The "Best Interest of a Child" in Anti-Gender Mobilizations: Framing Protection, Mobilizing Fear

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Abstract

Researchers of anti-gender mobilizations emphasize the central role of child well-being narratives, yet this aspect remains underexplored. This study addresses that gap by focusing on how the "best interest of a child" is strategically used in anti-gender campaigns across Denmark, Italy, Poland, Slovenia, Spain, and Turkey. Using framing theory we analyze how this frame is constructed, emotionally charged, and politically instrumentalized. Based on a Critical Frame Analysis of 128 documents, we show that the "best interest of a child" frame shifts across contexts and is mobilized to serve different ideological aims, while retaining a stable rhetorical core: the assertion that children must be protected. A child appears as a rights-bearing subject or passive object, biologically fixed or easily influenced, and at risk of sexualization or brainwashing. Our findings highlight the narrative's flexibility and internal contradictions, offering a novel lens for understanding the discursive dynamics of anti-gender mobilizations.

Keywords: anti-gender mobilizations, best interest of the child, gender ideology, discursive framing, child protection, sex education

1. Introduction

Since the emergence of scholarship on anti-gender mobilizations, researchers have emphasized the centrality of child well-being narratives in anti-gender campaigns opposing LGBTQ+ rights, reproductive rights, sex education, and related issues (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017; Martínez et al., 2021; Graff and Korolczuk, 2022; Datta, 2025). Anti-gender actors deploy the "best interest of a child" narrative across these domains to portray children as inherently vulnerable and in need of protection from progressive social changes. Datta (2025) argues that anti-gender actors can be divided into two distinct groups with regard to the question of the well-being of children. The first and considerably larger group consists of actors for whom child protection systems are not a primary concern; rather, they deploy the frame of children's well-being instrumentally to legitimize their opposition to a wide range of social and political changes. The second, much smaller group, is directly involved in concrete cases concerning children, families, and their interactions with state authorities. This article focuses on the first group of anti-gender actors.

In this context the figure of the innocent child functions as a powerful symbol for generating moral panic (Cohen, 1972; Critcher, 2008; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009) and enacting an affective politics (Ahmed, 2004; Hemmings, 2020), which relies on emotionally charged language, symbols, and narratives to produce perceptions of threat, insecurity, and crisis. Such discourses sharpen moral boundaries and advance disproportionate claims about harm, which can then call for counter-action while legitimizing exceptional political responses (Wodak, 2015; Jasper, 2011).

This article investigates how the "best interest of a child" frame is strategically employed in such anti-gender affective politics and how it is mobilized, adapted, and reshaped across diverse policy debates. It focuses on nine anti-gender campaigns in Denmark, Italy, Poland, Slovenia, Spain, and Turkey – cases that represent a range of socio-political contexts, gender-related policy debates, and levels of anti-gender activism. The campaigns have different foci and identify contextually distinct "others" and "allies." Yet our analysis reveals a common pattern despite these differences: regardless of context or cause, anti-gender actors across these cases all mobilize the claim that their positions serve the best interests of children and safeguard children's rights. In this article, the term "children's rights" is therefore not used in a strict legal sense as defined by international treaties. Instead, we use the term as anti-gender actors themselves deploy it – less as a substantive legal category and more as a strategic, often vague invocation of human-rights discourse. We therefore conceptualize these child-centered justifications as the discursive frame of the "best interest of a child" and trace its strategic deployment across different political and cultural contexts.

In order to do that, we begin by reviewing existing scholarship on the political use of the "best interest of a child", with particular emphasis on its appropriation in anti-gender campaigns. The second section of this article outlines our theoretical framework, which combines framing theory with the approach of discursive frame analysis in gender equality policy debates developed by Lombardo et al. (2009). We rely on their concepts of *fixing*, *stretching*, *shrinking*, and *bending* to analyze how the notion of the "best interest of a child" is constructed, negotiated, and redefined in policymaking processes. We argue that this combined framework enables us to explore both the strategic use of the frame and its discursive transformations over time. In the third section, we present our methodological approach, detailing the data sources and analytical procedures used in the study. The fourth section presents our findings, showing that the "best interest of a child" functions as a flexible frame across contexts, and the article concludes by returning to the theoretical framework to reflect on processes of frame transformation and appropriation.

2. Children in Anti-Gender Discourses

Scholarship on anti-gender mobilizations across Europe and beyond has consistently emphasized the central role of children in their political communication. Children function as

powerful ideological symbols, mobilized to reinforce nationalist, conservative, and authoritarian worldviews (Rakusa-Suszczewski, 2021). This symbolic potency is rooted in what Brock and Askanius (2023) describe as the cultural sacralization of childhood over the twentieth century, whereby children came to be understood as intrinsically valuable and as embodiments of innocence, purity, and societal hope. As a result, references to children are particularly effective in eliciting emotional responses, fostering public trust, and legitimizing political messages (Berson, 2008).

Appeals to child protection have repeatedly been used to generate moral panic. Historical examples include the moral hysteria surrounding "sexual psychopaths" in 1950s United States, which led to legislation in 21 states targeting male homosexuals under the pretext of safeguarding children (Marwick et al., 2024). Contemporary anti-gender campaigns draw on similar logics. A notable example is the adoption of so-called "anti-gay" legislation in Russia, Hungary, Bulgaria, and other countries, all introduced under the pretext of protecting children (Takács et al., 2022).

Central to this discourse is also the ideal of the "traditional family," typically defined as a heteronormative unit composed of a married man and woman and their children. Presented as natural, stable, and universally valid, the "traditional family" functions as a highly flexible discursive frame, drawing simultaneously on religious, nationalist, moral, and cultural repertoires (Garbagnoli, 2016). Within this framework, gender-differentiated and patriarchal roles are naturalized, and this family form is elevated as the only legitimate and healthy environment for child-rearing (Gusmeroli and Trappolin, 2021; Ćeriman and Juros, 2024). At the same time, the defense of the "traditional family" is equated with safeguarding the nation's future, with children symbolically positioned as its biological and moral carriers (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017).

