhetoric reflect a seemingly contradictory line of arguments: On the one hand, the interviewees problematize questions of gender and sexuality in pro-life terms, with their arguments emphasizing women’s role in motherhood and ‘Care’; on the other, pro-life actors are keen observers of the society they live in and may express their unease about contradictions of society, albeit accepting some societal evolutions. The points advanced herein by Lisa, Karina, Laura, and Julia extend beyond just ‘protecting women’ from abortion as passive victims (an argument that is present nevertheless). In its contradictions, the line of arguments of ‘pro-life feminist’ rhetoric strongly resembles the two strands of right-wing sexual politics I have mapped out in the introduction: embracing dramatic restrictions of SRHRs while at the same time claiming to protect women from different ills with the partial acceptance of liberal values. In this last

section, I discuss these results against the backdrop of three premises stemming from the interviews, necessary to make sense of the contradictions of ‘pro-life feminist’ rhetoric and to understand how its discursive strands come together in the larger pro-life worldview.

First, while it may appear trivial to recall that pro-life activists exclude the possibility of abortion from the self-determination of women, this exclusion is fundamental. For the interviewees, self-determination entails refusing the abortion one does not want, possessing a specific expertise about fertility and reproduction as women, and demanding accommodations specific to women to carry every pregnancy to term. This means that women can exercise autonomy in all aspects of their lives, including sexuality, except for abortion. In the four cases examined in this article, the interviewees assert a clear limit to women’s self-determination. Karina believes that her freedom ends where the freedom of another human being begins, which she perceives to be at conception. This sentiment is echoed in the following quote:

If you now mean feminism in the good sense of the word, that I can develop my womanhood and that I, as a woman (...), am free and can do anything I want and—of course, with certain limits—for example, I can’t just go and kill a child (...) according to my convictions.

Julia puts it this way:

Whether you bring a child into the world and whether you want to have zero or 17 children is entirely up to each woman, and preferably together with her partner. But if this child already exists, then I don’t think it’s justified to end this life (...).

These passages highlight that self-determination for women does in fact exist in the ‘pro-life feminist’ rhetoric but instead ends the moment a pregnancy does occur, and a woman instantly becomes a mother.

In line with this specific understanding of self-determination, the second key aspect to make sense of ‘pro-life feminist’ arguments is the premise that sexuality is necessarily linked with reproduction. For instance, both Karina and Lisa vehemently reject what they describe as the ‘sexual revolution’ that occurred following social movements of 1968 because it supposedly decorrelated sexuality from reproduction, leading to people wanting to ‘have sex without having to think about their fertility’ (Karina). The possibility of abortion, then, is a result of this decorrelation of sexuality and reproduction.

Moreover, when advocating for sex education to include discussions about fertility, they want young people to know that sex can lead to pregnancy and can be dangerous if not done in the ‘proper’ manner. Again, this may seem trivial, but in over-emphasizing the possibility of reproduction in sexuality, pro-life actors perpetuate a very specific view of what sex can be. In sexual practices and orientations that exceed heterosexuality, the possibility of reproduction is not always necessary. In the interviews, however, heterosexual families are portrayed as the ideal means to prevent unwanted pregnancies. Karina, for instance, wishes for a re-correlation of sexuality with reproduction:

Well, you could also do something preventive, such as healthy, stable relationships that are built on fidelity and exclusivity, and if we would push

and strive for this more, then a one-night stand would not result in an unwanted child, for example.

Following these points, the third key necessary to understand ‘pro-life feminist’ rhetoric is that traditional families can only be a way to prevent unwanted pregnancy if there is no sexual coercion inside partnerships and if women are mothers ‘by nature.’ To say it otherwise: Following ‘pro-life feminist’ arguments, all women would happily embrace all pregnancies resulting from their sexual activity if there were no outside constraints pushing for abortion. One of the popular slogans of the worldwide Pro-Life Movement, ‘making abortion unthinkable,’ must be understood against this background. In this logic, abortion is already unthinkable because it is unthinkable that a pregnant woman would not want to be a mother. There is theoretically no violence or coercion involved in this worldview because pregnancy is what women ‘really’ want.

