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TROUBLING COALITIONS. SOME REMARKS ON THE (HARDLY AUDIBLE) VOICE OF PRO-EQUALITY MEN'S GROUPS IN GENDER EQUALITY ADVOCACY¹

Abstract. This paper sets off to outline some reflections on the subject position occupied by pro-equality men's groups within overarching discourses of gender equality. Discussion makes reference to the cases of Men Engage Europe and Maschile Plurale, two loosely organized networks of men that support gender equality in different ways at the EU supranational-level and the Italian national-level respectively. Fragments of the voices of these organizations were gathered during two semi-structured interviews conducted in the context of my doctoral fieldwork. This paper argues that men supporting gender equality attempt to participate in feminism from the difficult position of 'unspeaking' subjects. More specifically, I argue that the tension between narrative of inclusion and narratives of 'sisterhood' within feminism produce overarching discourses of gender equality in which men's subject position is unspoken. Based on these premises, I attempt to offer some reflections on what is gained and what is perhaps lost in the process.

Key words: gender equality, subjectivity, masculinity, discourse studies.

Introduction

The fact that gender equality is a key European value seems to have consolidated in discourse across the continent, regardless of stark contestation as to what equality is and what it would take to achieve it. Over the last few decades, most European nation-states and the European Union itself developed formal structures to absorb the demands of feminist movements and translate them into policy; institutions that have been broadly defined as 'state feminism' or 'gender equality machinery' (Kantola and Outshoorn 2007). Since the early 2000s, these institutions have been fiercely criticized for a sharp turn toward a neoliberalized vision of gender equality (Kantola and Squires 2012; Kavagan 2017).

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There seems to be growing consensus in the literature for an interpretation of institutional gender equality discourses as instruments of a Foucaultian dynamic of power-knowledge that are productive of objects and subjects. Broad attention has been given to the ways in which women are produced by these discourses as neoliberal citizens-workers (Fraser 1994) that are responsible for joining the productive workforce and ‘empower’ themselves for the purposes of enhancing economic prosperity (Prugl 2015; Elomaki 2015). In other words, institutional gender equality discourses seem to be productive of ‘gender equality’ as an object of knowledge and of a collective category of ‘women’ as its subjects.

Rather than focusing on how women are explicitly produced as subject of the gender equality discourse, my wish in this paper is to focus on how men are under-represented therein. To put it differently, the focus of this paper is on how men are not subjectified in the gender equality discourse. These reflections are part of my broader doctoral project, in which I analyze discourses of gender equality as circulated on social media across the national-supranational divide in Europe, comparing the European-level with a case study on Italy.

In this paper, I sketch some features of men’s under-representation in the official social media communication posted on the social media platform Twitter by a sample of fifteen users that represent state feminist institutions and social movements from both contexts. I then offer some deeper reflections on the ways in which men are (and aren’t) mentioned in the corpus of data under scrutiny, dwelling on what is gained and what might be lost in the process of backgrounding men. Finally, I develop on these propositions through reference to the information obtained in the context of two interview with members of pro-equality men groups operating at the European and at the Italian national level respectively.

1. Theoretical framework

In this paper, I adopt a deconstructivist approach to the study of gender (Kantola and Lombardo 2017) and gender equality (Kantola and Verloo 2018). That is to say, I adopt an understanding of gender as a set of discourses and practices that is constantly reproduced and contested through individual as well as collective performances. This approach assumes that there is no reality ‘out there’ outside of discourse and that objects and subjects of knowledge are the product of discursive struggles that are oriented by power relations (Bacchi 1999, 2009).

In the context under scrutiny, adopting this lens means looking at gender equality discourses as gendering practices, i.e. practices that productive of gendered subjects (Eveline and Bacchi 2005). For example, policies to tackle gender inequalities are gendering practices insofar as they embed assumptions regarding what is the most appropriate way of performing femininity or masculinity, favoring the reproduction of some gendered identities over others.

Through a deconstructivist lens, these hidden assumptions can be made visible, questioned, and eventually disrupted (Verloo 2007; Lombardo, Meier and Verloo 2009; Lombardo and Meier 2016).

The above can be applied to discourses circulated via any medium, including social media. I define social media communication after KhosraviNik (2017) as ‘an electronically mediated communicative paradigm across any electronic platforms, spaces, sites, and technologies’ in which people can (i) work together in producing and compiling content; (ii) perform interpersonal communication and mass communication simultaneously or separately; and (iii) have access and respond to institutionally-generated or user-generated content.

Still following KhosraviNik (2017), my research falls under the umbrella of social media – critical discourse studies (SM-CDS), defined as socially committed, problem-oriented, textually based, critical analysis of social media discourses. A crucial feature of SM-CDS is its attention to context. KhosraviNik argues that context should not be understood only in its horizontal sense (i.e. what goes among users on a given platform or across platforms). Rather, any analysis of text should also account for ‘vertical’ contextual elements, such as for example sociological factors like access, visibility, and identity (in turn based on class, race, gender, etc.).