The same child-centered discourse is also deployed to delegitimize gender and sex education in schools. Slogans such as "my children, my rules" articulate claims to parental sovereignty and foreground the perceived right of parents to control children's education in line with personal, cultural, or religious beliefs (Ridei et al., 2021; Gregis Estivalet and Dvoskin, 2021). These framings are particularly prominent in campaigns against school curricula – especially comprehensive sexuality education and the inclusion of LGBTQ+ topics – and function as mechanisms of exclusion by discursively associating LGBTQ+ people with harm to children (Kuhar and Zobec, 2017; Linnamäki, 2022; Dragolea, 2022; Van Wichelen et al., 2024; Rédai, 2024).

Such debates have fueled virulent mobilizations across multiple contexts, including Croatia, Italy, Brazil, Peru, and Spain (Hodžić and Štulhofer, 2017; Lavizzari and Prearo, 2019; Kalil, 2019; Rousseau, 2020; Cornejo and Pichardo, 2017). A recurring theme across them is the fear of children's alleged "premature sexualization," a frame strategically used to activate broader social anxieties (Brock and Askanius, 2023; Jarkovská, 2020). For instance, in their study of

Catholic mothers and teachers in Italy who oppose gender-inclusive education, Gusmeroli and Trappolin (2021) show how individual concerns for one's own child are frequently conflated with a generalized moral panic over the welfare of all children.

At the transnational level, anti-gender actors frequently accuse international organizations such as the World Health Organization, the United Nations, and the European Union of promoting a so-called "LGBT agenda" that allegedly endangers children (Nenova et al., 2024). Children thus appear as innocent victims, instrumentalized to legitimize populist politics and to resist gender equality (Zanatta and Virgili, 2023).

Existing research has primarily examined these dynamics through discourse analysis, identifying the "best interest of a child" as one of the recurring frames in anti-gender discourse. More recent work has also highlighted the affective dimensions of this narrative, showing how fear, anger, and anxiety are mobilized to generate political support. Obst's (2024) concept of "hateful love" captures this paradox, whereby anti-gender actors position themselves as caring protectors of children while directing hostility toward imagined enemies who allegedly threaten children's well-being. However, although the claims regarding the best interest of children are frequently acknowledged in research on anti-gender mobilizations, it is rarely treated as a central analytical object. Our contribution addresses this gap by placing the "best interest of a child" at the centre of analysis and examining its deployment across multiple and divergent political contexts.

3. Framing the "best interest of a child"

In our analysis we draw on framing perspectives in social movement and critical policy studies (Bacchi 2009; Benford and Snow, 2000; Polletta and Ho, 2006; Verloo 2005). Framing theory provides a foundational understanding of how actors interpret social problems, assign meaning to events, and mobilize support by emphasizing certain aspects of reality while obscuring others (Snow and Benford, 1988). Rather than treating these actors as passive carriers of ideology, this perspective conceptualizes them as "signifying agents" who actively construct grievances, define goals, and seek to persuade multiple audiences (Benford and Snow, 2000).

Integrating framing theory into critical policy studies, Verloo (2005, p. 20) defines a frame as an "organizing principle that transforms fragmented or random information into a structured and meaningful problem, in which the solution is implicitly or explicitly included." From this perspective, framing is analytically productive because it directs attention to how policy problems are defined, which solutions are proposed, and which alternatives are rendered invisible (van der Haar and Verloo, 2016). Bacchi's (2009) work further highlights that problem representations are shaped by strategic choices. Actors may deliberately frame issues to advance particular agendas and resonate with specific audiences. At the same time, framing may also reflect habitual or taken-for-granted assumptions embedded in dominant discourses and practices of exclusion. In both cases, frame analysis serves as a tool for revealing the power relations underlying seemingly neutral or common-sense claims.

In this study, we examine how the frame of the "best interest of a child" is constructed, contested, and strategically deployed across a range of anti-gender campaigns. We focus on when and how anti-gender actors invoke claims to act in children's best interests. Framing theory is particularly useful for this purpose because it illuminates the inherent flexibility of frames and their capacity to be mobilized in divergent – and sometimes contradictory – ways. For example, anti-gender actors may invoke children's rights in one context while denying children's agency in another. Alternatively, because protection is central to this frame – as illustrated by "child-protection" laws – these actors can claim to safeguard children while simultaneously depriving them of other rights. We conceptualize these shifts as strategic adaptability: the deployment of multiple, context-specific meanings within the single frame of the "best interest of a child." Through this process, definitions of who the child is, what agency they possess, who is responsible for their protection, and what constitutes harm or care vary across policy debates. While the actors involved are multiple and vary across different settings (i.e. social movement and policy contexts), we consider them all part of a broader anti-gender movement that draws on a shared repertoire of frames. These actors use the same frame and imbue it with diverse meanings to appeal to various mainstream constituencies who may not otherwise align with their agenda.

To capture these dynamics, we draw on Lombardo et al.'s (2009) typology of frame transformations: *fixing, stretching, shrinking*, and *bending,* which explain how particular meanings are stabilized, expanded, narrowed, or strategically adapted over time. In this typology, *fixing* refers to the stabilization of a particular meaning for a frame, often at the expense of erasing contestations over what it should mean. *Shrinking* captures how a concept is narrowed down as certain groups are excluded or as certain interpretations are no longer considered part of it. *Stretching* is a move in the opposite direction, the expansion of a frame to include new issues, in some cases risking dilution of original political intent. Finally, *bending* is in essence the cooptation especially of equality or rights-based frames in ways that service dominant ideological narratives such as nationalism or religious traditionalism.

We analyze "best interest of a child" in anti-gender discourses by combining general frame theory with this specific typology of frame transformations. In this manner we are able to explore how the same frame can be stabilized, expanded, narrowed or co-opted across diverse political contexts. This allows us to highlight simultaneously the commonality of the frame across multiple anti-gender campaigns and its malleability, strategic adaptability and internal contradictions.

