

Female Leaders and the Populist Radical Right in the Nordic Countries

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Abstract

This article examines female leadership in populist radical right (PRR) parties in the Nordic countries, challenging the traditional view of these parties as “Männerparteien.” Building upon research on the centrality of gender to the radical right, we analyse biographical material covering the private and professional lives of two generations of female PRR leaders in Denmark (Pia Kjærsgaard), Finland (Riikka Purra), and Norway (Siv Jensen and Sylvi Listhaug). Our findings show that these leaders strategically balance hegemonic masculinity and femininity, drawing on masculine codes to frame themselves as top-down disciplining managers and tough party leaders while simultaneously invoking their private lives to highlight care, empathy, and softer values. The analysis also reveals generational differences tracking broader ideological transformations within the parties, with implications for leadership style and performance. Younger PRR female leaders place greater emphasis on radical and ethnonationalist agendas and appear less concerned about balancing masculine authority with feminine expectations.

Keywords

double bind; gender; leadership; pariah femininity; populism; radical right

1. Introduction

The relationship between the populist radical right (PRR) and gender has warranted increasing scholarly attention (e.g., Blee & Scrinzi, 2026; Meret & Scrinzi, 2024). Recent studies have shown how gender operates as more than a demographic variable or as a matter of gender equality and family politics. Today, gender functions as a structuring force across the PRR, shaping membership, ideology, and leadership style

(Sauer, 2020). Gender has become a powerful driver of social and political polarisation, as evidenced by intensifying public contestation over sex education, reproductive rights, LGBTIQ+ inclusion, and gender-based violence (Eslén-Ziya et al., 2026). Gender has been described as a “symbolic glue” (Grzebalska et al., 2017), a “signifier” that allows the coming together of a broader constellation of anti-gender and anti-feminist actors from different ideological, political backgrounds. In short, the centrality of gendered arguments and policies to the PRR has become increasingly manifest and researched (Donà, 2020). This article examines one dimension of the intersection between gender and the PRR (Meret & Scrinzi, 2024)—namely the construction of female leadership authority in the Nordic context. Prior research has analysed how prominent female leaders, such as Pia Kjaersgaard (Meret, 2015), Marine Le Pen (Geva, 2020), Giorgia Meloni (De Giorgi et al., 2023), and Siv Jensen (Meret et al., 2016), cultivate personal authority and mediate public and private life to mobilize support and project capability as party leaders. These contributions have illuminated the gendered dimensions through which PRR leadership is constituted and voters’ support is ensured (Formato & Evolvi, 2026). In the past decade, both this field of study and the number of women leading PRR parties have grown. Politicians including not only Marine Le Pen and Giorgia Meloni but also Alice Weidel, Riikka Purra, and Sylvi Listhaug have demonstrated that women can lead parties traditionally invested in the valorisation of masculine qualities while sustaining support from voters and followers. This raises three central questions that link up with our theoretical framework: (a) How do female PRR leaders position themselves in relation to hegemonic masculinity and femininity when constructing their leadership in biographical material? (b) How do they navigate the double bind between PRR masculine leadership codes and feminine expectations? (c) How do they manage the risk of negative stigma attached to women who embody traits reserved for masculine male leaders?

These parties have long been described as “Männerparteien” (Mudde, 2007)—parties led and voted for by men. This traditionally masculine character has also informed the PRR organisational cultures and strongly gendered the style and rhetoric of the leaders (Jungar & Jupskås, 2024). Yet, alongside these male leaders, women are no longer exceptions, and recent studies have questioned whether they too are worthy of the “strongmen” attribution (Griffini & Montecchio, 2026). Particularly in the Nordic countries, PRR female leadership is hardly new (Meret et al., 2016), and understanding how women enter and influence these male-dominated political spaces is essential to accounts of the contemporary PRR and gender.

2. The Radical Right Gender Gap

Until around 2010, a consistent marker of PRR support was the overrepresentation of men among its voters (Coffé, 2019). Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2015) capture this with the words “Vox populi or vox masculini?,” emphasizing the masculine-coded rhetoric, style, and substance of PRR politics. Givens (2004) introduced the phrase “radical right gender gap” to describe the fact that men are significantly more likely than women to support these parties. These accounts capture the consistent underrepresentation of women in the PRR electorate, a trend that has started to shift (Amengay et al., 2017). Within this context, the election of female leaders in PRR has been interpreted as a strategic response to the gender gap. Research shows that PRR parties are more likely to promote women when facing electoral vulnerability, using female leaders to broaden their electoral appeal while altering neither core nativist nor antifeminist commitments (Weeks et al., 2023). Related work conceptualises women’s inclusion as symbolic or instrumental, aimed at image moderation or normalization rather than substantive change (Meguid et al., 2025). Female leaders thus play a part in normalization processes by softening the image of the PRR (see

Amengay et al., 2017). Performance-oriented accounts have further argued that women may serve as effective leaders by embodying hybrid styles combining authority and care, facilitating the communication of exclusionary politics (Casullo, 2025). Other scholars (Bussière-Ladouceur, 2023) have emphasised, however, the lack of clear evidence that the PRR gender gap narrows under female party leadership. Sometimes the gap increases under female leadership, suggesting that the gender of the party leader has little to no effect.