KhosraviNik (KhosraviNik and Unger 2015) grounds his critique of contextualization in an attempt to bridge the Habermas-Foucault divide in critical discourse studies. In his interpretation, critical discourse scholars should concede that social media discourses operate both through the Foucaultian logic of power *of* discourse and Habermasian logics of power *in* discourse. The former refers to the macro-structural forces behind discourse that work to produce objects and subjects of knowledge. The latter refers to those micro-level instances in which individuals communicate in an attempt to influence each other and in the process construct, challenge, or perpetuate supra-individual discourses. KhosraviNik warrants that, despite an apparent theoretical incompatibility, these currents are not dissimilar in research practice: both notion of power feed each other through top-down and bottom-up processes of signification.

2. Methodology

Coherently with the above framework, this paper aims at achieving the following. A first section offers a sketch of the horizontal context pertaining the subjectivation of men in gender equality discourses on the social media platform Twitter by a sample of 15 users. The Twitter dataset under scrutiny spans from 1 September 2016 to 31 August 2017. The sample is drawn accepting Fuchs’ (2013) proposition that visibility on social media is unequally distributed with a strong positive correlation with the unequal distribution of material resources

in the analog realm. The sample is also drawn with an eye to traditional categories in comparative politics.

In the context of a broader project on discourses of gender equality in Europe, these users were selected through theoretical sample to offer an array of different perspectives on gender equality (see Table 1 below). These categories are, namely, (i) legislative power, (ii) executive power, (iii) women's right group affiliated with progressive political party, (iv) LGBTI rights group affiliated with progressive political party, (v) activist group for women's right, (vi) activist group for LGBTI rights, (vii) men's pro-equality group. One further user was sampled for each of the two levels which did not find a comparable one in the other level. The first one is the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) as a representative of so-called executive agencies (there is no executive agency for gender equality in Italy). The second one is the Italian feminist movement Non Una di Meno (there is no EU wide movement, although it can be speculated that national feminist movements do influence policymaking in Brussels).

More pragmatically, this paper starts from a corpus-assisted assessment of the sampled tweets as discursive practices that regularly background men. This assessment is broadly based on a discourse analysis that draws different methodological resources for the study of subjectification from the frameworks developed by Van Leeuwen (2007), Reisigl and Wodak (2015), and Bacchi (2009). Keeping in mind the attention to context proper of SM-CDS and in light of the focus on a subjectivity that is discursively backgrounded in the corpus of text under scrutiny, the bulk of my argument is based on two semi-structured interviews with members of Men Engage Europe and Maschile Plurale, two groups of men in favor of gender equality operating at the European and Italian national level respectively.

Table 1. Sampled users and number of tweets retrieved for this study

User category	Europe	#tweets	Italy	#tweets
1	2	3	4	5
Executive branch	Vera Jurova (EU Commissioner for Justice)	1,140*	Valeria Fedeli (former minister of education)	1,843*
Legislative branch	FEMM Committee	196	Laura Boldrini (former speaker of the house)	1,708*
Executive agency	EIGE	459	–	–
Center-left party women rights group	PES Women	540	Donne PD	240

1	2	3	4	5
Center-left party LGBTI rights group/ spokesperson	Rainbow Rose	1,453	Monica Cirinnà (Sen., same sex unions law)	1,210*
Women rights umbrella activist group	European Women’s Lobby	4,472	Di.Re.	2,858
LGBTI umbrella activist group	ILGA Europe	385	Arcigay	346
Feminist movement	–	–	Non Una di Meno	3,236
Pro-equality men’s group	Men Engage Europe	0	Maschile Plurale	165
Total		8,645		11,601

* Individual politicians may and in fact do tweet about issues other gender equality in order to appeal to their broader constituency in a way that is functionally different from that of social movements or gender equality institutions. The number of tweets above refers to the total number of posts by their official profile regardless of content.

Source: It is a table that summarizes the sampling described in the paragraph above it.

3. Subjectivation in the equality discourse: Foregrounding women, backgrounding men

In the sample of data under scrutiny, ‘women’ are by far the most prominent subject category. ‘Women’ is the most frequent word used by virtually all of the users, appearing a cumulative total of 1,665 times in the posts of the seven users sampled for the European level and 1,139 times [donne] in the posts of the eight users from the Italian context. It is possible to add to this 249 and 251 mentions for #women and #donne respectively, some 233 mentions of ‘girls’ at the European level, and 70 and 225 mentions for ‘woman’ and ‘donna’ (in the singular) respectively. By comparison, men are virtually non-existent in the gender equality discourses sampled for this study. The word ‘men’ and ‘uomini’ appear 116 and 96 times at the European and Italian levels respectively. The adjective ‘male’ appears 31 times at the European level, while ‘maschile’ appears 62 times at the national level. The word ‘man’, in the singular, does not appear in the 1000 most frequent words in the European level part of the corpus, while ‘uomo’ appears 34 times in the Italian part of the user-based sample.