4. Methodology

This article analyses nine anti-gender campaigns that emerged in Europe between 2013 and 2023 across six countries: Denmark, Italy, Poland, Slovenia, Spain, and Turkey. The cases were selected to capture variation across socio-political contexts, ranging from social democracies to electoral autocracies, and a variety of policy domains, focusing on issue areas

identified in the literature as central to contemporary anti-gender mobilizations: marriage equality and same-sex parenting, access to abortion, education, and transgender rights (Paternotte, 2023).

Our unit of analysis is the campaign, understood as a long-term political process that combines a policy dimension – such as legislative proposals or institutional reforms – with an activist dimension, including public mobilization in support of or opposition to policy change. To study these campaigns, we first identified key anti-gender actors in each country and defined campaign time frames, focusing on periods of heightened debate and mobilization. We then compiled a corpus of publicly available materials in two categories: social movement documents and documents produced by political actors. Social movement materials include public statements, press releases, blog posts, and similar content produced by anti-gender actors, collected from websites and social media. Documents by political actors include parliamentary interventions of anti-gender MPs and other party-political figures in legislative debates on the policy proposals at the center of mobilization.

From the broader corpus, we selected a total of 128 documents for our analysis. The selection was guided by the principle of maximum variation of documents, to reflect both the breadth and depth of anti-gender discourse across the analyzed campaigns and countries. Taken together, these materials reveal both public-facing mobilization strategies and attempts to translate activist claims into policy outcomes.[1] Although our analysis covers two distinct discursive contexts – social movement discourse and parliamentary debates – we find a strong spillover of the same framing across both. Namely, the same framings of the "best interest of a child" appear consistently across both, strengthening the analytical coherence of our argument by demonstrating the robustness of anti-gender discourses across social contexts.[2]

The campaigns that we have analyzed can be briefly summarized as follows. In Denmark, we focused on a campaign targeting the 2020 proposal by the Social Democrats to remove the minimum age requirement for legal gender change for minors (Gregersen et al., 2025). In Italy, we examined a mobilization that has been sustained since 2013 opposing proposed legislation on homophobia, transphobia and gender-related education in schools, more recently extending to the so called *alias career* policy that allows trans students to use their preferred names (Lavizzari et al., 2025). In Poland, we analyzed anti-gender resistance that emerged in response to the 2019 Warsaw LGBT+ Declaration, which committed the city to inclusive LGBT+ policies, and later broadened to oppose comprehensive sexuality education, abortion rights, and LGBT+ inclusion policies at the municipal level (Muszel, 2025). In Slovenia, we studied the campaign against marriage equality in 2015, mobilized to oppose the legalization of same-sex marriage and adoption rights for same-sex couples (Smrdelj, 2025). In Spain we studied

[1] All materials were coded in their original languages by country experts, who also translated the quotations used in this article.
[2] Detailed information on the campaigns, documents, and actors included in the analysis is provided in the Appendix.

campaigns targeting abortion and reproductive rights (2011–2015; 2021–2023), and opposing the 2023 Trans Law, targeting gender self-determination and raising concerns about women's safety and minors' well-being (Campillo et al., 2025). Finally, in Turkey, we focused on a multipronged campaigning since 2019 aimed at dismantling gender equality policies in the national education system, framing them as harmful Western impositions threatening traditional values and children's welfare (Alnıaçık and Altan Olcay, 2025).

We analyzed the collected materials using Critical Frame Analysis (Verloo, 2005). Critical Frame Analysis conceptualizes frames as organizing principles that define problems, propose solutions, and attribute voice and authority to specific actors. Accordingly, we coded diagnostic, prognostic, and voice-related elements in the texts. The coding process combined predefined codes derived from existing literature on anti-gender mobilizations with inductively generated open codes emerging from the empirical material. Frames were weighted as major, minor, or marginal, and relationships between codes were established using MAXQDA. Intercoder reliability was ensured through a shared codebook, repeated joint test coding within and across national teams, and regular online coder community sessions throughout the coding process.

Across the campaigns analyzed, the most dominant framings are what we originally termed as Children and Family Frames, with the "best interest of a child" emerging as particularly central to these framing. Other frames – such as appeals to natural law, critiques of political correctness and "woke culture," education-related concerns, and explicitly anti-homosexual or "natural family" narratives – also occasionally emerged, though less prominently (see FIERCE Consortium, 2024).

In this article, we focus specifically on the "best interest of a child" frame as it emerges as a unifying argumentative device in several types of anti-gender campaigns. In marriage equality campaigns, the frame is used to oppose legal recognition of same-sex couples by asserting that children's well-being depends on being raised within a heterosexual, two-parent family. In anti-abortion campaigns the frame shifts to the unborn child, constructed as a passive victim whose alleged protection is used to justify restrictive legislation, reinforcing pronatalist and nationalist logics that frame women's reproductive roles as essential to societal survival. This logic resonates with the broader 'demographic winter' narrative, which holds women responsible for declining birth rates and, ultimately, for endangering the nation's future. The education sector represents another key site of mobilization, with campaigns portraying gender equality measures, comprehensive sexuality education, and LGBTQ+ inclusion as an ideological indoctrination that threatens children's innocence and natural development, undermines parental authority, and requires protective intervention. Finally, in debates over transgender rights, the frame is used to oppose legal gender recognition for minors and inclusive school policies by depicting children as immature, easily influenced, and in need of protection from irreversible decisions.

Across these different campaign contexts, the "best interest of a child" functions as a recurring frame through which anti-gender actors oppose equality-based policies. However, the fact that it recurs does not mean it is deployed in a uniform or consistent way. In fact, when all explicit and implicit references to the "best interest of a child" are brought together and analyzed as a thematic cluster, it becomes easy to detect the frame's internal variations and strategic adaptability. It is this variation and adaptability we discuss in the remainder of this article.

5. Variations of children's wellbeing frame

Across the cases, we identified five distinct variants of how the frame "best interest of a child" is constructed:

(1) The child as a rights-bearing subject;
(2) The child as a passive object without agency;
(3) The child as vulnerable to brainwashing;
(4) The child as biologically fixed, but culturally malleable;
(5) The child as at risk of sexualization.

These categories emerged inductively from the material. Although some variants of the frame were in direct tension with one another, they all operated within the same overarching frame. Moreover, more than one variant was usually present within a single example, illustrating the frame's layered quality and strategic adaptability.

