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“In my dreams, gender disappears”. Social perceptions of gender identity and Legal Recognition in Spain

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Abstract

This study draws on qualitative fieldwork conducted in Spain which investigates contemporary opposition to gender equality and anti-gender backlash -as part of the Horizon Europe *PushBackLash* project GA No. 101061687-. We conducted four focus groups to explore how citizens understand gender identity, legal self-identification, and the implications of the recent Spanish Gender Recognition Law. These understandings were also linked by participants to their broader perceptions of democracy and the place of such rights within democratic societies. Using a stratified purposive sampling strategy, participants (N=22) were selected to ensure diverse profiles by age, education, gender, and political orientation. Sessions were moderated face-to-face following a social constructionist approach, enabling participants to co-construct their positions on topics such as self-determination, legal safeguards, biological sex, and the prospect of a future beyond rigid gender labels. Reflexive Thematic Analysis combined with lexical-metric tools captured collective meaning-making. Discussions revealed strong support for gender self-identification as a right, but also concerns about legal loopholes, perceived risks of misuse, and unresolved tensions between self-determined gender and biological sex. While some envisioned a future beyond gender labels, others stressed persistent stereotypes, normative gaps, and the role of education in shaping social acceptance.

Keywords: backlash; gender identity law; legal safeguards; self-identification rights.