PRR leaders usually spark contrasting reactions of admiration, sympathy, and aversion. Scholars have tried to understand how these performances are structured and why they provoke such feelings (Bjånesøy, 2023). In reflections on PRR mobilisation, Sauer (2020) examines how certain performances of masculinity are not just personal traits carried by male politicians but function as structuring logics informing discourse, institutions, and leadership. The concepts of “hegemonic masculinity” and “hegemonic femininity” (e.g., Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) help us understand how “gender hegemony” co-structures leadership styles and reconstructs authority. Schippers (2007, p. 91) explains that “idealized features of masculinity and femininity as complementary and hierarchical provide a rationale for social relations at all levels of social organization from the self to interaction, to institutional structures, to global relations of domination.” While hegemonic masculinity is expressed in qualities such as authority, physical strength, toughness, and desire for the feminine object, hegemonic femininity is expressed in qualities that support hegemonic masculinity as complementary to and yet hierarchically below it. Femininity markers include qualities such as care, nurturing impulses, attraction to the masculine object, and emotional vulnerability.

Schippers also identifies “pariah femininity” (2007, p. 95) as a form of femininity expressed by a person marked as female but with qualities identified as masculine. This person is stigmatised as socially less desirable because they contaminate the putatively natural relation between hegemonic masculinity and femininity. PRR political leadership is frequently associated with stereotypically masculine characteristics. PRR female leaders are thus seen as expressing masculine traits—such as being “controlling,” “disciplined,” “assertive,” and “authoritative,” while at the same time being characterized by followers as distinctly feminine (Geva, 2020)—for instance, by emphasising their maternal devotion to children and the family. Having to mediate between “masculine” and “feminine” traits is defined as the “double-bind” in the literature on political leadership and gender (Ås, 1981; Campus, 2013, pp. 54–72). Female leadership includes performances of masculinity, such as being “strong” or showing “strong” leadership. But it also requires displaying stereotypically feminine traits, such as maternal care, caring, and emotional responsiveness. In other words, PRR leaders must perform both hegemonic masculinity and femininity, with hegemonic masculinity being a vital “public” repertoire for both male and female populists. Yet, for PRR female leaders, this also implies facing the stigma of “pariah femininity.” The solution is balancing public and private: while hegemonic masculinity is produced and reproduced in the leader’s public life, the private becomes the locus of femininity. This strengthens gender hierarchies and legitimises the subordination of women to (white) heterosexual men. We argue that hegemonic masculinity and femininity, together with pariah femininity and the double bind, structure the performative repertoires enacted by Nordic PRR female leaders.

3. Case Selection and Data

State-feminism and gender equality are often seen as being part of national identity narratives in the Nordic region (Borchorst & Siim, 2008). The Nordic PRR parties have adapted and support public policies enabling the balancing of parenthood with working life and women’s rights, while simultaneously reproducing anti-gender

and anti-feminist repertoires (Jungar & Jupskås, 2024). Despite not having formal gender quotas, women's political representation in the Nordics is among the highest internationally (Bergqvist, 1999). All Nordic countries have been governed by female prime ministers, and most parties have had a female leader (with the notable exceptions of the Swedish PRR party, the Sweden Democrats, and the Finnish conservative party Kansallinen Kokoomus). The Nordic PRR parties selectively incorporate gender equality and gay-rights through femo- and homo-nationalist appeals (Edenborg & Jungar, 2024; Jungar & Jupskås, 2024).

Against this backdrop, we analyse four female party leaders of three Nordic PRR parties: Dansk Folkeparti (DF, Danish People's Party, Denmark), Fremskrittspartiet (FRP, the Progress Party, Norway), and Perussuomalaiset (PS, Finns Party, Finland). They represent all cases of female PRR-party leadership in the Nordics, as the Sweden Democrats have not had a female party leader. These parties represent comparable cases of electorally successful PRR parties within broadly similar institutional, cultural, and historical contexts. Emerging in the early 1970s, they first appeared either as mobilisations against welfare-state bureaucracy and taxation (Denmark and Norway) or as agrarian populism critical of rapid urbanisation and modernisation (Finland). The Sweden Democrats originated from extreme right milieus in the late 1980s (Jungar & Jupskås, 2014). Comparatively, the parties and their voters, as well as their effects on party competition and parliamentary behaviour, have been analysed (Jungar, 2024). However, studies on party leadership have been few, despite the fact that women have frequently held this position. The Nordic experience complicates conventional images of PRR leadership and invites closer analysis of how gendered norms and expectations are negotiated.

Female PRR party leadership has been far from exceptional. DF and PS have each had one female leader (Pia Kjaersgaard and Rikka Purra, respectively), while the Norwegian FRP has had two (Siv Jensen and Sylvi Listhaug). All of these leaders are included in our analysis (see Table 1 in the Supplementary File). They represent different generations, ranging from Kjaersgaard's and Jensen's long-term party leaderships to the more recent leaderships of Listhaug and Purra. Pia Kjaersgaard is the oldest of the four, with a 40-year parliamentary career. Siv Jensen's career is also long, lasting until her decision to retire from politics in 2021 and culminating in her appointment as Minister of Finance between 2013 and 2020. Sylvi Listhaug held ministerial posts between 2015 and 2020 before becoming party leader. Rikka Purra rose rapidly through the Finns Party, becoming leader in 2021 and Minister of Finance in the centre-right government from 2023.