Broadly speaking, all of the sampled users foreground ‘women’ and background ‘men’ in their tweets. This is somewhat more common at the European level than it is at the Italian national level. For example, discourses of violence against women by institutional users at the European level tend to background men as the implicit perpetrators of violence without directly mentioning them.

Conversely, Italian institutional users do not fully background men in the same discourses and do make an attempt at mobilizing them as possible allies for the eradication of violence against women. The Non una di meno Italian feminist network defines its own mobilizations as part of fight against ‘male perpetrated violence against women’. Within the sampled material, this is the only context in which men are regularly foregrounded as the subjects responsible for the gendered violence against which the movement mobilizes its supporters (Trillò 2018). These examples, however, are few and far between.

Not without irony, one of the few posts directly addressing the issue of men’s under-representation in the equality discourses sampled for this study reads the following:

#Genderequality discussions often engage women, but men have a crucial role to play. Read more [link to website].
 [@Eurogender, European Institute for Gender Equality] [accessed 10 October 2016].

In this post, EIGE is at pains to highlight that equality discussions should not neglect the role of ‘men’; a role that is defined as ‘crucial’. Despite the explicit intent of the post, men are nonetheless backgrounded while women are foregrounded as the most salient subject of gender equality discussions. The post is complemented with a picture of a man (presumably a father) who is on the phone while wearing rubber gloves and simultaneously holding a young child. His pose is implausible and resembles equally implausible representations of women who ‘multitask’ their way through domestic chores.



Figure 1. Picture embedded in the tweet above

Source: @Eurogender, European Institute for Gender Equality [accessed 10 October 2016]

All in all, the composition of text and image suggests that women are the protagonist of gender equality and that men's 'crucial role' is to take care of reproductive labor with little or no success. Arguably, the post by EIGE trivializes a potentially powerful argument: men's role in gender equality does entail a larger male participation in reproductive labor. nonetheless, its involuntarily ironic character poses a provocation that can be used as a starting point to think of what is gained and what is lost in making men unspoken subjects of gender equality.

4. Foregrounding women, backgrounding men: What is gained and what is lost?

The gender equality discourses sample for this study happen to be strictly binary. Its subjects are 'women' and 'men', with no opening towards other gendered identities. In a binary gender equality discourse, backgrounding men almost necessarily implies foregrounding women, with a wide range of advantages for the point of view of equal representation. Firstly, foregrounded women tend to be represented as agentic, to speak in their own right, and with their own voice. While this is not universally true (women are sometimes passivated even within equality discourses) it is nonetheless safe to state that their representation is far more positive in equality discourse than in other fields, as testified by countless studies referring to politics (e.g. Shoaf and Parsons 2016), business (e.g. Marvin et al. 2016; Baxter 2017), and sports (Ponterotto 2014; Bruce 2016), just to mention a few areas of possible interest.

Secondly and connectedly, over-representing and foregrounding women in equality discourses can be said to compensate for the under-representation and backgrounding of women in the discourses other than gender equality such as the ones mentioned above. Men already enjoy broad visibility in public discussions; a visibility that largely overshadows that of women, as documented once again in a burgeoning corpus of literature (Ross et al. 2018; Shor et al. 2015; Ross and Carter 2011; Ross 2011; Byerly and Ross 2008). Accepting the proposition that one of the functions of gender equality discourses is to reduce the power imbalance between women and men, the case for over-representing women therein is rather compelling.

Thirdly and crucially, men do not need to be represented in the gender equality discourse in order for them to engage in the struggle for gender equality. In her seminal book on masculinities, Connell (2005) pointed out that men can and should participate in feminism through their involvement in political battlefields other than the gender equality one. Labor unions, civil rights movements, environmentalist groups, and other progressive platforms already pose a threat to the patriarchy without having to call themselves 'feminist'. Men's involvement

in feminist spaces actually risks diverting the discussion away from women's claims for equality, thus hindering rather than supporting the quest for equality. As discussion below shows, the members of groups of men in favor of gender equality interviewed for this study seems to agree that men should take a stand in those space where they already enjoy visibility and make those spaces feminist rather than colonizing feminist spaces with their claim to visibility.

