

Why 'right-wing woman' is not an oxymoron: Lessons from the *volksmoeder* in South Africa

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Abstract

Ethno-racial populisms currently surging across the globe have driven contestation over gender to a fever pitch. Women's right to political agency and control over their bodies is under direct attack or being strictly circumscribed. Notably, right-wing women are firmly involved in intensified attempts to reverse the gains of successive waves of feminism. This presentation draws on historical research and interviews to make sense of how women come to advance or resist patriarchal politics. The rise and fall and (unexpected) rise of the Afrikaner nationalist *volksmoeder* (mother of the nation) in South Africa is illustrative of how women are mobilised and demobilised in the service of nationalisms. Afrikaner nationalist women were more publicly and politically active in the first half of the 20th century than the second half. They vigorously contributed to the version of Afrikaner identity that in 1948 tipped South Africa into the intensified form of colonialism known as apartheid but disappeared from public view after 1948. The *volksmoeder* assigned feminine care for the family and the *volk* to women. The flipside of its normalisation of 'woman/wife-as-mother' was to return Afrikaner women to the domestic realm with the demand of silence, service, and sexuality purposed for white reproduction, or 'white sex'. After the transition to constitutional democracy in 1994, the *volksmoeder* imaginary is unexpectedly bolstered, receiving a revivalist injection from neoliberal and postfeminist versions of motherhood that coax women into an enclave form of nationalism.