

8 No Country for Men

Negotiating Men's Rights Activism in Digital Spaces

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Introduction

Recently there have been intense debates in masculinity studies about transformations in men's behaviour and their impact on gender relations. A significant part of these debates is dedicated to trying to understand how white heterosexual masculinities are produced and buttressed in internet settings, as demonstrated by the increasing amount of knowledge about the heterogeneous nature of the so-called manosphere, a loose confederacy of online communities, focusing on issues concerning men and masculinity (Schmitz & Kazyak, 2016; Nagle, 2017; Marwick & Caplan, 2018; Sugiura, 2021). Moreover, most of the research on this phenomenon focuses on the US context, and in rare cases on other anglophone realities (such as Australia and Canada), while in Italy this field of studies is only starting to emerge and is limited to a few works, like Farci and Righetti (2019), Vingelli (2019), Cannito and Mercuri (2021), and Dordoni and Magaraggia (2021).

This chapter attempts to investigate Italian men's rights activists (MRAs) on the internet and their connection with the recent emergence of the manosphere. To do so, the research analyses the content of two of the most prominent Facebook pages dedicated to men's rights issues, *Diritti Maschili – Equità e Umanità* (Men's Rights – Equity and Humanity) and *Antisessismo* (Antisexism). These groups were chosen for several reasons. First, even though their participants often perpetuate the same antifeminism rhetoric adopted by more conservative men's rights activism (MRA) movements, their anti-sexist discourses seem to differ from the 'heteropaternalism' of fathers' rights groups and from the anti-woman rhetoric and explicit misogyny of groups like Incels (Involuntary Celibates) or 'Red Pillers' (taking its name from the 1999 film *The Matrix*, the Red Pill refers to men awakening to the reality of male subjugation by women under feminism). Second, as much as they appear thematically connected, there are differences of opinion and beliefs within the groups themselves and some debates cannot be so simply reduced to traditional men's rights issues. Third, although it is not possible to prove that they are representative of the entire MRA population, these pages seem to indicate the emergence of a new strand of moderate men's rights' activists, as demonstrated by *Ti prego Karen sono anche i miei*

ruoli di genere (Please Karen they are also my gender roles) (www.facebook.com/groups/595884441325918), which will be discussed in the conclusion.

Employing the principles of a critical discursive psychological approach (Edley, 2001; Wetherell & Edley, 1999), the chapter investigates the discursive constructions of MRA in the digital environment and identifies a range of linguistic resources, called *interpretative repertoires*, that members can utilise in the course of their everyday interactions on these pages. When people talk (or think) about things, their conversations are usually made up of a patchwork of quotations, in terms of particular images, metaphors, or figures of speech, that produce some highly regular patterns of talk. So, interpretative repertoires turn out to be “part and parcel of any community’s common sense, providing a basis for shared social understanding” (Edley, 2001, p. 198). Three key interpretative repertoires employed by Facebook users are used to discuss and question men’s issues within these groups: the nice guy discourse, the liberationist rhetoric, and the softening of masculinity. As the data demonstrates, these interpretative repertoires are not always mutually exclusive nor belong to a specific page because many participants can use multiple strategies in a single post or comment.

It is vital not to underestimate how social media platforms are instrumental in the rise of close-knit MRA communities that polarise around topics of shared concern (Bruns, 2019). According to Massanari (2015), the technological affordances of online platforms have facilitated the connections between different groups, based on similar interests, content, and shared users. Even if they give the appearance of being distinct, these groups authorise and validate one another, conferring on certain movements an outsized presence, which is often unreflective of or disproportionate to the real size of the community in question. However, this chapter tries to look at this phenomenon from a different perspective. Exploring how members can use different, and often conflicting, interpretative repertoires to make sense of their investment in anti-sexist, antifeminist, and ‘pro male’ groups, this work aims at demonstrating how difficult it is to define the contemporary MRA movement in terms of a clearly outlined worldview. Although the MRA is now considered an identity category in popular debates, it is possible to distinguish activists who are squarely antifeminist from those who are really worried about men’s issues. Focusing on such heterogeneity could be a crucial first step in bridging the divide between the men’s rights movement and feminism, which are still seen as opposing sides in the fight for gender equality.

