

European Journal of  
Cultural Studies

**Fatherhood and gender relations in the manosphere:  
Exploring an Italian non-resident fathers' online forum**

Journal:	<i>European Journal of Cultural Studies</i>
Manuscript ID	ECS-19-0211.R2
Manuscript Type:	Original Manuscript
Keywords:	non-resident fathers, manosphere, fatherhood, hegemonic masculinity, Facebook
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## Abstract

In the last few years, the informal network – called manosphere – of forums, websites and blogs, where commentators are mainly men and focus on issues relating to masculinity, has been gaining members and visibility. The paper’s objective is to explore the politics of fatherhood and masculinity that an Italian non-resident fathers’ online forum engages in to assess whether the claims for fathers’ rights are a move towards a new form of involved fatherhood or if they are only useful to rebuild a solid traditional male identity. By conducting an explorative content analysis on their Facebook group and page, we found that fatherhood is an “empty box” and that fathers’ rights are used in a strategic way to justify hegemonic masculinity, gender-based violence, as well as antifeminist and antifeminine ideas, and to promote political advocacy cooperating with right wing parties. The paper also reflects on the connections between hegemony and power using the concept of hybrid masculinities.

## Keywords

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## Introduction

In the last few years, an informal network – called manosphere – of forums, websites and blogs, where commentators are mainly men and focus on issues relating to masculinity, has been gaining members and visibility. This paper’s objective is to contribute to strengthen the understanding of this social and sociological phenomenon, by exploring the politics of fatherhood and masculinity of the Facebook group *Mantenimento Diretto* (Direct Alimony), one of the most active Italian non-resident fathers’ online forums. By conducting an explorative content analysis on their Facebook page and group, we aim to shed light on the ways in which fathers’ rights relate to the construction of masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Bridges and Pascoe, 2014) and so-called involved fatherhood (Dermott, 2008; Dermott and Miller, 2015; Miller, 2011). This topic is relevant for two reasons. First, the manosphere has been widening in the last few years all over Western countries, becoming a globally widespread amplifier for male (often chauvinistic) voices, as the Internet has become an increasingly important enabler and mediator of gendered identities and relations in society (Brickell, 2012; Cook and Hasmath, 2014). Second, Italy is a country where progressive instances coexist with still widespread traditional views of gender relations; furthermore, this historical moment is characterized by significant political attempts at revising family law in a conservative/right wing direction. In this context, these blogs and forums are very active combining ultra-catholic

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3 issues with claims for fathers' rights; however, empirical research on the Italian manosphere is  
4 still missing except for the works of Farci and Righetti (2019) and Vingelli (2019), which  
5 reconstruct, respectively, the network of Italian online groups of men's rights activists, and their  
6 antifeminist rhetoric. Our aim is, therefore, to begin to fill this gap, also by drawing attention  
7 on the contents produced, discussed and spread among the members of the group *Mantenimento*  
8 *Diretto*, focusing on processes of construction of meaning around fatherhood, masculinity and  
9 gender relations in contexts of separation or divorce.  
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### 17 **Fathers' rights and gender relations in the manosphere: an international review**