Since our analysis is inductive, we did not organize the results in advance according to the four categories defined by Lombardo et al. (2009) – *fixing, stretching, shrinking*, and *bending* – nor according to campaign content and objectives. Instead, we first present the findings in relation to the five identified variants of the frame and then, in the discussion, turn to the four aforementioned categories as a conceptual tool to illuminate the dynamic operation of discursive frames in our case.

The child as a rights-bearing subject

In the first variant of the "best interest of a child" frame, children are recognized as rights-bearing individuals. This frame asserts that "gender ideology" is fundamentally at odds with children's rights, positioning various policies as violators of these rights and anti-gender activists as the protectors. Within debates on same-sex families, this variant appears in claims that children have an inherent right to a mother and a father, implying that alternative family forms infringe upon these rights. This assumption is then translated into a rights-based language in which children are portrayed as entitled to such an environment and the state is tasked with the obligation to preserve this family model.

This argument, for example, featured prominently in the Slovenian campaign against marriage equality in 2015, where the Council of Catholic Laity of Slovenia – a public umbrella

organization of Catholic lay associations – linked the protection of the traditional family not only to children's well-being but also to national continuity.

> *"We demand and expect the state to protect the family, which is the only one that ensures the survival of the nation. We reject the devaluation of the family of father, mother and children at the expense of gender theory and an extremely distorted understanding of equality"* (Council of Catholic Laity of Slovenia, 2015).

A central aspect of such claims is often rooted in pseudo-scientific reasoning and legitimized through seemingly common-sense narratives that present heterosexual parenting as the only safe form of family life. This is evident, for example, in a public statement issued during the marriage equality debate in Slovenia by a group of individuals from academia, who asserted – without citing a single scientific study to back up their claim – that:

> *From psychology and psychotherapeutic experiences, we know that the absence of a father or mother in every person's life is traumatic and leaves lasting consequences in the process of identification, self-acceptance, establishing interpersonal relationships and giving meaning to one's life (Slovenian Academics, 2015).*

The same variant of the frame appeared also in the Italian debate during the general discussion in the parliament of the draft bill "Scalfarotto" in 2013, aiming at introducing crimes of homophobia and transphobia in which an MP from the Lega Nord claimed:

> *In fact, especially for children, who are the most vulnerable individuals in need of protection, all psychological studies have shown that they need both a paternal and a maternal figure* (Bragantini, 2013).

In these debates there is an implicit assumption that the "traditional family" is the "natural" family. The emphasis on the "naturalness" of this family structure is often linked to its reproductive potential, reinforcing the idea that biological reproduction is a defining feature of the legitimate family unit. All family structures that deviate from the heteronormative model are implicitly or explicitly categorized as detrimental to a child's well-being. They are portrayed as contrary to "the best interest of a child" and as violating the fundamental right of a child to have both a mother and a father.

While such framings are present across various national contexts, the Turkish case stands out in its explicit articulation of the child's rights in opposition to women's rights. In this context, the child's right to a mother is interpreted as a normative expectation that women should prioritize their maternal role over other roles, such as professional or public engagement. Women's autonomy is thus constructed as potentially conflicting with the child's best interest, reinforcing traditional gender roles through the invocation of children's rights. This framing is evident in a statement by Yasin Kuruçay, Vice President of the Family Academy Association,

welcoming the Ministry of Education's decision to cancel the Gender Equality in Education Project in 2019:

> *(...) it is noteworthy that there is no attention paid to policies that focus on a child's right to a mother. It is rather meaningful that what is diminished in the right of a child to a mother is transferred over to a woman's right to work* (Kuruçay, 2019).

This framing shifts the focus away from concrete policy issues concerning diverse families and redirects it toward a self-proclaimed defense of children's rights. Regardless of contextual differences, in all cases, the discourse of rights is instrumentalized in service of an ideology that fixes the definition of a family and gender roles of individuals and connects this to the survival of the nation. Because the focus is on rights, there is the impression that children have meaningful agency and possess a set of inalienable rights. However, neither the content of these rights nor the notion of agency is fixed or clearly defined. As the next section demonstrates, this invocation of agency is quickly reshaped – or withdrawn altogether – when it no longer serves the broader political narrative.

The child as a passive object without agency

In contrast to the first variant of the "best interest of a child" frame, which conceptualizes the child as a rights-bearing individual whose rights must be upheld, the second variant portrays children as lacking agency, not yet capable of independent judgment and therefore in need of external protection. Responsibility for ensuring their well-being is entrusted to authoritative actors – primarily parents, but also the state, religious institutions, and other guardians. This is particularly evident in debates about transgender minors, who are deemed too emotionally and cognitively immature to make decisions about themselves. For example, in Denmark, the former leader of the Danish People's Party, Pia Kjærsgaard, opposed the introduction of legal gender change for minors during a parliamentary debate in 2021, describing it as a "scary and landmark" case of identity politics and claiming that transgender identity is a matter of choice:

> *It is irresponsible and a total betrayal from society's side to make gender an optional right for a child. You must be 16 years old to buy a beer. You must be 17 years to acquire a driver's license and 18 years to vote or seek office. But you can apparently be just 10 years or even younger to make a fateful choice that will have massive consequences (Kjærsgaard, 2021).*

Similarly, in Spain, during the 2023 debate on the Trans Law, which would introduce gender self-determination, children were framed as developmentally immature and incapable of making informed decisions regarding gender identity and transition. Within this discourse, "the best interest of a child" was invoked to justify restrictions on gender-affirming policies for minors, reinforcing the notion that external authorities must intervene to prevent potentially harmful or misguided decisions, obscuring the fact that such decisions are, in practice, made through lengthy, expert-guided processes involving multidisciplinary assessments and clinical

oversight. This framing is illustrated by a statement from María Ruiz Solás, a Member of Parliament from the political party Vox:

> *Ladies and gentlemen, refusing to allow a child to undergo hormone treatment or mutilate their body without understanding what they are doing is not hatred; believing that a child should not make certain decisions until they reach adulthood, or telling an adult that they must be aware of the consequences of their choices, is not hatred (Ruiz Solás, 2023).*