The Nice Guy Discourse

In recent years, an increasing proportion of research has provided important insights into how the architecture of online platforms has allowed the emergence of a new form of antifeminism called *masculinism* (Nicholas & Agius, 2017; Ging, 2017). Masculinism asserts that since men are in crisis and

suffering because of women in general and feminists in particular, the solution to their problems involves curbing the influence of feminism and revalorising masculinity (Blais & Dupuis-Déri, 2012). Rather than acknowledging the neoliberal economic roots of their changing circumstances, the dominant response of these men has been to construct a masculinity-in-crisis narrative cast in specifically gendered terms of white male disenfranchisement (Kimmel, 2017). Even though the popular discourse of the crisis of masculinity can be considered a cliché, a *catch-all* container affecting contemporary representations of men in Western popular culture since the 1980s (Beynon, 2001), recently it has become notably attractive to new generations of young men. As Gotell and Dutton's (2016) analysis suggests, the emergence of sexual violence as a new focus of MRA can be viewed as part of a deliberate strategy to mobilise young men and exploit their "anxieties about shifting consent standards and changing sexual and gender norms" (p. 76). If activists in more traditional men's rights were "typically in their forties and fifties, often divorced or separated, and nearly always heterosexual" (Flood, 2004, p. 263), now it is young men who are being depicted as being feminism's principal victims.

The appeal to young men's concerns is further complicated because many of those who engage in men's online communities express considerable ambivalence towards predominant standards of masculinity. Let's for example consider the Facebook page *Diritti Maschili – Equità ed umanità* (Men's Rights – Equity and Humanity). *Diritti Maschili* advocates for "gender equality" and "human relationships based on empathy and compassion", and says no to "racism, sexism, violence and gender discrimination in the legal system" (www.facebook.com/dirittimaschili/). It is worth noting that many of the arguments and themes that run as a common thread through this page appeal to a so-called *nice guy* rhetoric. Nice guys are those young people who consider themselves marginalised, left out of the standard dynamics of heterosexual conquest, not tough enough to be one of the *macho* men that, according to them, girls should be more attracted to. An analysis of the comments reveals that Facebook members employ *nice guy* as an interpretative repertoire to position themselves in relation to conventional notions of the masculine. On the one hand, *nice guy* discourse is used to articulate the problematic masculinities of other men, portraying them as embodying negative stereotypes associated with excessive sexual prowess. On the other hand, it allows them to blend the refusal of perceived expectations regarding hegemonic masculinity with a more hegemonically congruent discomfort with women themselves (Kendall, 2002).

Nice guys often express their displacement away from the inexplicable realities of heterosexual relations, creating the image of a weak, oppressed, and self-destructive man. Narratives concerning this wounded masculinity support Savran's theory (1998) of the centrality of masochism in contemporary American white masculinity. Savran refers to the masochist as

a man who takes narcissistic delight in playing the role of victim, taking up a feminised position and celebrating the stereotypes of social marginalisation. Victimisation thus becomes a ruse by which men “remasculinize themselves in the wake of their feminizing decentering” (Robinson, 2000, p. 197). This process of remasculinisation is particularly evident in the Incel obsession with the figure of Chad, a caricaturised version of popular representations of the (Westernised) alpha male, alongside the denigration of women, presented as agentless in their desire to have sex with Chad, and other subordinated or marginalised masculinities (simp, soy-boy, cuck, etc.). Incel ideology stresses an exclusive heteronormative environment, whereby sexual relationships with women are exalted as the primary marker of an idealised masculinity. So, although Incels position themselves as beta-males against hegemonic masculine norms, they end up reasserting their sense of aggrieved entitlement to conventional markers of male success (which they are unable to access).