However, as other scholarship on the Pro-Life Movement in the USA has shown ([Browne 2022](#); [Leach 2020](#)) this re-traditionalization of gender, sexuality, and family that paradoxically coexists with ‘pro-life feminist’ rhetoric is not to be mistaken for a simple return to the past, in which (illegal) abortion did indeed exist. My analysis confirms that the used rhetoric is following a political project that goes further than making abortion illegal. What some have called an ‘alternative modernity’ ([Dietze 2018, 36](#)), a new articulation of gendered subjectivities ([Dombrowski and Hajek 2021, 54](#)) or a ‘neopatriarchal movement’ ([Leach 2020, 320](#)) is indeed a recent reconfiguration of right-wing sexual politics that goes further than a reactionary wish to return to (imagined) pasts or a conservation of the status quo, partially modernizing but ultimately deepening gendered structures of oppression (*ibid.*). The paradoxical tension between (neo)liberal discourse elements and the often antiliberal emphasizing of traditional gender roles is characteristic of this reconfiguration.

I seek to argue that the use of ‘pro-life feminist’ rhetoric allows for adapting pro-life imaginaries to current subjectivities and (discursively) aspiring toward an idealized future society in which abortion simply cannot exist. In this envisioned world, sexuality would be correlated with reproduction and all women would be mothers within long-term heterosexual and monogamous relationships and could fulfill themselves thanks to societal action in favor of childbirth. Put differently, the variety of seemingly contradictory strands of ‘pro-life feminist’ rhetoric has the function of contributing to a wider political project of ‘making abortion unthinkable.’ As Victoria Browne aptly points out in her analysis of pro-life feminism in the USA, it is, however, unclear what proponents of this worldview want to happen with pregnant people who wish not to be so, in the meantime, until all societal conditions to welcome ‘life’ are fulfilled ([Browne 2022, 32](#)).

CONCLUSION

In analyzing the sample at hand, I have shown that pro-life rhetoric on feminism extends beyond mere opposition to pro-choice feminism and the portrayal of women as victims of abortion. Instead, it redefines the concept of feminism in a pro-life lens, aiming to incriminate abortion through ‘women’s issues.’ I have proposed the term ‘pro-life feminist’ rhetoric to elucidate how interviewees employ arguments that would, at first glance, resonate in feminist debates. It then appears that ideas such as abortion as ‘structural discrimination,’ ‘neoliberal empowerment,’ and better

accommodations for care-work are deployed to create the (discursive) conditions wherein every pregnancy is encouraged to be carried to term, ultimately reinforcing essentialist ideas of gender and sexuality.

Oscillating between the two poles of right-wing sexual politics, between restrictions of sexuality and acceptance of sexual modernity, ‘pro-life feminist’ rhetoric paradoxically allows one to exceed the idea of a ‘return to the past.’ Abortion thus at the same time becomes the limit of the cooptation of feminist arguments by pro-life actors as well as the site of discursive alliances with Christian, conservative, and right-wing actors. This rhetoric is circulating internationally and adapting to the contemporary German context, in which anti-abortion sentiment is relatively acceptable and sexual politics operate ‘between Femonationalism and anti-genderism’ (Dombrowski and Hajek 2021). The potency of ‘pro-life feminist’ arguments in Germany also lies in their ability to address actual anxieties of the neoliberal present while empathizing the gender binary and traditional notions of gender and sexuality, contributing to an unprecedented vision of the future. However, within this framework, it is unclear what place is held by people who do not fit this ideal—women who do not wish to be mothers, pregnant people who are not women, married women who are abused by their partner, and people who have children resulting from one-night stands, among others.

This article presents an initial exploration of ‘pro-life feminist’ rhetoric, as it is based only on limited material and centered on the German context. Overall, there is a need for more research on the paradoxical interweaving of different political projects with feminism, in which debates surrounding motherhood, the role of nature, self-determination, and Care have always been central. It could also be productive to investigate how the emergence of a ‘pro-life feminist’ rhetoric is connected to the blind spots of liberal pro-choice feminism when it comes to addressing the Care crisis or the unequal treatment of different groups of people in terms of reproduction.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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Brillet Reutter
Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory
 DOI: 10.33134/rds.446

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Brillet Reutter, Juliette. 2025. "Pro-Life Feminism? Contemporary Rhetoric of Organized Abortion Opposition in Germany." *Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory* 28(1): 22–39. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/rds.446>

Submitted: 02 April 2024

Accepted: 20 May 2025

Published: 03 July 2025

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Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Helsinki University Press.