The data for this article comes from political biographies (see Table 1 in the Supplementary File) published between 2013 and 2026 by and on the four party leaders. The material interweaves their personal lives with those of their political parties and covers different stages of both. The texts are of particular interest since they document each leader's efforts to construct a unified self, merging personal elements and experiences with the external events each identifies as having shaped them as a politician. These self-representations matter because they expose both the content and form of self-disclosure: what they deem worth telling of their private and public story as well as how they convey it to a broad readership. Historically, the biographical genre has been implicitly bound up with gender. Most canonical biographies have focused on the lives of men. As Linda Anderson argues: "autobiography has been seen as promoting a view of the subject as universal, it has also underpinned the centrality of the masculine and....Western and middle-class modes of subjectivity" (Anderson, 2001, p. 3). Women are historically underrepresented in (auto-)biographical writing, not because they did not write about themselves, but because their lives were long deemed to fall short of the importance associated with historical male figures. The biographical genre (including political memoirs) has thus become

conflated with the narrative and style of the masculine subject. Later critical strands—particularly feminist ones—have emphasized that self-representation is constituted not only by gender but also by other categories tied to individual histories, contexts, and conditions. For PRR female leaders, political biographies are thus especially revealing, as they offer not only a site for observing how these politicians describe political events and experiences but also how they negotiate gender, authority, and authenticity within a political tradition long associated with masculine male leaders (Egerton, 1992).

We structure our analysis around three dimensions of the PRR female leaders' biographies: (a) personal origin, (b) political awakening, and (c) political self-branding. These are constitutive moments through which the female leaders portray themselves. Each dimension captures how party leadership performance and gender intersect. Starting with the justifications for political engagement and retrospective authenticity constructions, origin stories draw on modes of socialisation such as upbringing, class, family, and childhood, while political awakening highlights formative events and factors that retrospectively justify political engagement. Political self-branding concerns accounts of political leadership: leadership style; relationship with peers, supporters, and opponents; and public and private personas. These dimensions emerge from our analysis as codes and nested subcodes (using qualitative data coding aided by text-analysis software): (a) Origins (family, class, childhood, territory); (b) political awakening (wake-up moments, main sources of inspiration); and (c) political self-branding (public career, private life, critical moments). This approach lets us uncover and interpret shared patterns and variations across the cases. In doing so, we focus upon two analytical aspects introduced above: the double bind, whereby female leaders must reconcile masculinised norms of political authority with gendered expectations; and pariah femininity, highlighting how the party leaders negotiate hegemonic masculinity and femininity. The Nordic context intensifies these tensions. While female leadership is generally normalised, it is also subjected to heightened scrutiny. PRR female leaders face cross-pressure from societal norms and public expectations of gender equality, on the one hand, and masculinised party organisations and party ideology, on the other. This renders the double bind for female populist leaders in Nordic PPRs an interesting comparative case, as they navigate between the expectations of populist leadership in a context where the national self-understanding centres on (gender) equality. The analysis closely examines how female PRR leaders navigate this tension through curated forms of self-presentation that both draw on and reconfigure Nordic gender-equality norms.

4. Analysis

4.1. Origins

Across the four biographical accounts, narratives of personal background establish class- and gender-based senses of respectability, coupled with elements of care, independence, and morality. All the female leaders, to varying degrees, highlight their female forebears as role models of work ethic or perseverance. Identity-forming events and experiences function both to justify and counterbalance subsequent political leadership-ethos. All four ethos-constructions include degrees of authoritativeness, discipline, combativeness, and control—in short, masculine-coded characteristics.

Born in 1947, Pia Kjærsgaard presents an understated portrait of her young self as a “plain girl,” mostly “preoccupied with [her] appearance” (Kjærsgaard, 2025, p. 14):

I was what you might call a proper girl....I was also a bit quiet. I took care of my things, was active in class, but I wasn't the one getting top marks, and I didn't make much fuss about myself. (Kjærsgaard, 2025, p. 14)

Kjærsgaard's most recent biography recounts a middle-class upbringing within which her father owns a paint shop, and her mother acts as a housewife. Her first memories centre upon the man who later becomes her husband and lifelong support. She recalls collecting "things for [her] future home," which she then kept in her "bridal chest." As she elaborates: "I would bring home brochures of different dinnerware sets so I could tick off what I wanted" (Kjærsgaard, 2025, p. 14). Such details cast Kjærsgaard as traditional, prepared for an orderly life as a practical housewife. She retrospectively juxtaposed this respectable domesticity with crisis and a "broken home," as her parents divorced when she was thirteen. She describes this disruption both as a formative rupture (p. 95) and as a deep life crisis and a great embarrassment, as she was "the only one in [the] class who came from a divorced family" (p. 89). Closely tied to this is the fate of the family dog, Skipper: "one day my father shot him with his hunting rifle" (p. 20). Kjærsgaard's family idyll shatters, and her father nearly succumbs "to bitterness and drink." All this compels her to take responsibility "for holding everyday life together," "to harden herself" (Kjærsgaard & Carlsen, 2013, pp. 16, 37–38), and to "conceal her feelings" (p. 29). Kjærsgaard's origin story thus serves to justify traits of her persona (Kjærsgaard & Carlsen, 2013, p. 39):

My upbringing is a significant part of the explanation for why order and security mean so much to me. I am a security junkie. A control freak. I prefer to have structure and things under control, because I have experienced what it feels like when, all of a sudden, nothing is under control at all.

This narrative strives to establish a respectable femininity, achieved despite adverse conditions, which serves as justification for Kjærsgaard's overcontrolling personality and counterbalances the masculine-coded leadership practices.