In light of the above, it seems that there is much to gain and little to lose from a gender equality discourse in which men are backgrounded into quasi-irrelevance. This does not mean, however, that nothing of value is lost in the process. In her popular methodology for the study of gender equality policy, Bacchi (1999, 2009) argued that policies are productive of the 'problems' they wish to solve and also perform discursive work to produce the subjects of their own discourses. Within this framework, a gender equality discourse that consistently backgrounds 'men' necessarily implies that 'men' bear no responsibility for gender inequality. In turn, this prevents the articulation of political solutions that directly address men. The result is a gender equality discourse in which women are defined by their disadvantaged position vis-à-vis an un-named 'other' and simultaneously charged with the responsibility of lifting themselves out of their disadvantaged position. Conversely, directly addressing men as possible subjects of gender equality policy can unlock the possibility of making them responsible for some aspects of gender inequality and therefore also charging them with responsibility for its eradication.

Just as importantly, a feminism that makes of inclusivity one of its decisive features can hardly shrug its shoulders in the face of those men who want to enter its ranks. While absorbing this demand might be challenging, it is perhaps necessary in order for feminism to avoid falling into contradiction with its propositions. This in no way implies that feminist communities need to radically undo their feminist practices. For example, inclusion might take the form of an extended feminist 'us' that encompasses all disenfranchised 'others' along the lines suggested in Butler's (2015) politics of cohabitation. That is to say, feminism can be inclusive towards disenfranchised men (e.g. migrant men, precariously employed men) as long as their inclusion is grounded in a wish to build a wide network of intersubjective solidarity.

5. Unspoken subjects of feminism: The voice of pro-equality men's groups

Based on the above, I contend that 'men' are mostly unspoken subjects of the gender equality discourse; an unspoken-ness that is also manifest on social media platforms. At the end of the preliminary phase of this study, I gave up on finding 'the most visible' Twitter accounts of pro-equality men's groups and decided to focus instead on the relative invisibility of successful networks of men in favor of gender equality operating at the European and Italian level respectively. That is

to say, the focus shifted from finding the voice of men in favor of gender justice and redirected towards detecting potential causes for their unspoken-ness. Thus, the cases of Men Engage Europe and Maschile Plurale were selected for this paper. At the time of writing this, Men Engage Europe does not have an official Twitter account. Maschile Purale does have one, but its follower base is rather limited: just above 900 followers.

Men Engage Europe is the European regional chapter of the global umbrella organization Men Engage, a network of men working in support of gender justice in all continents. Particularly successful in sub-Saharan Africa, Men Engage did not have a European chapter until fairly recently. Men Engage Europe kicked off its work with a regional consultation in Stockholm in January 2009 featuring the participation of some 80 delegates representing around 40 organizations from 25 European countries (including delegates from states that are not EU members). The meeting was hosted by Men for Gender Equality Sweden and Save the Children Sweden and enjoyed some financial support by the EU. Since then, Men for Gender Equality has been leading the activities of the new found network of Men Engage Europe. However, notice that to this date Men Engage Europe does not have a formal structure, i.e. it is not registered as an NGO at the EU level nor in any of the EU member states.

Men Engage Europe defines itself as ‘an important resource for organisations and individuals working with men and boys to achieve gender equality, end violence, and promote health for men, women and children in Europe’. One of the very first activities of Men Engage Europe was a mapping of the individuals and organizations working with men in the EU member States conducted on behalf of EIGE and published in 2012. Follow up meetings established a provisional Steering Committee and produced a ‘strategic plan’ that aims at progressively expanding the activities of the network and eventually formalize its structure by 2020.

The strategic plan outlines the vision, mission, and objectives of the network, further articulated in short-, mid-, and long term objectives. These can be summarized as follows. Men Engage Europe wishes to contribute to the achievement of gender justice by working with partners at different level to engage men and boys and thus promote gender equality, health, wellbeing, and the elimination of all forms of violence. In their view, this involves fostering positive masculinities centered around care at the individual and community level as well as address structural inequalities at the institutional level. Men Engage explicitly addresses men as subjects of policy problems that make them responsible for gender inequality and its eradication. Furthermore, Men Engage Europe makes of accountability to the women’s rights movement one of its key principles. That is to say, Men Engage Europe explicitly aims at mobilizing within the field of gender equality without foregrounding their claims to the expenses of those of women.

Maschile Plurale is a network of organizations working on different aspects of masculinities issues on the Italian territory with activities spanning from small

discussion groups for self-awareness to government-sponsored anti-violence campaigns. The organization formalized its structure for the purpose of having a legal status allowing their participation in national and international funding schemes in 2007. However, its origin can be traced back to the early 1990s with first attempts of coordination between groups of men engaged in equality work. To this date, Maschile Plurale remains a loosely organized network of groups scattered across the Italian peninsula that makes of its horizontality and flexibility its key strengths.

The main objectives of Maschile Plurale are the following. Firstly, Maschile Plurale aims at promoting personal and collective reflection among men on their subjectivity, in turn aiming to foster cultural change in the way men understand relationships between women and men. Secondly, Maschile Plurale aims at engaging publically as an organization and personally via its individual members for the eradication of all forms of gendered violence. Thirdly, Maschile Plurale wishes to support change in the everyday behavior of individual men to produce new subjectivities that are mindful of diversity and willing to support equality in every aspect of life.