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20 In the last few years, we have witnessed a proliferation of online groups concerned with the  
21 promotion of men's and/or fathers' rights, in a historical moment often described as  
22 characterized by changes in masculinity and fatherhood towards a more egalitarian direction.  
23 The "manosphere", the online network of blogs, forums and websites dedicated to men's rights  
24 and issues, is populated by two groups of actors. The first consists of groups of men who either  
25 fear the "crisis of masculinity" declared by Men's Rights Activist (MRA) groups and seek for  
26 a reconciliation with true male nature, such as the mythopoetic movement (Connell, 1995;  
27 Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Messner, 2000), or conversely encourage the crisis,  
28 interpreting it as an occasion for setting men free from female domination, such as the Red Pill  
29 philosophy promoters (Mountford, 2018; Van Valkenburgh, 2018). This frame leads the way  
30 to discourses on gender relations based on the degradation of women as sexual objects and  
31 exchangeable commodities (Van Valkenburgh, 2018), on revisions of the notions of rape and  
32 sexual consent (Dragiewicz, 2008; Gotell and Dutton, 2016), and on new forms of hybrid  
33 masculinities that combine older variants of antifeminism with new ones (Ging, 2017).  
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44 The second group consists of fathers' rights groups whose common demands very often  
45 rely on a vocabulary of "equality" between parents and sharing child custody. However, their  
46 claims for a more equal co-parenting take shape in discourses on entitlement, presumed  
47 discrimination against men and victimization at the hands of women (Bertoia and Drakich,  
48 1993; Dragiewicz, 2008; Kaye and Tolmie, 1998; Petti and Stagi, 2015). Indeed, it has been  
49 argued (Kaye and Tolmie, 1998; Petti and Stagi, 2015) that the fundamental aim of these  
50 discourses is to do with maintaining control over former spouses and children, on the basis of  
51 the patriarchal myth of the family as unit to be preserved, more than a real desire of being  
52 involved fathers. Within these rhetorical strategies, the notion of "involved" fatherhood (Miller,  
53 2011) serves, instead, as a reminder of the relevance of the father's presence in his child's life  
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3 (Kaye and Tolmie, 1998), and is used as a discursive weapon to promote misogynistic  
4 depictions of mothers and women in general.  
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6 As one can gather by this short description of the manosphere, these groups share some  
7 common features but, at the same time, they locate themselves in different parts of the triadic  
8 “terrain of the politics of masculinities” elaborated by Messner (2000) to analyse men’s groups  
9 activists. The author bases his theorization on Connell’s (1995) conceptualization of  
10 masculinities as at the same time a set of practices and a position within a system of inter-gender  
11 and intra-gender relations based on power imbalances. According to Messner (2000), the  
12 politics of masculinities are the different forms of men’s organized collective responses to the  
13 changes in the gender order. The politics of masculinities revolve around three main themes,  
14 which represent the corners of the “terrain”: institutionalized privilege, or the fact that men, as  
15 a group, have a dominant position in society; the costs of masculinity, or the difficulties of  
16 adhering to an ideal model of man; and differences and inequalities between men, or the  
17 relevance of intra-gender categorization and power hierarchies. According to the theme or  
18 factor that they bring to the foreground as the main motivation for their activism, or conversely  
19 ignore, men’s social movements may take different and even contradicting routes. In the  
20 manosphere groups we have briefly described, the frame of victimization is common ground,  
21 but while non-resident fathers’ groups insist more on their identity as men and the costs they  
22 have to pay as fathers locating in the corner of the “costs of masculinity”, the Red Pill  
23 community privileges the aspect of inequalities and hierarchies between men (Ging, 2017; Van  
24 Valkenburgh, 2018).<sup>1</sup>  
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39 In Italy, the emergence of movements that can be ascribed to a politics of masculinity  
40 dates back to the ‘90s. The country has been characterized since then by a vast constellation of  
41 associations and groups, mostly (but not only) concerned with the costs of masculinities, which  
42 have, nevertheless, never succeeded in creating a solid network. While their presence online is  
43 increasingly widespread, there is to date little research on the Italian manosphere (except for  
44 Farci and Righetti, 2019; Vingelli, 2019).  
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50 In particular, in the wider constellation of online and offline male groups and  
51 associations, the most relevant, influential and organized groups are fathers’ rights movements.<sup>2</sup>  
52 In the last decades, in which a series of family law reforms have taken place in Italy, they have  
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56 <sup>1</sup> The third element of the triad, “institutionalized privileges”, characterizes the groups of men that pursue the goal  
57 of undermining men’s institutional power and privileges over women (Messner 2000), therefore we will not  
58 consider it this paper.

59 <sup>2</sup> In 2007, there were 47 groups/associations/acronyms ascribable to the universe of fathers’ rights activism, some  
60 of which with a national diffusion (Deriu 2007).

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3 gained a consolidated lobbying ability and a strong political influence, which led in 2006 to the  
4 promulgation of the law on post-separation joint child custody (Petti and Stagi, 2015).