In addition to operating within the rhetoric of masculinity in crisis, the recent *nice guy* discourse can be considered a variation of the undersexed *net geek* trope that has existed for decades since the 1980s. Most of the research on nerds and geeks has emphasised how the connection with technology helps to bolster the ‘emasculatation’ idea. Nerds and geeks are usually coded as physically weak, unattractive, poorly dressed boys who are not man enough to get a flesh and blood relationship, so they turn to machines to fulfil their needs. In their view, the internet represents a safe space where they can have control, where they are successful, and where they can retreat when the off-line world rejects them. For example, Kendall’s study (2002) demonstrates how these spaces are both created and maintained through the use of intellectualism, aggressive displays of technical self-confidence, and an adversarial orientation towards their interlocutors that tends to discourage them from participating (Herring, 2000). Just as significantly, members of online MRA communities tend to embrace a confrontational model of interaction, reminiscent of hypermasculine expressions often found in subcultural trolling behaviours. In certain cases, discursive practices adopted by participants in the online discussions seem driven by the need to mock a particular style of social media sentimentality that has become so central to contemporary liberal identity politics (Nagle, 2017). Indeed, a lot of the content circulating within online MRA communities is aimed at deriding the feminists or insulting the so-called social justice warriors. This is especially so when such content takes the form of easy to disseminate images, clips, screenshots, or internet memes used by these groups to cultivate their personal resistance to feminism (Farci & Righetti, 2019). Considering the substantive knowledge gap about what feminism is/was among MRA groups, it is easy for activists to extract excerpts from broader discourse, take them out of their context, present them as the whole ideology of feminism, and label them as nothing less than misandry. Every statement is immediately turned into a grotesque exaggeration and real people are reduced to fictionalised objects.

The ‘memeification of feminism’ reveals the mask of a troll residing behind the *nice guy* discourse (Phillips, 2016).

Not only does the *nice guy* discourse appear imbricated in the same nihilistic cynicism, detached humour, and public humiliation that constitute trolling behaviours, it also, and simultaneously, mimics what Banet-Weiser (2018) calls the ‘sentimental earnestness’ of popular feminism. Sentimental earnestness is a specific mode of address exploited in many recent feminist campaigns that present girls and women as being ‘in crisis’ – a crisis due to insecurity or a lack of self-confidence, among other things. MRAs mirror the same logic but in a way that distorts and transforms the target of empowerment so that it is men who are discriminated against and in need of recuperation and reparation. For example, the MRA initiative *SheForHe* responds to the success of *HeForShe*, a global campaign launched in September 2014 by UN Women’s solidarity movement for gender equality with the aim to engage men and boys in removing the social and cultural barriers that prevent women and girls from achieving their potential, and thus in positively reshaping society together. *SheForHe* includes a number of counterclaims that invite women “to abandon the models, borrowed directly or indirectly from old stereotypes and new ideologies, that degrade and penalise men, especially those who do not reach certain artificial and toxic standards (social, economic, physical, etc.)” (www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.1379635742154498&type=3). Apparently, the *nice guy* discourse supports many of the same things that feminists want, including acceptance of alternative masculinities, and rejects all the poisonous practices associated with the term ‘toxic masculinity’. However, whereas feminists refuse these roles because they serve to maintain a system of power that benefits men, men’s rights activists deny them because they give women power over them (Clatterbaugh, 1997). Similar to Incels, many young MRAs have unrealistic perceptions of women’s real status. They believe that women have all the power in the romantic sphere, especially the privilege to compare and choose (Kimmel, 2008) and usually find *bad boys* – men who possess confidence and hard-headedness and are inclined to take risks – more appealing. So, even though they are told they can be gentle, vulnerable, less successful, men feel pressured to be strong, aggressive, and bold because of women. It is women who are responsible for keeping the male subject in those traditional gender roles (as providers, protectors, and competitors) that are lethal to him. Ultimately, the *nice guy* discourse circulating on pages like *Diritti Maschili* works as a defensive posture against perceived female power. Such a posture is particularly appealing to mostly younger men who feel disempowered by the shift in gender roles during recent decades.