Kjærsgaard's relationship with her mother is strained, particularly after the divorce and her mother's new marriage with "Uncle Poul" (Kjærsgaard & Carlsen, 2013, p. 30). Kjærsgaard describes her mother as a conspicuous "femme fatale, who wore hats and feather boas," was "beautiful, striking, charismatic," "reckless," and "very self-centred" (Kjærsgaard & Carlsen, 2013, p. 30, 2025, pp. 181–182)—a hyper-feminine, eccentric woman who "partied through the night, and slept late next day" (p. 183). This contrasts with Kjærsgaard's preferred relative, the "tidy and meticulous" grandmother who "behaved normally" (p. 26). Her mother features primarily as a negative counter-model to what Kjærsgaard aspires to as a wife, mother, and woman. She nevertheless recalls her mother urging her "never to bow her head" (Kjærsgaard, 2025, p. 182)—a phrase she later repeats in accounts of her political challenges. While Kjærsgaard rejects elements of improper femininity in the domestic sphere, she later draws on this charisma and eccentricity as useful qualities in public political life, such as engagement, enthusiasm, and overcommitment.

Siv Jensen, born in 1969, also recounts her parents' divorce but emphasizes her extended-family constellation as "entirely positive" (Jensen & Ringheim, 2021, pos. 89). In contrast to Kjærsgaard's narrative of crisis and control, Jensen presents her mother's post-divorce struggle as a formative example of self-reliance and entrepreneurial resolve:

We learnt early on that money doesn't fall from the sky. It comes from hard work.....Mum's attitude is that you must never give up....No matter how bleak things may seem....She managed to set up a small one-woman business that earned enough money to pay the bills and put food on the table for a whole family. (Jensen & Ringheim, 2021, pos. 99–102)

Jensen's memoir otherwise portrays an emotionally secure childhood in a petit-bourgeois environment. Raised in a flat above her parents' shoe-shop at a busy Oslo intersection, Jensen depicts herself as both a "mummy's girl" and an independent "city girl." Commerce and urbanity affect her early socialization. Family life intersects with labour relations, and Jensen earns increased inclusion in work tasks within a naturalized hierarchy. Childhood aspirations "to stand behind the counter and serve customers" (pos. 49) position Jensen's family among "hard-working shopkeepers" and far from political elites. Jensen anchors her later political engagement in experiential knowledge, having "felt it firsthand":

[Y]ou learn to live within your means. You must create value before you can spend it. From a very early age, Mum and Dad taught me the importance of a strong work ethic and responsibility. This has shaped me and my political work. You get nothing for free. You must get up in the morning. You must go to work. There is no such thing as "I can't be bothered." (Jensen & Ringheim, 2021, pos. 112–117).

Work ethic and responsibility are central components in Jensen's self-construction and economic-political engagement. Her origin story reinforces a duty-oriented ethos embedded within existing socio-economic frameworks. Jensen's schooling in economics entails both moral and intellectual fostering. She describes herself as an apolitical student, yet she sees the student council as a "natural arena," suggesting that ideological conviction comes second to organisational ability. Jensen's narrative relates to order, justice, and institutional engagement rather than to anti-establishment rebellion.

In contrast, Sylvi Listhaug's origin story stands out as a construction of authenticity rooted in a seemingly picturesque, homogeneous, and unchanging Norwegian farming community. Born in 1977 and raised in semi-rural Norway to Christian traditions, Listhaug presents herself as a farmer's daughter of humble origins and ambitions, staying at home to "take care of grandma" (Listhaug & Akerhaug, 2018, p. 9) rather than studying in the big city. Listhaug revisits this *heartland* throughout her autobiography when presenting her motivation for political engagement. The autobiography recounts a childhood resolve to avoid dependence on men, family, or anyone else (p. 16). Anecdotes such as how Listhaug walks by herself to her first day of school contribute to constructing an ethos of self-reliance that supports her combative and stubborn persona and maverick style in politics. Like Kjærsgaard and Jensen, she foregrounds her professional legitimacy in a personal story of care, hard work, and ordinariness, although here presented along more Christian-conservative lines. Listhaug works in a nursing home while studying teacher education at the local college, and she teaches briefly before becoming political adviser to the Progress Party in 2001. In tracing her beginnings, she repeatedly highlights her experience of care work, and, like Kjærsgaard (1998, pp. 103–113), she expresses immense joy at meeting and helping the sick and elderly as a politician.

Riikka Purra, also born in 1977, describes a lower-middle-class upbringing in Tampere—an area historically associated with industries and the labour movement. Like Kjærsgaard, Purra recounts her parents' divorce, which left its mark on her, and living with her single mother, who was a secretary at the public broadcasting company YLE. Purra is notoriously protective of her private life, which is marked by grief and loss. As a girl, she

accompanies her mother to the pub. “Adult talk in general—and especially the talk of adults who are drinking, is not something a small child should have to listen to,” she says (Kari & Nurmi, 2026, p. 26). The roles of parent and child are reversed, and Purra recalls taking care of her mother and worrying about the future. Aged 12, she wakes one morning to find her mother dead in bed beside her. Feeling lonely and unsafe, Purra avoids openly showing grief but retrospectively recognizes that “kids should not be left alone in such a terrible situation as I was” (pp. 26–28). She frames her loss as formative, making her strong, determined, and able to take control over her life. Reacting against her mother’s poor lifestyle and health, Purra adopts vegetarianism and takes schoolwork seriously. Beyond her mother’s death, Purra explains how divorce and the loss of three unborn children both hardened her, gave her strength, and shaped her belief that family is the most important thing in life. Like Kjærsgaard and Listhaug, hardness and discipline in character and political practice are justified through accounts of a background of feminised responsibility, care, and injury—ruptures that create the need for control and self-reliance as well as distance from perceived societal deviance and weakness.