In abortion debates, this logic is extended to the unborn child, who is similarly constructed as a passive subject in need of protection. This dimension was clearly illustrated in the Polish debate surrounding the proposed *Save Women 2017* bill legalizing abortion:

> *We must shout it out loud on behalf of those who cannot defend themselves, and it must be emphasized that this is not just a matter of worldview or religion. After all, everyone has the right to life, and this is true regardless of party affiliation, even if it may be more difficult for some to understand (Milczanowska, 2018).*

So far, we have seen how the "best interest of a child" frame shifts from recognizing children as rights-bearing subjects to positioning them as passive and dependent. While this variant foregrounds immaturity and vulnerability, it also implicitly prepares the ground for a further transformation of the frame. Once children are constructed as lacking agency, they can also be portrayed as particularly susceptible to external influence and manipulation, which we termed as vulnerability to brainwashing. As the next section shows, this logic is often extended beyond the individual child to broader national registers, where "gender" is threatening not only children's well-being but also cultural authenticity and national cohesion.

The child as vulnerable to brainwashing

In this version of the frame, the child is imagined as innocent and easily manipulated, particularly through exposure to state-sponsored or progressive discourses on gender and sexuality. The child is positioned as a potential victim of "brainwashing," requiring protection from ideological indoctrination framed as externally imposed and morally deviant.

This variant of the frame frequently emerges in debates on education policy. In Italy, for example, opposition to gender-sensitive programs in schools was led primarily by Catholic organizations, parental associations, and institutional representatives of the Church. These actors portrayed school textbooks addressing gender diversity as attempts to "colonize the minds of children and youth" without parental consent, framing such initiatives as both a violation of parental rights and an illegitimate expansion of state authority into areas of education that, in their view, should remain under parental control. This position was articulated, for instance, by Giuliano Amato, president of Lawyers for Life, in 2015 during the public debate on on reforming school programs to introduce gender-sensitive education:

> *The right of parents is to educate their own children and to reject any type of educational experimentation on children and young people, who are used as laboratory guinea pigs, in schools that increasingly resemble re-education camps (Amato, 2015).*

While "the best interest of a child" is frequently framed as an intimate, family-centered matter, it is simultaneously linked to broader national interests. In both cases, the underlying logic remains the same: children are positioned as passive recipients of external influences, requiring protection from ideologies that threaten to undermine cultural and national cohesion. What therefore distinguishes this framing from the preceding variants is its expansion beyond concerns for children's well-being to encompass broader anxieties about national authenticity and cultural colonization. In this context, gender ideology is not merely depicted as indoctrination intended to confuse or mislead children, but as a fundamental threat to the integrity and future of the nation itself. This logic is clearly evident in the Polish debate surrounding the 2019 *Stop Paedophilia* bill, which framed sexuality education as harmful and equated it with paedophilia. Former Prime Minister of Poland, Mateusz Morawiecki, invoked the well-being of children to advance a broader culture war narrative.

> *Whoever wants to poison children with [gender ideology], separate them from their parents, break up family ties, enter schools without invitation and write ideological textbooks is planting an explosive charge in Poland, is trying to start a cultural war in Poland* (Morawiecki, 2019).

This variant of the frame operates on two interconnected levels, constructing a clear opposition between "us" and "them." In some contexts, the perceived threat is located within society itself – particularly LGBTQ+ and feminist actors – who are accused of infiltrating schools to indoctrinate children. Framed as ideological agents imposing their worldview under the guise of education, they are depicted as corrupting young minds and undermining parental authority. This logic was articulated by Tomaž Merše, leader of the Family Initiative, during the Slovenian marriage equality debate in 2015, when he warned that the adoption of such a law would result in schools teaching children that marriage between two people of the same sex is normal:

> *If the law [on marriage equality] comes into force, all our children in kindergarten and school will be exposed to homosexual, transgender, and similar sex education, where they will be taught, in line with gender ideology, that there is no natural sex and that everyone can choose their own, that a father and mother are unimportant to a child, and they will be encouraged to experiment with different sexual practices and sexual orientations already in elementary school. (Merše, 2015)*

The second dimension of this frame has a stronger nationalist component, where the "us vs. them" divide is extended beyond internal actors to contrast national identity with the so-called degenerate West. This narrative is particularly prominent in Turkey, where anti-gender actors argue that gender ideology is not merely a local issue, but a form of Western imperialism

disguised as human rights advocacy. This logic is illustrated in the anti-gender discourses opposing the Gender Equality in Education Project in 2019, which was ultimately cancelled by the Ministry of Education. For example, the leader of a *Yellow union* in the education sector protested the project as a Western imposition, while simultaneously invoking children's vulnerability and the need to protect them.

> *This project, sponsored by the international education and cultural organization of the UK, the British Council, uses the slogan of "men take care of children, too;" organizes events in schools where the rainbow colors are in display, and tempts [children] with homosexuality. We must see that [the project] puts the country in a position where it is easy for projects, which destroy our nation, our values, our family structure, to be run [uninhibited]. This country is not a colony, and our institutions are not cogwheels of destruction employed by the west (Yavuz, 2019).*

The "best interest of a child" frame, in this context, derives its power by aligning with widely recognized narratives of cultural imperialism and Western invasion. By doing so, anti-gender actors position their opposition to gender equality as part of a broader resistance against external control and cultural erosion. However, what is particularly noteworthy is that such opposition to the "West" is not limited to regions, which might be considered outside Europe by some, but also emerges within contexts that would always be considered as part of the West. For example, a similar logic appears in the Danish debate on the right to legal gender change for minors, though with a slightly different emphasis. Here, the external threat is not framed as "the West" in general but is specifically attributed to the United States. The fear of ideological imposition is linked to concerns about the rise of identity politics and wokeness originating from the U.S. and infiltrating Danish society. In this framing, the push for gender-inclusive policies is not seen as an organic national development but as an externally driven agenda imposed through recent waves of progressive activism, as expressed by the former leader of the Danish People's Party in a 2021 parliamentary debate on a proposal to prevent the government from introducing a legal gender change for minors:

> *And I just have to say that we can recognize this from the US, where this whole identity politics thing is coming from, and we are becoming more and more strange in the way we interact with each other and can't figure out whether it's called chairperson or chairwoman or they or him or whatever. This is spreading, and I think that is really unfortunate (Kjærsgaard, 2021).*

Whether the perceived threat is attributed to internal actors (LGBTQ+ and feminist groups) or external forces (Western cultural imperialism, US identity politics), the underlying argument remains the same: "gender ideology" is framed as an intrusive force that manipulates children, disrupts traditional values, and erodes national identity. By merging concerns about children's well-being with anxieties about cultural sovereignty, this framing recasts opposition to gender equality as a broader struggle against internal and external "others," portrayed as sources of

moral decay and domination. This strategic alignment allows anti-gender actors to present their resistance to specific policies as a defense of societal and national survival. It also leads into the next variant of the frame, in which a child is simultaneously a being with biologically fixed, "natural" identity, but also one that can be easily manipulated. This contradiction builds on the alleged need to protect the demographic survival of the nation by protecting a child's biological identity from manipulation. Although these positions are in clear tension, we treat them as a distinct variant in order to highlight the internal contradictions of the frame.

The child as biologically fixed, but culturally malleable

This contradiction regarding the degree of children's agency reappears in debates over sex and sexuality. These two variants – biologically fixed and culturally malleable – can be understood as flip sides of the same frame, which portrays children as either possessing an essential, biologically determined sex that must be preserved or as vulnerable to harmful cultural influences capable of destabilizing this "natural" identity. This tension sustains a logic in which a child's gender is simultaneously understood as inherently stable and perpetually at risk of disruption, thereby justifying rigid socialization into binary gender norms.

At the heart of this frame lies the perceived threat of erasing "natural" sex differences and the assertion that men and women, as biologically distinct groups, possess fixed and homogeneous characteristics. Gender equality policies are thus portrayed as undermining biological femininity by alienating women from traditional roles of care, marriage, and motherhood. Conversely, some actors argue that such policies emasculate boys, producing a generation of men disconnected from their "true" masculinity and its associated responsibilities. This view was articulated, for example, by Sema Maraşlı, a Turkish writer active in conservative circles, who published a commentary on her website following the cancellation of the Gender Equality in Education Project in 2019, stating:

> *"Gender equality" sounds innocuous enough. But there is a word play here. It sounds as if the goal is equality in terms of rights, in front of the law. But, in reality, this is an attempt to erase the differences between boys and girls. In this project, the educators are telling students that "being born a girl or a boy is biological, but the society is imposing female or male roles on you. You can choose your gender freely and live as such." Gender equality classes confuse children about their sex roles. "Let the boys wear pink, let the boys cry, girls can do whatever boys do, there is no difference, choose the gender you wish…" How grave are these impositions for the world of a child ... (Maraşlı, 2019)*

Gender ideology, from this perspective, aims to "de-sex" children by suppressing their innate biological characteristics, thereby dismantling the natural order. For instance, Turkish anti-gender texts express alarm over a Ministry of Education project slogan – "Are you ready to rewrite?" – arguing that the slogan, originally intended to challenge unequal gender norms, signals an effort to redefine natural sex roles. Anti-gender actors – while referring to "the best

interest of a child" – claim that gender equality curricula pose a fundamental threat to children, as they confuse them about their biological sex, eliminate sexual differences, and ultimately legitimize diverse sexual orientations.

In a similar manner, during the Spanish debate on the Trans Law in 2023, which would introduce gender self-determination, the theme of biological sex is introduced and all discourses that challenge essentialism are seen as part of a denialist ideology:

> *The provisions of the Draft Bill appear to be aimed at establishing a new gag law intended to deter individuals, media outlets, social networks, and professionals from expressing any opinion contrary to an ideology that denies the validity of biological sex and introduces new definitions of what it means to be a man or a woman* (Plataforma Contra el Borrado de las Mujeres, 2021, p. 9).

The same speaker also invokes Orwellian dystopias, suggesting that children are at risk of being mentally colonized by dangerous ideologies. In both cases, the framing operates through a tension: on the one hand, there is an assertion of biological fixity; on the other, it is claimed that powerful actors, through sheer ideological pressure, can disrupt this supposedly natural state of affairs. In this respect, the logic of the frame echoes earlier discourses on homosexuality, which similarly oscillated between construing homosexuality as an innate condition – often pathologized – and as a learned behavior or choice (see, for example, Bennett, 2014).

There is a parallel discourse that emerges in the Danish debate on transgender minors, which does not come out explicitly to affirm biological fixity but rather argues that children are inherently playful beings who go through a phase of experimentation. In this instance, the "best interest of a child" frame is used to argue against legal gender recognition for minors by claiming that children do not have an essentialized gender identity and that gender identity develops over time. Right-wing politician Mette Thiesen of the New Right party, for example, cited in a parliamentary debate on legal gender change to minors in 2021 personal experience as a schoolteacher to argue that children frequently go through phases of wanting to be like the opposite sex – such as boys wearing earrings or attending girls' birthday parties – which should be understood as a normal part of development:

> *There is no place that is so inclusive as the Danish school; there is no one that is so inclusive as children are. I have met plenty of children who have been playing with their gender identity and who have been fully accepted (Thiesen, 2021).*

Anti-gender actors express concern that legal gender recognition would interrupt what they describe as a natural exploratory process by forcing children to make definitive and premature decisions about their gender. The expectation is that, if left undisturbed, children will eventually "reconcile" with their biological sex and identify as cisgender.

At first glance, the Turkish and Spanish cases appear to differ markedly from the Danish case, with the former emphasizing biologically fixed sex and the latter foregrounding experimentation and exploration. This suggests an oscillation between claims of fixity and assumptions of malleability. Yet the core concern is not the exploratory phase itself, but the fear that children might make premature decisions that become legally or medically fixed. In the Danish case, children are repeatedly described as going through "phases" of gender exploration, implicitly assuming that such phases will naturally be resolved due to the presumed permanence of biological sex. The underlying anxiety, therefore, is that this supposed biological reality is vulnerable to disruption through inappropriate socialization or, more recently, through gender self-determination.