The Liberationist Rhetoric

Representations of the *nice guy* who seeks to live up to male gender expectations abound in the MRA groups. However, if many members of the

men's rights movement employ such interpretative repertoires to denounce the reality of their allegedly powerlessness, others use the *nice guy* discourse to adopt a more progressive liberationist rhetoric. Such liberationist rhetoric is intertwined with the 'socialisation argument' that formed the basis of the 1970s male liberation movement. Men's liberation movements were driven by a basic principle: that men are as hurt by gender roles as women and, although they may have more institutional power, they are still imprisoned by their aggression or emotional constraint, or both (Pleck & Sawyer, 1974). So, men's liberation called for men to free themselves of all the negative constraints that limited their ability to be human. Of course, the idea that gender is a social role sounds progressive, because it offers a break from any biological essentialism which assumes men to be naturally rough, tough, and sexually aggressive, and women to be passive, caring, and good. However, it can also be regressive. First, as Whitehead (2002) states, considering men as a passive recipient of socialisation processes, it fails to "develop a theory of masculinity as identity work, beyond, that is, the notion of men learning gender roles scripts appropriate to our culture" (pp. 22–23). So, although it apparently refutes the idea of a universal masculine essence, it reifies the concept of men as a category defined by a cross-cultural and transhistorical experience (Petersen, 1998). Second, by assuming the existence of a consistent and uniform set of social expectations that are reciprocal to men and women, men's liberation discourse underplays social inequality and power (Connell, 1995). The socialisation argument not only depoliticised sexism, but it ignored the power imbalance between men and women (Segal, 1990).

An example of the ambivalence of the liberationist rhetoric that usually underpins MRA discourses is found in *Antisessismo*, a prominent MRA page with over 45,000 followers. *Antisessismo* "adheres to the idea that patriarchy never existed, and that societies [...] came into being as 'bisexist', i.e. they oppressed men and women" (www.facebook.com/Antisessismo). Most of the public posts shared on pages like *Antisessismo* address news stories and research findings regarding male problems linked to many of the issues coming out of men's liberation: from men's higher suicide and mortality rate to greater involvement in crime, alcohol, and drugs, from boys' crisis in education and mental health issues to frustrations and concerns with fatherhood and loss of status within families (Ashe, 2011). Many MRA groups denounce the areas of public policy in which male subjects can be disadvantaged as men (Coston & Kimmel, 2012). Most of these complaints are a sort of recitation, supported by a few anecdotes, and an occasional series of empirical inversions (Kimmel, 2017). They claim that there is 'gender symmetry' in domestic violence, or that men are more discriminated against in their efforts to balance work and family life, or that women enjoy a greater range of choice regarding the conduct of their sexual life. However, in other cases, their arguments are guided by truly egalitarian goals of fairness, and not everything they discuss lacks merit, like men's higher suicide rates, job-related casualties, or gender disparities in sentencing. Men's

rights activists argue that the oppression of men cannot be reduced to the disciplinary idea of men's emotional incapacity – summarised in statements like 'boys don't cry' or 'don't be a sissy', because it also involves material effects of men's institutional positioning through the division of labour in employment, in the family, and as citizens (New, 2001). Therefore, if men benefit from the gender order, there are aspects in which the current gender order does not meet their human needs and constitutes a form of systematic mistreatment. So, "the fact that men are told they are superior and deserving of privilege does not cancel out the effect of this mistreatment, which we only fail to see as oppressive because of the lack of an obvious agent or beneficiary" (New, 2001, p. 744).