4.2. Political Awakening

While these biographies establish respectable femininity as a precondition for later authority, they also recount political awakenings through formative experiences, including attraction to transgression and charismatic (male) leaders. Mogens Glistrup, a flamboyant tax lawyer who entered Danish politics in the early 1970s, triggers Kjærsgaard’s (1998, p. 59) political awakening. Glistrup founded the Danish Progress Party (FrP) and gained widespread public attention and furore. Kjærsgaard (1998, p. 59) describes him as “provocative, infuriating, charming,” as well as “intelligent,” “genuine,” “wild,” “rebellious,” and “in many ways touched by madness” (Kjærsgaard & Carlsen, 2013, p. 55; see also Kjærsgaard, 2025, pp. 26–27). Kjærsgaard writes that she “fell for” him (Kjærsgaard, 2025, p. 27), ascribing this attraction to his transgressive style:

I had a soft spot for people who cross the line in a good way. He caught my interest, and little by little I began to take notice of what he stood for politically....I was fascinated by Glistrup. (Kjærsgaard, 2025, pp. 27–28)

It is this charismatic male leader more so than the party’s political stances that first intrigues Kjærsgaard. Her biographies disclose political ambivalence and disinterest early on, describing a political awakening that is more affective than ideological: “I had not formed my own political views yet, but I followed the debate and became more and more provoked by those who sponged off the state” (Kjærsgaard, 2025, p. 30). In 1973, Kjærsgaard votes for the FrP and subsequently participates in party meetings and political activities. As her husband puts it: “She caught the political bug” (p. 35). But to this she adds: “I did not do this to be elected to Parliament. It was not on my mind at all as a possibility” (p. 49). Indeed, she tells of tough political beginnings in a context of anarchy and ungratefulness.

Similarly, Jensen’s turn to politics appears accidental rather than ideologically driven. Since adverse financial conditions impede her entrepreneurial aspirations, she instead enters party politics in 1987. Her mother participates in the local branch of the Progress Party, whose members, coincidentally, recruit Jensen, seeing that she has “far too much passion and too many opinions not to get involved in politics” (Jensen & Ringheim, 2021, pos. 136). Jensen joins but does not divulge her ideological convictions at this stage. She becomes properly active in 1992 as a nominee for the local party board. She describes a decisive moment speaking in front of idolized party figures, including long-serving leader Carl I. Hagen. Just as

Glistrup is crucial to Kjærsgaard's political engagement, Hagen is a strong source of inspiration and a mentor for Jensen: "Carl I. Hagen was a politician I really looked up to; I thought he was unrivalled in his ability. Just being in the same room as him was really something back then" (pos. 185). Jensen highlights how Hagen warned that "inflammatory rhetoric on immigration" (pos. 294) could damage the party, while conveniently disregarding his earlier controversies and anti-Islamic "Mustafa letter" of 1987. Jensen describes her subsequent election and new responsibilities as transformative in terms of training and as a personal discovery of rhetorical authority, more so than as an ideological awakening. In the context of tough economic times, the party offers Jensen work as group secretary in 1994. While charismatic male party leaders play a significant role for both Kjærsgaard's and Jensen's turn to politics, Jensen is more so increasingly integrated into a masculinised party milieu rather than attracted to transgression.

In contrast to the previous two, Listhaug's political awakening starts at an early age. She credits watching news broadcasts with her grandmother as politically formative and inspiring. Listhaug highlights, for instance, seeing a debate, at the age of eight, between Reagan and Gorbachev. She engages in youth politics amid the EU-membership debate in the early 1990s. This issue bridges the left-right divide, as youth parties on both the left and the right join the "no" side. While there is no singular moment of political awakening, Listhaug mentions familiar events, like September 11, as significant for her political convictions. The autobiography anchors Listhaug's political persona to the homestead, which is set against urban and intellectual "elites" characterized by liberal values, higher education, and disdain for the "common people" (Listhaug & Akerhaug, 2018, pp. 35–36). The emphasis on rurality effectively underscores her formative distance from "the elite" and counterbalances her political career in the capital among those very same elites. By grounding her political engagement in moral conventionalism and respectable "rural" femininity, Listhaug's self-presentation provides a down-to-earth anchoring. She justifies her controversial, often hyperbolic statements by saying that they "came from the heart" as natural and common-sensical reactions. Here, pariah femininity appears through the ethos of the independent maverick, coupled with a seemingly authentic expression of emotion and anti-elite confrontation. Her desire to intervene in mediatized political discourse stands out in relation to Kjærsgaard and Jensen. Intriguingly, while Jensen and Kjærsgaard both pay homage to previous party leaders, Listhaug only briefly mentions Jensen and Hagen.

Neither Listhaug nor Purra seem triggered by charismatic party profiles. Purra's political socialisation starts at home, in discussions with her mother, who sympathized with the Finnish radical left. Purra's way into the radical right is far from linear. Like Listhaug, Purra presents herself as intuitively drawn to politics, albeit with greater academic interest. As a teenager, Purra engages with environmental and existential issues: "In upper-secondary school I already used every opportunity available to explore and bring attention to environmental issues. The presentations were very personal: indifference and the world filling up with filth were deeply distressing" (Kari & Nurmi, 2026, p. 47). She furthers this engagement through a non-materialist and vegetarian lifestyle, as well as through studies in political science, economics, and environmental sciences, graduating from the University of Turku in 2004, having written a master's thesis on NGOs and intergovernmental environmental policy. Having previously voted green, social-democratic, and conservative, she turns to ethnonationalism in the early 2000s. She develops an anti-immigration and anti-Islam stance while engaging in far-right discourses on the Finnish Honnaforum and in frequent posts on Jussi Halla-aho's blog *Kirjoituksia uppoavasta lännestä* (Writings from the Sinking West). At this time, Halla-aho (PS party leader, 2017–2020) was neither yet a member nor a public supporter of the Finns Party but was driven by his resistance to what he calls "the Islamization of the Western world." Purra's posts at the

time are femonationalist (Farris, 2017) in that they combine general and personal accounts of fear of migrant men with claims that immigrant values and cultures threaten Finland's existing gender equality.