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6 Despite the lack of empirical research on the Italian case, some authors (Deriu, 2007;  
7 Petti and Stagi, 2015) have pointed out the traits and demands common to all the groups that  
8 identify as activists for fathers' rights.  
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11 First, their main objective is a reform of the law on divorce and especially on child  
12 custody. Although in Italy the Act n. 54/2006 established joint custody as the norm in case of  
13 separation/divorce, they maintain that it is not always respected and that mothers are usually  
14 advantaged. Indeed, they depict themselves as victims of a conspiracy driven by women, which  
15 also involves the courtrooms, aimed at taking fathers' rights away from them and at limiting  
16 their role as "ATM dads" or "hourly dads". These claims are very often framed in a socio-  
17 cultural context dominated, in their view, by "the divorce factory". This expression was coined  
18 and spread by one of the main ideological leaders, Claudio Risé – inspired by Robert Bly's  
19 Mythopoetic movement – and is meant to describe a supposed lobby composed by social  
20 workers, judges, psychologists, public servants and so on, allied with women with the precise  
21 scope of destroying the family. This example is also very useful to unveil their vision of family  
22 and gender relations: the family is rooted in the (heterosexual) married couple with well-defined  
23 gender roles, which stays together despite the difficulties. It is interesting to note that, in their  
24 words, women are supposed to be the "angels of the house", but at the same time they are  
25 depicted as guilty of the ruin of the family (Deriu, 2007).  
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38 Concerning the relationship with children, they feel victims of the conspiracy against  
39 men and of the retaliation of their former partners to keep them apart from their children,  
40 especially when women ask for and/or obtain the full custody of the children. Indeed, when  
41 children refuse to see their fathers, these men invoke the Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS),  
42 an undocumented and unrecognized syndrome allegedly derived from a brainwashing enacted  
43 by women to the detriment of fathers (Petti and Stagi, 2015).  
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49 Finally, their discourses are dominated by a conflicting vision of the relationship  
50 between fathers and mothers which is described in terms of a "war" between men and women.  
51 In this scenario, though, a more profound reflection about gender roles and the social  
52 construction of the maternal and paternal role is missing. In the words of Deriu (2007: 236; our  
53 translation): "It is not possible to ask for a more equal co-parenting if they are not ready to  
54 question some elements, such as the centrality of paid work and career, which have always been  
55 at the core of male social status and which are two of the main pillars of paternal identity".  
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## Methodology and aims

The aim of the article is to analyse one case study – the Italian Facebook group *Mantenimento Diretto* (from now on MD) – to investigate the politics of fatherhood and masculinity of its members. In particular, we want to explore whether the claims for fathers' rights are a move towards new forms of a more involved fatherhood (Miller, 2011; Dermott and Miller, 2015) or if they are only useful to keep and rebuild a solid traditional male identity (Boyd, 2004; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Deriu, 2007; Dragiewicz, 2008; Faludi, 1991; Petti and Stagi, 2015).

The choice of Facebook as a field of study derives from the centrality that the internet and social networks have gained in the last few years in providing a space where gender can be performed (Brickell, 2012; Cook and Hasmath, 2014), and in amplifying certain demands and shaping activism for men's rights (Marwick and Caplan, 2018). The choice to study a Facebook group is based on the assumption that this is a unique case of communities of practice (Paechter, 2003) where masculinity is performed and relations of power undone and redone (Connell, 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005).

The choice of the Italian group *Mantenimento Diretto* as case study is due to the fact that it is one of the most active in the Italian manosphere, counting more than 13700 members (at the moment of the research). Finally, the choice of Italy is justified by the current political moment, characterized as it is by the rise of right-wing populist parties concerned with traditional gender and family roles, some members of which are advocates connected to this group. Therefore, we decided to investigate the politics of fatherhood and masculinity of this group because it is a unique and useful example of the collective organized responses to the so-called "crisis" of masculinity (Messner, 2000).