Nevertheless, although MRAs recognise how men's oppression is produced by gender order, for them oppression results in a purely rhetorical category that, in Messner's view (1998), led to a falsely symmetrical call for women's and men's liberation from oppressive sex roles which ignored the structure of gender relations. Consequently, according to them, men are equally oppressed compared to women because, as Farrell (1993) argues, each sex has always been the other's slave in different ways. Situating their belief system in a social vacuum that fails to consider intersecting social dynamics, MRAs construct an over-simplified cultural model of the world that avoids any analysis of structural inequalities in favour of simplistic notions of equality that reinforce the liberal language of individual 'choice' and ignores the material and social constraints of race, class, and gender hierarchies that shape personal choices. As Nicholas and Agius (2017) explain, many MRAs seem to be resistant "to the idea that individuals are shaped by anything bigger than themselves" (p. 46), and that social structures interact dynamically in constituting privileged social groups and conditioning people's life chances. As a result, while MRAs acknowledge that gender inequality operates at the individual level, they often ignore how it is also a result of power relations that structure how societies are organised, laws are set, economies function, and ideologies are shaped. They consider power as a resource possessed by certain individuals that is primarily expressed in individual and intentional acts of domination over others. Such voluntarist understanding of power limits their ability to realise how privilege is reproduced through structurally conditioned actions and interactions, which may be conscious as well as unconscious and not always require deliberately misogynistic intention.

This positioning demonstrates why men's rights discourse that operates on a self-proclaimed platform of egalitarianism can be problematic. Even though it tends to appropriate and reconstruct the language typically associated with feminism that is designed to be non-discriminatory, it comes to discredit any feminist analysis of structural and political inequalities between sexes as unnecessary and unreasonable. Indeed, while on the surface MRA discourses advocate for gender equality, further inspection reveals that they encourage divisive gender relations and derision of feminist

perspectives (Menzies, 2008). MRA groups believe that when gender-specific perspectives are aired, in public opinion they become a zero-sum game, so that any attention paid to female issues diminishes male-specific problems. Therefore, most of what constitutes men's rights activism is trotting out a series of counteraccusations that serve "to pit men against women in arguments of which gender suffers more oppression" (Schmitz & Kazyak, 2016, p. 11) and question any feminist efforts to address issues that are experienced by women in distinctive and unique ways. For example, every time antifeminist men's and father's groups call for gender-blind approaches to violence, they essentially demand that "we become blind to women's particular experience of violence" (Dragiewicz, 2011, p. 22).

This perspective is further complicated by the fact that many of these groups neither are explicitly hostile to feminism nor deny the existence of specific discriminations against women; however, they strongly reject feminism as a label and political project. According to Jordan (2016), this stance can be seen as a consequence of the complexification of backlash caused by the prominence of postfeminist ideas. Postfeminism narratives create a context conducive to a gentler, moderate men's rights strategy that tends to selectively incorporate those elements of feminist narrative that confirm the 'liberal equalism' that characterises their liberationistic rhetoric, while disparaging other feminist argument as irrelevant relics of the past (Messner, 2016). In fact, many activists tend to distinguish between a 'reasonable' feminism of equality and an extreme feminism that 'has gone too far'. As Edley and Wetherell (2001) explain, this dual construction of feminism allows MRAs to position themselves as modern-day men who are supportive of women 'simply' wanting equality but who, at the same time, look with fierce disdain at the 'illogical' claims of the unfeminine feminists and extreme political activists. This moving backwards and forwards across these two positions allows these men to be both pro and anti, in favour and against feminist principles. It is here that the rhetorical strength of the liberationist repertoire becomes apparent. The notion that men and women are equal underneath or prior to their gender socialisation "comes to be understood as women taking their place alongside men in an economic, social and political battle of each against all" (Edley & Wetherell, 2001, p. 454). In such individualistic scenarios, programmes of affirmative actions for women get resisted and rejected as unfair or discriminatory against men. If this scenario is historically linked with right-wing conservatism, what is less obvious is the way that is assumed by men's groups claiming to be progressive.

The Softening of Masculinity

Another recurrent interpretative repertoire circulating within MRA communities can be called the 'softening of masculinity', and it refers to the appropriation of apparently contradictory elements of identities typically associated with various marginalised and subordinated masculinities.