6. Bottom-up convergences across the supranational-national divide

Men Engage Europe and Maschile Plurale show strong elements of similarity in the narratives they have about themselves, their work, and their role in the broader ecology of feminist mobilization. Out of the topics discussed in interview setting with individual activists from the two groups, I selected three main topics for presentation in this paper. These are, namely, accountability to the women's rights movement, introspection as the starting point of male mobilization within feminism, and engagement with men to prevent violence against women. Discussion below attempts to outline the key elements of each of these topics for the two groups under scrutiny, highlighting elements of similarity between their narratives.

6.1. Accountability to the women's rights movement

Men Engage Europe and Maschile Plurale share a strong wish to make sure that their actions are carried out in accountability vis-à-vis the women's rights movement. That is to say, both groups start from a recognition of their own male privilege as a factor that potentially impedes their participation in feminism. Therefore, these groups strive to find their place in the context of feminism by stressing their accountability towards those that more clearly have a stake in feminist mobilization, i.e. women. In the words of one activist from the Men Engage network:

from the very start we have had the principle as Men Engage Europe, or as Men Engage global, that we are accountable to the broader women's movement. In plural, women's movements. And we have a complete document on accountability. As Men Engage global to the women's movements. (James, activist, Men Engage Europe)

The Men Engage network published in 2014 a 42-page document operationalizing what they mean by 'accountability'. The document stresses that the work of Men Engage follows in a feminist tradition that has its roots in the mobilization of women-led groups and that, therefore, accountability to these groups is a necessary element for the production of collaborative and equitable partnerships within feminism. In this sense, Men Engage defines 'accountability' in terms of acknowledging male privilege, being open to criticism, striving for personal action in all settings, and respecting and supporting women's leadership in the gender equality movement.

Accountability to women movements is also operationalized in terms of ensuring that no resources are taken away from their activities. In the words of the interview partner:

we feel, as the EU Men Engage movement, we should prevent taking money from the Women's movement [...] because of the enormous gap of power positions. At the same time, we want to help address the issue of funding from a different angle by bringing new founding from new sources. (James, activist, Men Engage Europe)

As shown above, the issue of accountability has a very material aspect and a clear focus on preventing the diversion of resources from issues that are recognized as having priority.

While accountability to the women's movement was not as crucial in the interview with the activist from *Maschile Plurale*, this does not discount the fact that the association operates in a framework that demands engagement with women rights groups along feminist principles. Coherently with this, *Maschile Plurale* defines itself as 'National association serving the Network for the change of sexist, misogynist, and patriarchal models'.² While *Maschile Plurale* does not have a document stating their commitment to accountability to the women's movement, their positionality within feminism is one of the crucial elements of their work.

A clear example came in a communique issued in the immediate aftermath of the first nationwide mobilization of the *Non una di meno* feminist network in November 2016. The communique was published on the website on *Maschile Plurale* and circulated to its follower base on Twitter with the following post:

² Associazione Nazionale a servizio della Rete per il cambiamento dei modelli sessisti, misogini e patriarcali.

Text by some men of the Maschile Plurale network #nonunadimeno #beforeviolence [link to website].³

[@MaschilePlurale, Pro-equality men's group] [accessed 27 November 2016]

The communique is informally called 'text', therefore taking the edge off of any official or institutional façade it could appear to have. The communique is published by 'some men' of the network, thus hinting to the fact that the text does not aim at conveying the voice of Maschile Plurale in its totality and plurality. The post is complemented with the hashtag of the Non una di meno mobilization, signaling that the new feminist network is the topic of the 'text' in object. The other hashtag, 'before violence', refers to a set of actions (mostly, workshops) run by Maschile Plurale that engage with men and boys to prevent violence against women.

In the communique, 'some men' from the network stated that 'the organization of the [Non una di meno] rally was paralleled by a public discussion on the modes for male participation therein, in which its very appropriateness was questioned. We believe that what's right is for women to decide on this. However, the initiatives of the 26th and 27th were presented by the organizers [female suffix] as open, and we felt committed to participate... we do not believe that it is useful to have a formal male presence [within Non una di meno], nor any courtesy of sort. Our participation in this process of transformation makes sense only if it can give voice to a male desire for change.'⁴

This is just one example among many in the communication of Maschile Plurale stressing that the organization does not wish to overshadow women by taking over women's spaces. This notwithstanding, the communique clearly states that a male presence can make sense within those feminist spaces that women rights groups define as 'open' to the participation of everyone, including men. Thus, while clarifying the wish to take a backseat, Maschile Plurale is also pointing out that men's participation in feminism might have advantages worth considering.

