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## #SecurityHasNoGender. Frontex, border security, and the politics of gender-neutrality

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To celebrate this year's International Women's Day (IWD), the European Border and Coast Guard Agency Frontex published a [short video](#) paying homage to women working at the EU's external borders. The video, accompanied by the hashtag #SecurityHasNoGender, is reminiscent of a trailer from an action movie. Frame after frame depicts predominantly female border guards in roles such as passport checking and fingerprinting. Each frame narrates a story about 'security', and particularly the border security practices as engaged by Frontex, as seemingly gender-neutral. In different frames, for example, Frontex states that its activities are part of "preventing terrorism" and "protecting Europe," which, it claims, "has no gender".

This recent attempt by Frontex to present itself as progressive, benevolent, impartial, and inclusive comes amidst both immense growth of the agency in terms of resources and mandate, and immense criticism of its conduct, including allegations

of human rights violations such as illegal push-backs, workplace harassment, fraud, and problematic relations with security industry lobbyists. Against this backdrop, it is vital to unpack and challenge the claims to gender-neutrality made by a powerful security actor, and thus the de-politicisation of both gender equality and border security. Because, of course, border security is not gender-neutral, but profoundly gendered and racialised.

Practices such as border checks, detentions, returns, profiling, interceptions, surveillance, and search and rescue operations often reproduce societal power relations and increase insecurities, particularly for women, minors, and those defined as 'irregular' or 'illegal'. , draconian immigration policies and repressive border management and security practices across Europe have been shown to increase the risk of gender-based violence as well as other forms of abuse against migrants. As many scholars have shown, border management and security rely on categorising different groups of migrants according to gendered and racialised binaries, e.g. normal/deviant, wanted/unwanted, deserving/undeserving, or as a risk/at risk. These dualisms reproduce colonial constructions of Europe's 'Other' as backward, victimised and potentially violent posing a threat to Europe's security, its welfare system, and its (gender) order.

Frontex has evolved from a platform coordinating member states' border policing activities into a powerful actor and the central institution in the EU border security architecture that is anticipated to develop into a fully-fledged border police force by 2027, with over 10,000 staff members and a budget of €5.6 billion. This expansion in both resources and power raises concerns over the increasing militarisation, externalisation, and privatisation of Europe's "violent borders". While Frontex is often represented as a managerial, technocratic entity without decision- and policy-making powers, it is a complex institution that is deeply politicised and politicising.



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The agency shapes and interprets EU strategies by practicing border security on the ground and by producing largely hegemonic knowledge on migration through its extensive risk analysis capabilities. Risk analysis – the supposedly ‘objective’ and ‘rational’ evaluation of developments conceived as increasing the risk of illegal or irregular border crossings into the EU – forms the basis not only of Frontex’s operations and practices, but for border security and migration policies at the national and EU level. Frontex hence plays an important role in defining migration as a (security) ‘problem’, ‘risk’, or ‘crisis’ that, in turn, makes certain solutions, policies, and emergency measures thinkable and desirable, whilst foreclosing others.

Frontex’s representation of security as gender-neutral obscures how gendered and racialised inequalities and insecurities are inscribed in and through its security practices. Moreover, its co-optation of the term gender to legitimise its version of border policing, highlights how the deployment of gender can become “[subject to forces intent on removing any commitment to the political goals of feminism](#)”. The institutionalisation of such depoliticised conceptualisations of security serve to legitimate harmful and potentially violent border practices that increase insecurities for those who undertake dangerous and often deadly journeys to Europe, yet are not considered relevant in security analyses. The way Frontex conceptualises security – as technical, gender-neutral etc., – is thus consequential for how border and migration issues are handled. The strategic PR decision to release this video on IWD therefore reveals much about how the agency understands and instrumentalises gender.

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Gender is represented in the video as being synonymous with 'women', as demonstrated by the female border guards that the video centres and profiles. Frontex thus deploys gender in a simplistic, reductionist, and reifying way, with white-coded female border guards used as a proxy to profile the agency as progressive, such that women are represented in security practices, lending an inclusive and supposedly 'human' face to border policing. Yet, the women depicted wear border security/police uniforms, thus appearing 'professional' and 'tough', whilst fighting threats like crime and terrorism that the video directly associates with migration. This is accompanied by a soundtrack that smacks of action-packed, testosterone-filled, and gun-ho fervour, evoking a powerful combination of militarism, myths around protection, and coloniality.

The video therefore conjures up gendered and racialised representations of Frontex and border guards as heroic, white protectors. This reproduces the dichotomies of victim/saviour and rational/irrational, which strongly links to postcolonial constructions of the 'Other' as victimised and/or potentially dangerous in contrast to the enlightened, progressive, and disciplined Europe.

In the context of allegations of unlawful conduct during enormous institutional growth, it is evident from this video that security agencies like Frontex are deploying gender-neutrality – and utilising the subject of the female border guard – to portray themselves, their practices, and the concept of 'security' as benevolent. This extends the notion of neutrality to legitimise their practices and EU's continuous investment in the agency as an overall objective and rational response to the alleged risks and threats posed by migrants. The politics of invoking security as gender-less thus point to the gendered-ness of border 'protection' and the actors engaged in it. On the basis of such self-other representations, powerful normative claims are being made by Frontex about who is to be secured from what, by whom, and through what measures.

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*The views, thoughts and opinions expressed in this blog post are those of the author(s) only, and do not necessarily reflect LSE's or those of the LSE Centre for Women, Peace and Security.*

Photo by [Saj Shafique](#) on [Unsplash](#)

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Columba Achilleos-Sarll is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the University of Vienna and an affiliated Visiting Research Fellow at the Austrian Institute for International Affairs. She is also a final year ESRC PhD candidate at the University of Warwick. Her primary research examines the United Nation's Security Council's 'Women, Peace and Security' (WPS) agenda, and focuses on the UK's implementation and institutionalisation of the agenda and the role of networked civil society. Beyond this, she is working on a project on border security and migration using feminist and postcolonial approaches to security studies.



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