Deviating from positions once associated with hegemonic standards of male behaviour, young straight men now exhibit more *sensitive* forms of masculinity that reject sexism, stoicism, and compulsory heterosexuality implicit in orthodox masculinities (Anderson, 2011). This is indeed what happens in online MRA communities, where men have no problems displaying supposedly ‘unmasculine’ emotions such as pain, weakness, vulnerability, and exhaustion without fear of being homosexualised by their peers. The decreasing of homophobia helps to explain why groups like *Antisessismo* are populated by hetero, gay, or bisexual men who claim to be anticonservative, against any sexual prejudice, and supportive of the rights of the LGBTQ+ community but, at the same time, fiercely antifeminist. As Ging’s research (2017) confirms, the circulation of queer discourses within the manosphere serves as a stark demonstration of “how reduced homophobia can happily coexist with extreme expressions of misogyny and racism” (p. 15). Changes in the expression of masculinity characterised by a visible softening do not axiomatically entail a genuine engagement in the erosion of inequalities (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). This process may be better explained as a consequence of what John Mercer describes as ‘saturated masculinity’ (2017), in which there are such a multitude of differing and sometimes contradictory or competing representations of masculinities that the meaning of masculinity becomes ever more elastic and fluid. In this contemporary setting, the appropriation of some traditionally feminine appearance-related practices and characteristics that are often also stereotypically associated with gay men is likely to be a repackaging of forms of domination (Ingram & Waller, 2014; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), a masquerade behind which men not only maintain their sexual and cultural dominance but also obscure this process as it is happening (Demetriou, 2001).

The opportunity to display behaviours that were once stigmatised as gay or feminine is enhanced by the turn towards a cultural politics of emotion that has recently emerged in conjunction with digital culture and social media. The spread of fake news, clickbait, trolls and bots, polarisation, post-truth, echo chambers, and right-wing extremism has forced scholars, policymakers, and journalists to consider how forms of social media are first and foremost emotional media (Tettegah, 2016); they rely on intense statements of personal feelings, and they thrive on the circulation of affect. As Dean notes (2010), the ‘weaponization of affect’ is central to communicative capitalism in social media. The architecture of the information economy is based on emotional appeal. It relies on the marking, adding, forwarding, and circulating of messages, not because doing so *means* something but simply to capture, exploit, and catalyse users’ feelings. In this vein, the content is less important; what matters is its mobility and capacity to circulate and produce affective encounters with each other, with each other’s writing, with things, places, and events brought to our attention through the broader media ecosystem. As both a precognitive force and a contingent sense of connection and relation, affective encounters shape our networked

exchanges and become ‘registered in bodies’ as they pass from one state to another. Following this line of thinking, the same object – be it a smart device, an app, an animated GIF, a hardcore porn clip, or a social media update – can result in virtually any kind of an affective encounter (Paasonen, 2021). Ahmed (2004) considers such affective encounters as a crucial part of our identity production. Although everyday language of emotion is based on the presumption of interiority, in her reading, emotions are not simply something ‘I’ or ‘we’ have. Rather, emotions are intentional in the sense that they are *about* something: “we do not love and hate because objects are good or bad, but rather because they seem ‘beneficial’ or ‘harmful’” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 5). Consequently, they involve a direction or orientation towards objects: “the attribution of feeling to an object (I feel afraid because you are fearsome) is an effect of the encounter, which moves the subject away from the object” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 8). Emotions do not positively inhabit anybody or anything, meaning that they are an effect of the circulation between objects and signs. Their circulation shapes the ‘surfaces’ of individual and collective bodies: “collectives get constructed as *being* through *feeling*” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 97). In other words, emotions produce a differentiation between *us* and *them*, whereby they *are* constituted as the cause of *our* feelings. Emotions glue communities together, but at the same time, they position the ‘other’ on the outside.