Our first steps were taken with a focus on the Facebook page *Mantenimento Diretto* connected to the group. First, we retrieved information on the activity of the page, in terms of number of reactions and comments to posts from its opening until June 2019. As it is clearly visible in the graph below (Fig. 1), the page has been particularly active since the beginning of 2019, when they started campaigning to support a controversial draft law on divorce and child custody, trying to attract new activists to distribute questionnaires in the streets focused on joint custody and to collect signatures in favour of the bill.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This campaign was necessary because the bill, proposed by senator Simone Pillon and aimed at defining "perfect" joint child custody after separation (50% of time spent with both parents and no child alimony), raised many protests on the part of feminist associations, women's shelters, psychologists, law experts and other figures connected to the theme of child custody and separation/divorce regulations.

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[Figure 1 here]

Then, we conducted a web scraping of the Facebook page, in order to identify some key issues and themes shown by the word cloud (Fig. 2) that guided our content analysis of the group members' posts. The word cloud was created only with the words whose frequency was over 50.

[Figure 2 here]

In a subsequent phase of the process of analysis our focus moved from the page to the group. The word cloud served as a base to retrieve recurrent topics: we selected a first shortlist of keywords based on relevance to the theme (fatherhood/father, children, alimony, ex (wife), feminism) to search the posts in the MD Facebook group. After a first round of searching, we added some other relevant categories all derived by literature, such as "care" and "education" as subcategories of fatherhood, except for the keyword "nazifeminism" as a subcategory of feminism, which, instead, emerged as particularly relevant during the first round of analysis. This word, in fact, was surprisingly widespread and one of the most common themes in the discourses of the group. Even if this term is cited in (some of) the international research, it is not in the research on Italy, especially in relation to online separated fathers' groups. All the keywords used in the analysis are summarized in Table 1.

Following previous studies (e.g. Cook and Hasmath, 2014) we used a critical discourse approach to analyse all the posts and related comments that emerged from the search by keywords, and dated between the year of the foundation of the group (2015) and June 2019. Although we are aware that Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is not very much used in Cultural Studies, we followed the intuition of Barker and Galasinski (2001) that the former can provide understanding, skills and tools to enrich the latter. CDA, in fact, is not only a simple textual analysis, but makes it possible, on the one hand, to interpret language and textual interactions as specific forms of social practice (meso-level); on the other, to connect language to societal power relations, structural inequalities, and normative ideologies (macro-level) (Coates, 2012; Fairclough, 1992, 2012; Cook and Hasmath, 2014).

Therefore, in our case study, and as shown by Barker and Galasinski (2001), language serves to perform gender (masculinities but also femininities), but it is also the result of the social construction of genders and their unequal power relations.

**Table 1.** Posts sorted by keywords and number of interactions

<b>Keyword</b>	<b>Total number of analysed posts</b>	<b>Total number of comments</b>	<b>Maximum number of comments under a post</b>	<b>Date of collection of data</b>
<b>Father</b>	97	3.380	330	05/30/19
<b>Women</b>	96	4.563	474	06/01/19
<b>Feminism</b>	94	1.708	178	05/20/19
<b>Nazifeminism</b>	36	1.098	169	05/20/19
<b>Men</b>	95	2.339	323	05/30/19
<b>Violence</b>	98	2.127	217	05/21/19
<b>Co-parenting</b>	99	1.219	88	05/30/19
<b>Ex (wife)</b>	97	6.564	299	06/01/19
<b>Care</b>	50	574	85	06/21/19
<b>Rights</b>	92	2.838	330	06/21/19
<b>Duties</b>	58	1.258	167	06/21/19
<b>Education</b>	41	639	123	06/21/19
<b>Total</b>	953	28.307	-	-

Since we are well aware of the ethical issues concerning these research methods (European Commission 2018b, 2018a) and the reasonable expectations of privacy the users of the group may have, we have paid attention to some key dimensions. First, the data we have analysed and presented in the article come from an open group whose posts are public. However, this is a necessary, but not sufficient condition to justify the moral feasibility of the research. For this reason, we anonymized the data since the initial phases of the study, so that it is impossible to trace back the posts to the authors. Moreover, we have excluded all the posts that contained personal information, or paraphrased the quotations that could make the author recognizable.