6.2. Introspection as the starting point

Regardless of how explicitly the two organizations address their relationships with women's groups, it can be argued that they carved for themselves a niche within the broader ecology of feminist interventions. Both groups have a very strong emphasis on bottom-up approaches and a belief in change at the individual

³ Testo di alcuni uomini della rete Maschile Plurale #nonunadimeno #primadellaviolenza.

⁴ La manifestazione è stata accompagnata da una discussione pubblica sulle modalità di una presenza maschile e sulla sua stessa opportunità. Noi pensiamo che sia giusto che siano le donne a decidere su questo. Le iniziative del 26 e 27 però sono state presentate dalle organizzatrici come aperte, e ci sentiamo impegnati a partecipare... Non crediamo sia utile una presenza maschile formale, né un omaggio di maniera. La nostra partecipazione a questo grande processo di trasformazione ha senso se sarà in grado di dare voce a un desiderio maschile di cambiamento.

level as crucial in order to achieve political transformation. In the words of the interview participant from Men Engage Europe:

The personal is political, and the political is personal. And that goes as much in this movement. Because otherwise we tend to run the risk of being nice on the outside in the campaigns but we still miss out on our caring at home, or our division of task at home or bring up our kids. [...] And that's because patriarchy is broader than what we are, but we have to really unlearn, really unlearn and transform ourselves, and that's a long way. We can't expect that to happen overnight. That's also more so why the women's groups feel "you men, you still remain in power. In charge". And to some extent they are right. And that also meant that we actually have to ask them to keep challenging us, don't stop challenging us (James, activist, Men Engage Europe).

Along similar lines, the interview partner from Maschile Plurale stressed that his organization mostly focuses on change at the individual level. In his words:

The issue of introspection is the founding element of this, for what concerns me at least. [...] firstly, because a lot of things are inside of you. and it is not only violence [that I am speaking of]. You have logocentrism inside of you, you have a competitive notion of knowledge [...]. To simplify all of this, to go to the root, the only thing... or to the very least the key was to say 'ok, now stop talking about the world, and start talking about yourself. Stop to decode the world through politics, sports, motorsports... you get it? Economics... and all of that. Now, start doing it through your lived experiences. To me, the keyword is narrative. It is narrative. [...] create free spaces of mutual listening and narrative. This is the baseline.⁵ (Giovanni, activist, Maschile Plurale)

Introspection is surely a key issue for Maschile Plurale, insofar as many of its local groups base most of their activities on a regular schedule of self-awareness sessions. Many of the tweets by Maschile Plurale gathered for this study make reference in one way or another to this issue. For example, some of these tweet advertise one of the online initiatives of the network, and namely 'Friday's notebooks' [i quaderni del venerdì]. These are a series of blog posts in which members and sympathizers of the network reflect on their own masculinities in connection with currently unfolding political events. The result is a window on the practice of self-awareness of the group that is made available to the public at large via its website.

The examples above do not do justice to the complexity in which the two activists spoke about the relevance of action at the individual level in order to achieve

⁵ Il discorso dell'introspezione e' il discorso fondante della questione, per quanto mi riguarda. [...] Primo, perche' tante cose ce le hai dentro. E non e' soltanto la violenza. C'hai dentro il logocentrismo, c'hai dentro un'idea competitiva del sapere [...]. Per semplificare tutto questo, per andare alla radice, l'unica cosa... o quantomeno la chiave di lettura e' stata di dire 'ok, adesso smetti di parlare del mondo, e inizia a parlare di te'. Smetti di decodificare il mondo attraverso la politica, lo sport, I motori... hai capito? l'economia... e tutto. Adesso lo fai attraverso il tuo vissuto. Il narrato. Per me la parola chiave e' narrazione. E' narrazione. [...] Creare spazi liberi di ascolto e di narrazione. Questa e' la base.

feminist change that is politically momentous. It is fair to say that, in the work of both organizations, individual change is just as relevant as public advocacy, if not more relevant. With reference to the commonplace statement that feminism is about negotiation at the dinner table (i.e. about micro-politics), both organizations would argue that change in public perceptions on gender equality cannot go very far without change in individual conduct. Connectedly, both organizations make of intervention at the level of the individual the key pillar of their work, prompting men towards reflection on their own masculinities and ideally affecting change.

It is clear that Men Engage Europe and Maschile Plurale are caught in a common conundrum affecting all men wishing to engage with feminism. Connell (2005) outlines how change at the individual level can undo the patriarchal masculinities of some men, but can hardly undo patriarchy as a system of oppression. Conversely, involving men in a serious political challenge to patriarchy can prove to be more successful without necessarily implying that all the men involved undo their individual masculinities. As a matter of fact, undoing individual masculinities without challenging patriarchy as a structure can lead to political paralysis at the macro-level while courting self-annihilation at the individual-level for those involved.