This rhetorical flexibility highlights how anti-gender actors adapt the "best interest of a child" frame to different political contexts, positioning themselves as the ultimate protectors of children's well-being by selectively mobilizing arguments that resonate within each setting. Corollary to the perceived dangers of misinterpreting experimentation – and of ideologizing and fixing it through legislation – the risk of prematurity also features prominently in discourses on inappropriate sexual exposure through educational content related to sexuality or LGBTQ+ issues. This brings us to the fifth and final variant of the frame.

The child as being sexualized

This framing constructs childhood as asexual and pure and positions any engagement with sexual diversity as inherently corrupting or abusive. This concern extends beyond discussions of sexual education. Linked to the previous iteration of the frame discussed above, it also extends to broader debates about how gender roles are addressed in school curricula and whether the boundaries of binary gender roles are maintained.

Anti-gender actors often employ conspiracy narratives to argue that children are being exposed to explicit sexual content, equating sexuality education with pornography to provoke moral panic. In Italy, for instance, opposition to sexuality education has been driven by misinformation campaigns, including false claims that children are taught masturbation techniques and homosexuality in schools. This discourse portrays education as a primary channel for disseminating "gender ideology", as expressed in the claim articulated by a member of the steering committee of ProVita & Famiglia during an event at the Chamber of Deputies in 2023, where the association claimed that schools have departed from traditional values and embraced "gender ideology":

> *"Projects are presented to families under the pretense of supporting their education in unconditional respect, against discrimination and bullying, against femicides, and then too often turn into something else: gender changes for minors, books that promote illegal practices such as surrogacy, even lessons that suggest how to masturbate, how and when to have sexual intercourse, and portray overcoming the sexual binary as a form of freedom." (Ruiu, 2023)*

Similar rhetorical tropes were employed in Poland to generate moral panic around sexuality education in schools. During the 2019 election campaign, the citizens' initiative *Stop Paedophilia* was submitted to the parliament, equating sex education with paedophilia. The proposed bill framed sexuality education as a harmful influence that "eroticizes the child's psyche," seeking to ban its public endorsement in schools under the guise of protecting children from sexualization. In a Facebook post published by a Member of Parliament from the ruling Law and Justice party (PiS), it was stated:

> *"Playing doctor, masturbation in early childhood or sex on the internet – that's what Trzaskowski wants to teach in schools. Let's save the children!" (Siarkowska, 2019).*

A similar dynamic is observed in Turkey, where anti-gender actors claim that policy documents about gender equality in schools redefine young girls as women, thereby encouraging sexual activity outside of marriage and increasing vulnerability to pedophilia.

Across these cases, gender and sexuality-related policies are framed as direct threats to children's moral integrity and psychological well-being. Anti-gender actors argue that exposure to gender diversity, LGBTQ+ identities, and comprehensive sex education confuses children, causes distress, and leads to moral corruption. According to this logic, traditional gender roles provide psychological stability, whereas progressive policies introduce harmful ideologies that undermine this stability.

6. Discussion

Stemming from Lombardo et al. (2009) and their typology of four discursive practices through which the meaning of gender equality is negotiated (*fixing*, *stretching*, *shrinking*, and *bending*), we suggest that three of these practices (*stretching*, *shrinking*, and *bending*) are particularly evident in the framings of the "best interest of a child." While *fixing* refers to the stabilization of a specific meaning over time, our analysis indicates that the child-related discourse in anti-gender campaigns remains highly fluid, adaptable, and strategically ambiguous. Rather than stabilizing a single, consistent definition, anti-gender actors modify the meaning of child protection in response to shifting political needs and cultural contexts. This discursive flexibility enables anti-gender mobilizations to *stretch* the concept to include new threats, *shrink* it to exclude rights-claiming groups such as same-sex families, or *bend* it to align with nationalist or religious ideologies.

The practice of *stretching*, as defined by Lombardo et al. (2009), involves expanding a frame to incorporate new meanings or policy domains. In the context of anti-gender discourse, this stretching occurs when actors invoke the language of child protection and human rights to advance conservative agendas. These actors strategically draw upon the lexicon of international conventions (e.g., the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child) and adapt its terminology to argue, paradoxically, against progressive reforms in family law, education, and reproductive rights. This stretching allows for the mobilization of discourses that appear rights-based on the

surface, while substantively undermining the autonomy and rights of children – particularly in matters related to sexual and gender identity. As Lombardo et al. (2009) warn, stretching can reduce the transformative potential of equality frames. In this case, the emphasis on child welfare appears inclusive and emotionally compelling but does not translate into genuine empowerment or expanded rights for children.

Closely linked to this is the practice of *shrinking* where frames are narrowed, often stripping them of their capacity to challenge power asymmetries. Our analysis identifies shrinking in the widespread portrayal of children as passive, innocent, and incapable of making informed decisions about their lives. This infantilization is particularly visible in debates around transgender rights for minors, where children are constructed as confused or manipulated, and therefore in need of authoritative protection – typically from parents, religious institutions, or the state. By denying children agency, this discourse reduces their visibility as rights-bearing individuals. What is presented as protection ultimately serves to reinforce hierarchical power structures and restrict children's participation in decisions that directly affect them.

In addition to stretching and shrinking, we also observe how the "best interest of a child" frame is *bent* to fit within nationalist and religious discourses. Across the six countries analyzed, the frame is repeatedly adapted to resonate with local ideologies, cultural norms, and hegemonic political narratives. Such framings maintain the appearance of universal concern for children while embedding it within exclusionary nationalist narratives and essentialist imaginaries.

What emerges from this analysis is the extraordinary *flexibility* and *malleability* of the "best interest of a child" frame. It is not a fixed or neutral concept, but one that transforms across contexts and serves different ideological objectives while maintaining a stable rhetorical core: the claim that children must be protected. This adaptability is a key source of its political power. It allows anti-gender actors to present emotionally resonant arguments that appeal to common sense and moral intuition, even when the policies they promote are restrictive or discriminatory. For example, the concern for children's rights and well-being is never extended to migrant minors. When anti-gender actors address migrant children – particularly so-called "unaccompanied migrant minors" – they are portrayed as threats, linked to criminality, and subjected to calls for expulsion. In these cases, observed particularly in Spanish anti-gender campaigns, the discourse shifts away from the "best interest of a child" toward the "best interest of the (ethnic) nation."