Emerging far-right social-media environments and mobilisations seem to affect Purra's entrance into politics to a much greater degree than for Listhaug (who is of the same age), and in contrast to the older generation of Kjærsgaard and Jensen. Purra enters organised politics in her 30s, a comparatively late development that interrupts her academic career before she completes her PhD. Through male-dominated radical-right ethnonationalist communities, she meets people who will later recruit her to the Finns Party—first through the party think-tank *Suomen Perusta* and subsequently in the party office. Purra later connects her turn towards radical-right nationalism to her personal adolescent experiences of sexual harassment by migrant men while growing up in Tampere:

When we were biking around in the city as adolescents we had problems with men from refugee-countries that spent their days in [a shopping mall]. The men harassed us sexually, followed us, and made different sounds—and we ran away. (Koivisto, 2021)

Here, the past radicalises Purra's persona rather than softens it. Radicalized by Halla-aho's beliefs and male-dominated far-right milieus, she moves towards a hardened politics of exclusion, showing little concern for mitigating an image of extremism.

4.3. Political Self-Branding

While narratives of origin and political awakening establish morally legible femininities that emerge from accounts of early political engagement, self-branding explains how they balance leadership styles with presented personal qualities in male-dominated milieus—authority with care, hardness with softness, and control with emotional recognisability.

Kjærsgaard frames her political apprenticeship in the FrP as formative, particularly in having taught her what to avoid when founding and leading the DF after the FrP's collapse in 1995. She describes the FrP's 1995 annual meeting as emblematic of an organisation lacking leadership, authority and discipline (Kjærsgaard, 2025, pp. 73–76). Kjærsgaard concludes that “DF had to be run in a completely different way,” with “top-down” leadership being a “necessity” (p. 139). Accordingly, “[i]n....DF, there was never any disagreement about anything whatsoever, neither on the political line nor on the role distribution” (p. 83). Her biographies highlight her ability “to cut through” and make party members “fall in line” (p. 142), and Margaret Thatcher is invoked as an inspiration. She describes herself as a “control freak,” involved “in even the smallest details,” including “how people in the group dressed” (Kjærsgaard & Carlsen, 2013, p. 43, 47, 2025, pp. 142–146). Yet, Kjærsgaard balances this authoritative image with a putative maternal, caring ethos. She accepts the nickname *Mama Pia* and describes the party as an extended family, both strategically and vocationally:

I have followed my fellow party members' lives closely. It is easier to bring people along if you also take an interest in their families, what children they have, or how they get through a divorce....But that wasn't the only reason I did it. I did it out of genuine interest. Because DF became my new family. (Kjærsgaard, 2025, p. 146)

Compared to Kjærsgaard, Jensen's populist appeal is more discreet, evident in her accounts of personal economic hardship, choice of dress, emphasis on humour, and her appeal to women voters. To broaden its voter base, Jensen argues, the party "must appeal to the entire population, not just half of it" (Jensen & Ringheim, 2021, pos. 1319). She invokes her great-grandmother Betzy's life of poverty and first-wave women's activism to formulate the demand "equal pay for equal work," despite it being at odds with her party's platform. She frames this as a response to the party's stigma of being a "men's party." Jensen's self-branding is, like her political career, marked by repeated internal party scandals, beginning with the notorious 1994 party congress, where "populist anti-immigration figures" and "Christian conservatives" clashed with the party's liberal wing (pos. 159). Retrospectively, Jensen aligns with the liberals against what she blatantly describes as xenophobic elements, aware of the implications this has for her leadership image.

Jensen's narrative emphasises organisational leadership over ideology, centring on inter-party relations and management of internal discord and scandals. She also highlights achievements in fiscal policy, electoral successes, and government collaboration with the Conservative Party. Her relationship with the conservative Prime Minister Erna Solberg is significant, but it relies on political pragmatism and careful balancing, as party loyalty, integrity, and ideological purity are weighed against influence and legitimacy. Like Glistrup is for Kjærsgaard, the incumbent party leader is crucial to Jensen's political career, as he handpicks her for everything from youth-party leader in Oslo, to televised debates, the Finance Committee and, eventually, party leadership. Yet their relationship deteriorates after she succeeds him. Jensen recounts this with surprise and dismay, attributing it to Hagen's inability to accept retirement. As with Kjærsgaard, Jensen recognises her predecessor as inspirational and motivational but presents herself as having surpassed him in leadership style and party development. She reframes her own leadership as "loyally supporting majority decisions" (Jensen & Ringheim, 2021, pos. 178) despite conflicting personal convictions and contrasts this to Hagen's more authoritative style. Like Kjærsgaard, Jensen maintains organizational control, keeping party members and successors close; yet, in contrast to Kjærsgaard's top-down leadership, Jensen explains how:

It doesn't work well to impose decisions on members from above. We have an almost statutory freedom of expression. I believe that any organisation will die over time if its members are not given the opportunity to express themselves in appropriate fora. (Jensen & Ringheim, 2021, pos. 1040–1041)

Jensen thus appears as soft but resilient, repeatedly presenting herself as "hands-on," media-savvy and composed under moments of pressure when "[p]ause is a foreign concept" (pos. 1082). Her balancing act combines firmness, composure, and organisational control with inclusiveness and traditionally feminine-coded mediation and pragmatic diplomacy.