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3 Finally, since this is a group of parents, when information about children was shown we did not  
4 use it, in order to protect the privacy of this vulnerable group.  
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6 We have also reflected on whether our research may cause harm not to individuals, but  
7 to the group as a whole, making it susceptible to processes of discrimination or stigmatization.  
8 We think this is not the case. First, this group does not belong to any minority or marginalized  
9 category of people, since its members are in the vast majority of cases white, heterosexual and  
10 able-bodied men. Second, some research (Hearn et al., 2013) shows that virtual spaces, just as  
11 traditional media, reproduce gender and other inequalities because of the under- and  
12 misrepresentation of women and other Others in favour of white men.  
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## 20 **Fatherhood and gender relations in the Italian manosphere**

### 21 *Fatherhood and the absence of care*

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24 As already mentioned, MD as a movement has the fundamental aim of advocating for equal co-  
25 parenting after separation, and the group is open to both men and women to discuss their  
26 experiences as separated parents, seek advice and promote lobbying initiatives in favour of  
27 “perfect” shared child custody (50% of time spent with each parent, and no child alimony to be  
28 paid) at the local as well as national level. While fatherhood and the maintenance of non-  
29 resident fathers’ relationships with their children are, then, seemingly themes at the forefront  
30 of MD’s aims, reflections on what fatherhood “is” are hardly presented and discussed. The most  
31 widespread rhetorical theme is to do with time spent with children. It emerges vividly as fathers  
32 describe their post-separation agreements in terms of child custody and alimony, but it rarely  
33 carries along discussions of what these men’s relationships with their children were before  
34 couple disruption, and how much time was dedicated to them (Messner, 2000; Petti and Stagi,  
35 2015). While discourses on the importance of spending time with children resonate with  
36 theoretical reflections on “new”, “involved” fatherhood which requires (or suffices) “being  
37 there” and spending “quality” time with children (Dermott, 2008; Miller, 2011), they seem to  
38 exhaust the contents available for the construction of parenthood. Fatherhood as it was acted  
39 out before separation does not enter these discussions. Here, most posts and comments on the  
40 theme revolve around rights and duties: the rights of children to spend time with their fathers,  
41 the rights of fathers to be there for their children, and parental duties as responsibilities but also  
42 obligations coming from external actors, such as courts and social workers. These rights and  
43 duties seem, however, empty, abstract concepts. Care, especially, appears in these discourses  
44 mostly, if not only, as part of the text of the Act 54/2006 that these men consider as their  
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3 reference point: “An underage child has the right to maintain a balanced and continuous  
4 relationship with each parent, to receive care, education, instruction and moral assistance from  
5 both and to maintain significant relationships with ascendants and relatives of each parental  
6 side”. This text is, explicitly or implicitly, the cornerstone around which the members of MD  
7 construct their narrations but, when reflecting upon the issue of co-parenting, much more  
8 relevance is given to the “co” rather than the “parenting”. Fathers in this group very rarely get  
9 deep into fathering practices, and when it happens (interestingly, often thanks to a woman’s  
10 post), these discussions open the way to claims for very gendered parenting and essentialists  
11 views on masculinity. A good example is a post by a woman member who, in November 2018,  
12 dedicated to fathers a lengthy text that opposed “men with children” – emotionally distant  
13 breadwinners – to “dads” – caring and affective. Here a few lines:  
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24 (... ) There are men with children who “well, I bring money home” and dads for whom  
25 going to work every morning is a stab to the heart.

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27 There are men with children who “I want a boy so I can take him to see the match” and  
28 dads who “all right, put lipstick on my lips”.

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30 There are men with children that won’t do “mum’s things” and then there are dads who  
31 get dirty with poo and vomit (...).