Men Engage Europe seems to be navigating the conundrum more skillfully than Maschile Plurale, perhaps because of the opportunity structures available to them. Indeed, recognition by EIGE and endorsement by the European Union clearly legitimize their participation in feminist advocacy at the macro-level, partially fending off the risk of focusing too narrowly on the individual level. Furthermore, the relatively static realm of EU level politics offers opportunities for advocacy that are somewhat less challenging than those at the national or local level.

Conversely, Maschile Plurale seems to favor a strict focus on the individual level grounded on a firm belief that individual change has political repercussion at the meso- and macro-level. This might be once again a choice determined by the opportunity structures available to the organization. While Maschile Plurale is often consulted by the Italian government on issues of gender equality, its position within the national ecology of feminist mobilization seems to be somewhat more precarious, probably because of the more turbulent character of national politics when compared to European supranational political debates.

6.3. Addressing men to prevent violence

In light of the importance of violence against women and gender based violence in the narratives of all the Twitter users sampled for this study, it was inevitable for this topic to be central also in the somewhat unspoken narratives of the pro-equality men group. Both interview partners spoke extensively about violence against women as a crucial topic to the work of their organizations.

For example, the activist from Men Engage Europe focused on the need to work with men to prevent gender based violence. In his words:

So violence has different forms and different ways, and I think we really should address the causes of the violence rather than only addressing the violence after it happened. That's too late. Some like Frank in Men for Equality have been giving a lot of trainings to young boys in schools, secondary schools, on how to handle your anger in a different way. And if you don't learn that, you think that beating is the only way. [...] So we feel that ... gender based violence needs to be addressed at its core. Addressing the reasons why we use it. Domination. Ignorance. Insecurity. And all of that. (James, activist, Men Engage Europe)

The activist from Maschile Plurale commented on strikingly similar lines and referred to his own work in the field by stating that:

We started with... with... a communique in 2006 that was called 'violence is [also] our business'. And it is all there... it is all there. [...] you won't eradicate violence if you don't eradicate the man who treats the woman as an object, the man who doesn't understands his shortcomings, or [men that] don't do a little work [on themselves]. And I see it with kids, because with male kids, when you start talking about this, honestly, sincerely, even those whom you think would have more resistances, even those whom you think have more machist models, they recognize these things in your words. They tell you 'it's true'. 'It is true'. Then they might not be capable of behaving otherwise. That's ok. Meanwhile, they say it [a different model]. That's what we ought to do, don't we? Facilitate the possibility of seeing these things.⁶ (Giovanni, activist, Maschile Plurale)

The issue of violence was central to the relatively small corpus of tweets published by Maschile Plurale. The tweet below echoes the words of the interview partner by stating that:

I'm not a violent man. Nonetheless, violence on women is my business #Fridaysnotebooks #beforeviolence [link to website].⁷
[@MaschilePlurale] [accessed 28 October 2016]

In this post, a member of the network takes the word to present himself as a 'non-violent men'. The speaker, however, tells the reader that violence against women is 'his business' anyways, regardless of the fact that he declaredly never

⁶ Noi siamo partiti con un... con un... appello nel 2006 che si chiamava "la violenza ci riguarda". E la' stiamo... la' stiamo... [...] Tu non riuscirai ad estirpare la violenza se non estirperai l'uomo che tratta come oggetto la donna, l'uomo che non capisce le sue tare, o che non fanno un minimo di lavoro. E io coi ragazzi lo vedo, perche' coi ragazzi maschi, quando tu comincia a parlare di questo, onestamente sinceramente, anche quelli che tu credi che abbiano piu' resistenza, anche quelli che tu credi abbiamo piu' modelli machisti te le riconoscono le cose. Ti dicono e' vero. E' cosi. Poi non sono in grado di fare diversamente. Va bene. Intanto l'hai visto. Noi questo dobbiamo fare, no? facilitare la visione di queste cose.

⁷ Non sono un uomo violento. Eppure la violenza sulle donne mi riguarda #iquadernidelvenerdi #primadellaviolenza.

practiced it. This short message can be interpreted as a claim to be subjectivated in the discussion of violence against women. This request is voiced in the first person by one individual men, but can be said to be representative of a collective request by ‘men’ at large. This man is claiming that his subjectivity belongs in discussions of violence against women, regardless of the fact that he never personally exerted it.

This statement might be controversial in its own right, but it is nonetheless worth considering in light of its possibly upsides. These include the possibility of charging men with responsibility for violence and, in turn, for its eradication. The post is complemented with two hashtags, one referring to the Friday’s notebooks and signaling that the linked webpage probably offers a personal reflection of the individual men who is speaking in the tweet. The other hashtag refers again to the ‘before violence’ campaign for prevention run by Maschile Plurale.