Listhaug, by contrast, balances composure with confrontation. Her autobiography reinforces a long-standing ethos, juxtaposing a polemic public image—"no matter what I do, it creates attention" (Listhaug & Akerhaug, 2018, p. 7)—with a more conservative self-presentation, oriented towards private morals, motherhood, and religion. Her autobiography presents a politician apart—resilient, principled, and self-sacrificial. Compared to Jensen and Kjærsgaard, Listhaug relies less on organisational caretaking and more on personal qualities. Listhaug also emphasises a conservative family ideal and traditionalist values, far from those of the divorce-children of the 1970s.

Listhaug presents motherhood as a cathartic turning point, softening the image of the buttoned-up career politician. Similarly, low-brow cultural references and self-description as a “blond mother of young children from Sunnmøre” (Listhaug & Akerhaug, 2018, p. 75) portray Listhaug as an “ordinary woman.” In utilising the trope of the young blond girl stepping into politics, she echoes Jensen’s self-presentation. Hard work, dedication, and local grounding structure Listhaug’s account of her parliamentary induction—a dream-come-true that shapes her personally and politically. Yet she also presents herself as a natural talent, intuitive, and quick to master new issues. Role models such as Reagan and Thatcher position Listhaug politically, as does a brief mention of Jensen as “an important role model for all of us young ladies in the party” (p. 45). More central, however, is the lesser-known John Alvheim’s moral conservatism. The autobiography also speaks to conservative Christians, although Listhaug describes religious practices as representative of tradition rather than conviction (including in her seemingly off-hand references to her cross necklace featured on the cover). She positions herself as conventional rather than evangelical and reframes her opposition to same-sex marriage as an anti-establishment defence of clerical freedom rather than deriving from moral disapproval. This contrasts with Jensen’s more gay-friendly agenda and single, child-free lifestyle. An emotional account of miscarriage—described as “child loss”—underscores Listhaug’s “Christian humanity” and fatalistic belief “that everything happens for a reason” (p. 12). Even her greatest blunder—a hyperbolic comment on asylum policies that forces her to resign after only two months as Minister of Justice, Public Safety and Immigration—is deflected accordingly: “[I]f I hadn’t posted that Facebook post that made me resign, I would have lost out on some of the best years of my life so far” (p. 12). She thus reframes this would-be personal scandal as loyalty to the party and government, ideological authenticity, and ultimate personal gain.

Purra’s career is the least mature of the four, and perhaps the most fragile. When she becomes Finance Minister in 2023, Purra’s earlier comments on Hømforum resurface, including allusions to violence against immigrants. Purra initially denies connection to her online alias but later admits authorship, blaming her youth and inexperience while arguing that her political views have changed radically. In the documentary series *Hated Women* (Akimof & Rokosa, 2026–present), Purra reflects on her public image as “a stereotypical person who is always angry, in a bad mood, and grumpy” (Purra, cited in Akimof & Rokosa, 2026–present). She rejects this media-produced image and stresses that a certain distance is necessary for all leading politicians. “But that doesn’t mean that nothing affects or hurts,” she adds. She argues that she is punished more harshly than women from other parties, saying that if they receive threats:

We practically have a national state of emergency—but in my case, this does not happen. When public graffiti depicts me being killed—which is clearly a form of incitement to violence—it does not necessarily raise concern. When this came out publicly, it was entirely my own problem. (Purra, cited in Akimof & Rokosa, 2026–present)

Here Purra justifies her “cold” public persona as a necessary tool for dealing with external factors and criticism. Where Kjærsgaard materialises control, Jensen fosters relations, and Listhaug domesticates provocation, Purra is defensive. She justifies distance and detachment as attributes of leadership rather than (merely) balancing them with warmth and care.

5. Discussion

While the female leaders counteract their double bind, sometimes pre-emptively, through self-presentations that balance emotionality/unemotionality, softness/hardness, professionalism/passion, care/competence, etc., pariah femininity emerges when masculine-coded authority, transgression, rationality, etc., are incorporated into their ethos as charismatic or strategic assets that contrast with the gendered ideals attached to their political beliefs.

Kjærsgaard learns to inhabit visibility, rhetorical boldness, and charismatic disruption—in short, how to enact a pariah femininity—via Glistrup. Ahead of a campaign event in 1981, Glistrup advised her “to look good and keep her mouth shut” (Kjærsgaard & Carlsen, 2013, p. 57). Her retrospective account, however, presents herself as a natural public performer: “I liked, and still like, the spotlight,” “I am at my best when I speak straight from the heart,” and “I was quick on my feet and could talk my way out of most things” (Kjærsgaard, 2025, p. 55). She underscores a natural leadership ability to “speak in a way that people can understand,” as she asserts “[f]rom the day I entered politics, I have made it a virtue to meet the voters” (p. 57). Kjærsgaard admires similar characteristics in Glistrup, who she claims had “a care for the weak, for the outcasts. He...could speak with everyone” (Kjærsgaard & Carlsen, 2013, p. 54) and did not “look down on people” despite being a “rich and well-known lawyer.” Kjærsgaard converts her fascination with Glistrup’s masculine style into her own repertoire of transgression. Compared with the more transgressive trajectories of Kjærsgaard, Listhaug, and Purra, Jensen instead stresses responsibility, accountability, and institutional competence rather than rule-breaking or personal hardships.