Read through the lens of moral panic theory, our findings demonstrate that the "best interest of a child" operates as a central trigger through which anti-gender mobilizations produce a sense of urgent moral threat. In line with classic accounts (Cohen, 1972), children are constructed as idealized and universally relatable victims, while a range of actors – LGBTQ+ activists, feminists, educators, or international institutions – are positioned as "folk devils" accused of endangering the future of society. However, our analysis extends these accounts by showing that the object of panic is not fixed, but discursively flexible and internally heterogeneous.

Rather than revolving around a single, stable threat, contemporary moral panics around gender are sustained through the strategic reconfiguration of a child as simultaneously rights-bearing, passive, manipulable, sexualized, or biologically fixed, depending on political context and campaign objectives. This demonstrates that moral panic in anti-gender campaigns operates through a durable and adaptive framing infrastructure, capable of continuously absorbing new issues, actors, and anxieties while retaining its emotional core.

Gilliam and Gulløv (2022) argue that children must be understood not only as autonomous individuals but also as symbolic figures, a potential onto which societies project their ideals, fears, and hopes for the future. Accordingly, the child becomes a vessel through which wider societal transformations and anxieties are negotiated. Our findings support this view. The child in anti-gender discourse is framed as both *at risk* and *a risk* – in need of protection from progressive ideologies, but also potentially a site of ideological infiltration. This dual positioning serves two important functions. First, it allows anti-gender actors to claim moral superiority by presenting themselves as defenders of the most vulnerable. Second, it positions them as cultural gatekeepers, responsible for shielding children from "foreign" or "corrupting" ideas, especially those that challenge traditional gender roles.

The "best interest of a child" frame is not just conceptually elastic; it is also politically and emotionally charged. By drawing on powerful imagery of innocence, vulnerability, and familial care, anti-gender actors mobilize public sentiment against gender equality initiatives. Our analysis demonstrates that appeals to children's well-being operate as powerful affective devices that mobilize fear, anxiety, and moral outrage, while simultaneously invoking love, care, and responsibility toward the imagined future of the nation. As Ahmed (2004) suggests, such emotional narratives operate within *affective economies*, where feelings like fear and love are circulated, attached to particular social figures, and mobilized for political ends. The figure of the child becomes a "sticky" object around which emotions circulate and ultimately attach to, enabling the rapid alignment of individual subjects with collective nationalist and heteronormative imaginaries. This emotional register enables the discourse to transcend ideological boundaries, attracting support from individuals who may not otherwise align with anti-feminist or anti-LGBTQ+ politics.

Moreover, beyond its emotional appeal, this frame is accepted by a wider range of audiences because it presents a highly political issue as non-political, non-ideological, and neutral and thus operates as a *depoliticization strategy*: by framing opposition to gender equality as a neutral, commonsense response rather than as an ideological position, anti-gender actors obscure power relations and foreclose democratic deliberation. This makes the frame particularly useful for anti-gender actors seeking proximity to right-wing populist politics, including those aiming to enter parliamentary arenas or already operating within them, as it allows political goals to be pursued through ostensibly apolitical claims. By framing their opposition to gender equality as concern for child welfare rather than a political or ideological position, anti-gender actors deflect accusations of bigotry and recast their agendas as protective

and reasonable. In doing so, they make exclusionary policies appear as pragmatic responses to shared societal concerns, rather than regressive or discriminatory interventions.

This article focuses exclusively on the framing strategies of anti-gender actors and does not examine how these frames are produced and transformed through interaction with feminist, LGBTQIA+, and other progressive counter-frames. Since framing processes are inherently relational and dynamic (Roggeband, 2018), this constitutes a certain limitation of the analysis. Future research would benefit from a comparative, interactional approach that examines how the "best interest of a child" frame is co-constituted through ongoing discursive struggles over children's rights, agency, and well-being.

7. Conclusion

The analysis of anti-gender mobilizations across diverse contexts reveals the remarkable adaptability and emotional potency of the "best interest of a child" frame. This study moves beyond identifying the "best interest of a child" as a mere recurring trope in anti-gender rhetoric by placing it at the center of a systematic analysis. While previous scholarship consistently acknowledged the presence of child-well-being narratives, our research provides a deeper understanding of the internal mechanics and discursive transformations that render this frame so effective. By applying the typology of *fixing, stretching, shrinking*, and *bending*, we have demonstrated that the power of this frame lies in its strategic adaptability and inherent contradictions. Our analysis shows how the figure of the child is systematically reconfigured to serve divergent ideological aims – alternating between a rights-bearing subject and a passive object, or between biological fixity and cultural malleability – while maintaining a stable rhetorical core of protectionism. This systematic mapping reveals that the "best interest of a child" functions not only as an emotional trigger for moral panic but as a sophisticated depoliticization strategy that recasts ideological agendas as neutral, common-sense responses to societal threats.

These findings open several new perspectives for future research that move beyond the descriptive analysis of anti-gender campaigns. First, our identification of the frame as a "sticky" object within affective politics suggests a need for further inquiry into how specific emotional resonances (such as fear or care) translate into legislative success or institutional policy shifts across varying socio-political contexts. Second, because this study focused on the framing strategies of anti-gender actors, a crucial future direction involves an interactional approach to examine how these frames are co-constituted or contested through relational struggles with feminist and LGBTQ+ counter-frames. By treating the "best interest of a child" as a durable and adaptive framing infrastructure, future research can better analyze how such discourses continue to absorb new anxieties and actors while evolving across the global political landscape.

Key messages:

- The paper shows child welfare as a key strategic tool in anti-gender politics.
- It demonstrates the frame's flexibility despite a stable "protect children" core.
- It identifies five contradictory constructions of the child driving mobilization.
- It reveals the frame as a depoliticizing, affective mechanism enabling moral panic.

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