The circulation of affect in digital media is crucial to understanding the shift in men’s rights activism towards a new politics of emotion and individualism. Salter (2016), in his study of Australian antifeminism, describes how traditional discourses of rights has become replaced by a less contestable and more supplicatory language of needs that serves to promote a sympathetic response to complainants in the absence of an assessment of the merit of their claims. As Allan (2016) confirms, such language is less about the realness of their claims and more about feelings of pain and anger that motivate these claims. In fact, many assumptions of the men’s rights movement are indisputable precisely because they do not need to prove “their affectively charged discourses” (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 7) to be true: emotions cannot be denied; one can only experience them. Discourses around subjective feelings are constantly reproduced in many MRA groups (De Boise, 2017). It is common, indeed, even on moderate pages that embrace a more egalitarian stance, to find comments of users invoking and justifying their rage, anger, frustration, anxiety, and fear against feminists. “The process is not ‘irrational’ in the sense that people act impulsively ‘without thinking’. Rather, specific viewpoints, based on a certain pre-understanding of a society in which men’s privilege is being seemingly eroded, are collectively reinforced through the circulation of affect” (De Boise, 2017, p. 8).

In other cases, the mobilisation of the affect seems to be driven by an opposite intent, specifically that of offering an emotional and pleasurable engagement with factual claims. This is clearly evidenced in the emerging trend of ‘fact signalling’: the strategic and performative invocation of

epistemic and moral authority which may then be weaponised against the enemy. Such an approach usually revolves around charismatic influencers and specific pages claiming their place as standard-bearers of facts and reason, logic and empiricism, against the perceived irrationality of social justice warriors and the sentimentality and absurd priorities of Western liberal politics (Nagle, 2017). Yet, as Hong (2020) highlights, this valorisation of ‘facts over feelings’ is delivered not through a substantive engagement with factual claims using any kind of rigorous methodology, but as a confident and aggressive stance the repetition of which breeds a feeling of being on the right side. So, the affective appeal to ‘facts’ provides a relentless daily flow of para-social experiences through which a particular kind of adversarial, self-confident, and morally and intellectually superior masculinised subjectivity may be cultivated. Such agonistic contestations designed to ‘destroy’ the opposing side is particularly evident in the huge use of *Gish galloping*, a debating/rhetorical technique of burying your opponent under a mountain of different half-truths, weak arguments, logical fallacies or outright lies: the opponent is forced to either laboriously unpack their flaws one by one or forego contesting the house of cards upon which bolder claims are now being made.

In a lot of ways, the affective politics of digital media challenges the idea of men as emotionally inarticulate. The issue, then, is not whether men feel emotions, but whether or not they display or act on some emotions and not others, and with what consequences. In this sense, we could say that MRA communities provide a space of ‘disciplinary homosocial intimacy’ (Kanai, 2019), where men can pick, choose, and customise ideas that promise a desirable sameness – a relatability – with other men who share a similar socio-cultural, gendered, and classed position (Dignam & Rohlinger, 2019). Following Hochschild (1983), this space offers a set of feeling rules that guide emotional work between men by establishing the sense of entitlement or obligation that regulates their affective exchange. These feeling rules provide techniques of ‘gender policing’ through which men may govern themselves and articulate a collective affective attachment to specific standards of masculinity.

Conclusions

While MRA movements are often thought to be a coherent object with a cohesive set of beliefs, there are contradictory ideas about what contemporary men’s rights activism is or should be. The broad assumptions about MRA misogyny and violence do not fully encapsulate differences of opinion within the movement. First, even within the contemporary MRA movement there appear to be some divisions, or at least degrees of extremism, and some pages are more moderated than others. The policy of *Antisessismo*, for example, “prohibits homophobic, misandric, misogynistic, racist, ableist, slutshaming or virginshaming comments [...] Furthermore, it is not allowed