Similarly, Jensen and Purra learn from Hagen and Halla-aho, respectively, as both male former party leaders function as role models and mentors for their female successors. Yet, while Jensen and Hagen differ in many aspects of their leadership, Purra and Halla-aho share a disposition towards coldness and rationality. Purra is repeatedly confronted with that image of herself in the media—an image she then counters by drawing upon her experiences as a woman and mother. Despite being the least experienced leader, Purra’s public persona is the hardest to read. The biography, *The Finnish Iron Lady* (2026)—an obvious allusion to Thatcher—testifies to this. The title reflects the widespread image of Purra as emotionally cold and politically hard. She advocates for restrictive immigration and integration policies, austerity, lower taxes, authoritarian law-and-order measures, and stricter order in schools. She promotes welfare chauvinism by presenting Islam as a threat to Finnish identity and gender equality to justify reduced benefits for migrants and non-citizens. She describes her politics as “rational” and “realist.” Purra also radically repositions the Finns Party to the socio-economic right, thereby estranging pro-welfare voters. In a 2023 interview (Vasantola, 2023), she states that “empathy is not suitable as a guiding principle for politics,” implicitly critiquing stereotypically emotion-driven, feminine political rhetoric among left-liberal “humanitarians.” Rather than invoking a populist “common sense,” Purra appeals to “hard facts,” pragmatism, and realism. This captures her in a double bind where she is deemed too cold and rational.

Purra’s style contrasts sharply with Listhaug’s impromptu speech and attention-grabbing stunts, but these differing styles are used to promote similar political measures. Listhaug repeatedly adopts an anti-elitist position, signals rural belonging, and constructs a maternal femininity that counterbalances her image as a confrontational and harsh politician. In contrast to Jensen, she portrays herself as more of an ideologue than an administrator. After assuming party leadership in 2021, Listhaug further softens both her own and the

party's image. Her personal "glow up" attracts media attention and receives questions of authenticity. Listhaug explains that although she has little interest in fashion, she felt forced to "pull herself together" (Listhaug in Tjeldflåt & Bringslid, 2025). Like Jensen before her, she also exposes the media's one-sided focus on female politicians' appearances. Today, both Listhaug's biographical narrative and visual self-presentation converge to offset her aggressive political style with a softer, morally legible conservative femininity.

In contrast to Kjærsgaard's controlled charisma, Jensen's managerial composure, and Purra's rationality and emotional distance, Listhaug converts provocation into political capital and turns personal vices into moral virtues. Jensen does not embrace transgression as charisma, like Kjærsgaard and Listhaug. Instead, she domesticates the masculinised, scandal-prone legacy of the Progress Party through organisational competence, pragmatism, and a striving for respectability. Listhaug is perhaps our clearest case of pariah femininity as self-branding: a female leader who turns masculine-coded political practices and uncontrollable emotions into charisma, while retroactively downplaying scandals and stigma. While Listhaug adopts a style of masculine affective provocation akin to that of earlier generations of male leaders, Purra works through masculine restraint, exhibiting hardness, rationalism, and emotional distance. This becomes both a political method and a source of stigma. Purra's narrative thus comes closest to Schippers' notion of pariah femininity as a female-marked subject whose authority is saturated with masculine-coded hardness and who is accordingly cast as both disturbing and punishable.

6. Conclusions

The four female leaders represent different generations and stages in the trajectories of PRR parties from marginal to legitimate political forces. While all navigate male-dominated political environments, they perform gender differently. Kjærsgaard performs hegemonic masculinity through top-down control, discipline, and an unquestionable chain of command, while emphasising hegemonic femininity in the private sphere as a traditional and emotional woman toughened by personal adversity. Jensen articulates gender more implicitly, domesticating the Progress Party's masculinised, scandal-prone legacy through softer registers of organisational competence, pragmatism and a striving for respectability rather than charismatic transgression. Listhaug and Purra frame their leadership through gendered threat narratives, casting themselves as defenders of Norwegian and Finnish women against migrant values and violence, and as leaders willing to tackle harsh realities, thereby invoking more masculine-coded traits. Purra pushes this even further, presenting masculine-coded coldness and pariah femininity as intrinsic to political leadership.

Since gender equality has been integrated, albeit in femonationalist terms, in Nordic PRR conceptions of national identity, female leaders have not had to justify their political careers as such. Instead, despite these parties' opposition to formal and informal quotas, female leaders are part of the institutionalisation and normalisation of PRR parties within Nordic political systems. Yet they still navigate the gendered double bind by combining presentations of strong, disciplined and rational leadership with narratives of care, nurturing qualities and the shared experiences of "ordinary" women, including motherhood and divorce.

Overall, our analysis reveals a generational shift in how PRR female leaders engage with hegemonic masculinity and femininity and the double bind this generates. Kjærsgaard and Jensen balance the two registers by drawing on masculine-coded authority while anchoring femininity as either maternal care or virtues of restraint, discipline, and compromise, respectively. The younger generation of PRR female leaders,

Listhaug and Purra, more openly foreground masculine-coded traits, thereby willingly risking stigmatisation due to pariah femininity. In this sense, they contribute to the (re-)masculinisation of PRR leadership, even as they perform it as women. Hegemonic masculinity here remains constitutive of PRR leadership but is detached from bodies recognised as male and is instead enacted by leaders who renegotiate the boundaries of hegemonic femininity in a manner that effectively ousts it from the register of PRR leadership.

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