Once again, these examples cannot do justice to the level of nuance addressed by the two interview partners during discussion, nor that practiced by the two networks in their broader work. However, both organizations seem to share support for the following propositions. Firstly, engaging men to prevent violence against women and gender based violence is crucial. Through different frames, both organizations seem to argue that addressing men as potential perpetrators of violence is a valuable strategy to go beyond emergency-based approaches and post hoc relief and assistance to victims. In their view, the eradication of violence to a large extent requires addressing men and clearly stating that ‘violence is their business’.

Secondly, both organizations seem to agree that violence finds its roots in the socialization that is imposed on boys in the process of producing them as ‘men’. In particular, there seems to be an understanding that violent masculinities are embraced and performed by because alternative models of non-violence masculinities are virtually non-existent in the discursive/performative repertoire to which boys are exposed. Thirdly, both Men Engage and Maschile Plurale seem to agree that at least part of their work must revolve around presenting these alternative models to boys and young men via targeted educational interventions.

Conclusions

In this paper, I dwelled on the uneasy relationship of feminism with those men who wish to join its ranks. This uncomfortable ambiguity vis-à-vis self-identifying feminist men seems to result in an unspoken-ness of men in the gender equality discourse. I attempted to offer an overview of what is gained and what is perhaps lost in the process of backgrounding men into quasi-invisibility in the gender equality discourse on all platforms, including Twitter. While there is much to be gained from making men unspoken subjects of the equality discourse, I suggested that something is nonetheless lost and that, therefore, foregrounding men in some

parts of the gender equality discourse might have benefits worth considering. In particular, explicitly addressing men as potential perpetrators of gender based violence might have the positive effect of charging them with responsibility for action towards its eradication.

Following up on one of the insights above, I then presented the work of two groups of men working on equality issues at the European and Italian level respectively. In light of their marginality in tweeted discussions of gender equality, I argued that said invisibility is one of the manifestations of the unspoken-ness of men as subjects of the equality discourse. Thereafter, I dwelled mostly on data gathered during interviews from activists participating in their work and their respective websites and written political statements.

I found that accountability to the women's movement and a strong focus on action at the level of the individual were crucial to the work of these organizations. Arguably, a combination of these two factors could explain at least in part the backgrounded position of men in gender equality discourses. That is to say, a declared wish to let women speak as the privileged subjects of feminism and a focus on micro-level interventions can contribute to explain the quasi-complete absence of their men voices from gender equality discourses. While explaining the absence of male voices, however, this does not explain the absence of men as subjects of the gender equality discourse. This explanation would have to be found elsewhere, perhaps in a wish to mostly focus on women's issues (with its upsides and downsides) and also a wish to avoid antagonizing men by calling them out as possibly responsible for gender inequality.

Finally, I argued that Men Engage Europe and Maschile Plurale carved for themselves a field of intervention that follows a feminist ethos despite their unspoken-ness as subject of gender equality. These organizations perform work with men and boys across several different areas of intervention, in their view contributing to equality by supporting alternative ways of performing masculinity, especially at the individual level. In this sense, these organizations are working towards overcoming the impossibility to target men for intervention without mentioning them as subjects of the equality discourse. By clearly stating that equality and gender-based violence are men's business, they are producing men as subjects of the equality discourse, thus unlocking the possibility of involving them in the production of systemic solutions.

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KŁOPOTLIWE KOALICJE. KILKA UWAG NA TEMAT (LEDWO SŁYSZALNEGO) GŁOSU PRORÓWNOŚCIOWYCH GRUP MĘSKICH W PROPAGOWANIU RÓWNOŚCI PŁCI

Abstrakt. Praca ta ma na celu zarysowanie pozycji zajmowanej przez grupy mężczyzn z prorównościowych organizacji podczas dyskusji odwołujących się do tematu równości płci. Dyskusja odnosi się do przypadków Men Engage Europe i Maschile Plurale, dwóch luźno zorganizowanych grup mężczyzn, które wspierają równouprawnienie płci na różne sposoby, na poziomie ponadnarodowym Unii Europejskiej, a także odwołując się do realiów panujących we włoskich miastach. Część głosów obu organizacji została zebrana podczas dwóch częściowo ustrukturyzowanych wywiadów przeprowadzonych w ramach mojej pracy doktorskiej. Praca argumentuje, że mężczyźni popierający równouprawnienie płci próbują uczestniczyć w feminizmie z trudnej pozycji „cichych” podmiotów. Mówiąc dokładniej, twierdzą, że podejście „siostrzanego ruchu” w feminizmie prowadzi do nadrzędnych dyskusji na temat równości płci, w których pozycja mężczyzny jest niewypowiedziana. Opierając się na tych przesłankach, staram się przedstawić pewne refleksje na temat tego, co zostało osiągnięte i co być może zagubiło się w tym procesie.

Słowa kluczowe: równość płci, podmiotowość, męskość, studia dyskursywne.