to attack an entire gender and is therefore forbidden to criticise men or women” (www.facebook.com/Antisessismo/about). *Ti prego Karen sono anche i miei ruoli di genere* (Please Karen they are also my gender roles), a small but very dynamic MRA group founded in June 2020, specify that they are not a Red Pill group: “We do not pick on women here, nor do we pick on the feminine” (www.facebook.com/groups/595884441325918/about). Obviously, none of these groups are pro-feminist. On the contrary, most of their members are responsible for the spread of misinformation about feminism and downplay the existence of men’s institutionalised power. Moreover, there are members of the men’s rights movement who fundamentally distrust and dislike women, and believe that feminism is an ideology of hate akin to Nazism, or that false rape accusations against men have reached epidemic proportions. That said, it is inaccurate to ignore how a good proportion of MRA arguments revolve around the rejection of patriarchal notions of gender essentialism. When MRAs criticise the assumption that male rape victims are not seen as real victims because it is unlikely that a teenage boy would not want sex with an older, more experienced woman, what they are really doing is fighting against the gender-essentialist notion of male hypersexuality. Liberationist discourses reject traditional gender ideology, which assumes men to be naturally rough, tough, and sexually aggressive, and women to be passive, caring, and good. These are the attitudes that result from gender essentialism, and these are exactly the attitudes that feminists have been battling against for decades. It goes without saying that any liberationist discourse also has its ugly side. As highlighted, focusing their attention on how men are disadvantaged by gender role stereotypes, MRA groups may provide fuel for male backlash against feminism under the guise of male suffering. That said, it is vital to acknowledge that “any discrimination against men may ultimately result in harm to women” (Levit, 2008, p. 1052). For example, the disparate treatment of the sexes in the case of parental leave harms both men and women. By employers giving women more generous parenting leave, men are precluded from and women are locked into parenting roles. Both genders are damaged because the underlying stereotypes limit their choices. It is unquestionable that women, on the whole, are disadvantaged much more seriously and persistently than men. At the same time, “focusing on comparing the disadvantages of men and women reinforces on a theoretical level what society says on a social level: suck it up. Be tough. You are male” (Levit, 2008, p. 1080). As Segal (1990) points out, it is playing masculinity’s own game to suggest that men do not experience fear, trauma, and bodily shattering, much like women. Men enjoy social power and many forms of privilege by virtue of being male: “But the way we have set up that world of power causes them pain, isolation, and alienation” (Kaufman, 1994, p. 142).

In this context, the continuous appeals to male suffering, as exemplified within MRA groups, may be considered something different than a mere change in styles of masculinity (Messner, 1993). If ‘feeling at ease’

is the quintessential aspect of a masculine stance, men who are nervous and express their emotional discomfort represent a potential break from standard patriarchal gender ideology (Reeser & Gottzén, 2018). Following Butler's suggestion that masculinity is a performance in the theatrical sense (1990), in the MRA communities we can find performances that highlight and call attention to the construction of masculinity rather than concealing it. In many cases such online groups attract members who have witnessed or experienced some kind of discomfort resulting from the pressures exerted on them by hegemonic masculinity – the pressure to not appear weak or effeminate, the pressure to be strong, to be a leader. Unbeknownst to them, they have likely spent more time pondering gender theory than have most other men.

In that sense, considering the *nice guy* discourse as nothing less than a strategic call for victimhood may be counterproductive. As Gotell and Dutton (2016) point out, it is important to adopt a gender-inclusive view of victimisation to prevent moderate men's rights activists from being co-opted by conservative groups that would misuse their arguments in order to maintain the status quo. This approach necessitates viewing victimisation as less of a political or epistemological stance and more of an evidential one: even though men are in general more privileged than women, there are some arenas in which they are disadvantaged by stereotypic notions of maleness and suffer as a result of it. As hooks (1984) argues, "While it in no way diminishes the seriousness of male abuse and oppression of women, or negates male responsibility for exploitative actions, the pain men experience can serve as a catalyst calling attention to the need for change" (p. 73). Moderate men's rights activists, because of their personal involvement with painful consequences of sexism in their lives, can offer a useful framework to understand how men are harmed by gender stereotypes. If they were to replace their misguided anger at women with a more constructive analytical framework through which to address these issues and start to advocate for their rights without being dependent on bashing feminism, they could become useful feminist allies (Allain, 2015).

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