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36 While some of the 52 comments were thankful for the nice portrait of father’s importance for  
37 children, a certain discomfort (if not spite) was evident in some men’s reactions:  
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41 (man1) This is even worse than nazifeminist nonsense. It characterizes men with typically  
42 female flaws, you are a good father if you are a servant, a doormat, and it praises the man  
43 who unburdens the mother from her duties. Are we really reading this kind of disgusting  
44 and sneaky messages here too?  
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48 (man2) I have a boy, but if I had a girl... no, I won’t let anyone put lipstick on me. I’m  
49 sorry! I think the message would be more correct [if it had said that] there are things for  
50 boys only, like urinals, and things just for girls, like lipstick. Maybe I’m narrow-minded  
51 but this is how I see it.  
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54 (man3) I appreciate the intention, but the message conveyed is that you are a father only  
55 if you fulfil female expectations.  
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3 The mention of gender roles within the family is, in most cases, either a reinforcement of  
4 traditional and essentialist understandings of masculinity and femininity, or a blaming of  
5 women's choices and experiences disguised as promotional claims for gender equality:  
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10 Women are also disadvantaged in the labour market because they accept the role of “angel  
11 of the hearth” and think they have to take care of children leaving the duty to “bring  
12 home” money to men. “50's family” style. If women themselves accept this role,  
13 obviously society will hardly evolve toward a real gender equality, also in the labour  
14 market. Luckily, Pillon's bill intervenes to put both parents on the same level, with the  
15 same duties towards children. No more mums constrained into the “angel of the hearth”  
16 role. Unfortunately, obscurantist and reactionary fringes oppose to this equality of roles  
17 (man, March 2019).  
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26 This post received 74 comments, many of which expressed opinions in tune with the post: on  
27 the one hand, the apparently progressive idea that women should be as involved in the labour  
28 market as much as men is shared by almost all commentators. In their words, and in perfect  
29 accordance with the law, equal co-parenting means that both parents contribute to the  
30 maintenance, education and care of their offspring. On the other hand, these comments convey  
31 a conviction that women do not work because they simply do not want to; as one of them puts  
32 it: “there is nothing that forbids women to be plumbers, automotive electricians or boat painters,  
33 but let's say it, it's better to go to the gym”. The underlying idea is based on a single leitmotiv,  
34 which will be better investigated further on: women avoid paid work to benefit from child  
35 support.  
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43 Discourses on fatherhood are, indeed, rarely worthy of reflection per se, but rather, they  
44 are often used as a bridge towards other discourses. In fact, the group's role as promoters of a  
45 cultural revolution about fatherhood and parental roles in the family seems now overwhelmed  
46 by their role as carers for fathers' and men's pain and advocates for fathers' rights. As will  
47 become clearer in the next section, in fact, posts on fatherhood, gender relations and father/child  
48 relationships are mostly used to open threads on unjust (economic) post-separation agreements,  
49 which often convey resentment towards ex partners that turns into antifeminism, victimist  
50 complaints about a plot against all men, and calls for action and advocacy.  
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### *Men's pain and women's/feminists' responsibility*

At first sight, differently from the results emerged in previous research (Boyd, 2004; Deriu, 2007; Faludi, 1991; Petti and Stagi, 2015), the members of the MD group seem promoters of progressive instances and gender roles. As already mentioned in the previous section, in fact, they stress the importance of the pursuit of equal co-parenting, which is also strongly connected with the two parents' equal commitment to paid work.

Nevertheless, analysing the data in depth, it emerges that these apparent demands for equality actually rely on a very traditional construction of masculinity. As white heterosexual men, they never put into question their privileges and, on the contrary, they only point out the costs of masculinity (Messner, 2000) in a strategic way meant to promote antifeminine ideas.

Their discourses, in fact, reveal a lack of reflection – theoretical and political – on the social construction of genders, masculinity and power. Figure 3 exemplifies this process: the author ironically lists “men's privileges” showing that only in 14% of cases men obtain child custody, 97% of people who die in war are men, as well as 76% of homicide victims, 93% of workplace deaths, 80% of suicides.

[Figure 3 here]

Bracketing the truthfulness of the data, it is interesting to note that these dimensions are some of the main pillars around which hegemonic masculinity is built, i.e. violence and paid work (opposed to care work) (Connell, 1995). The lack of reflection about this issue leads them – intentionally or not – to ignore, for example, that most of the violence (including rape) experienced by men is usually enacted by other men and that child custody assigned to the mother is the result of a traditional vision of gender roles and arrangements inside and outside the family. Indeed, paid work and the public sphere in general have always been gendered arenas built on masculine standards and dominated by men (Connell, 2002; Kimmel, 2000). Paid work provides economic and symbolic resources that reinforce men's position of power, but it also has costs in terms of physical and psychological stress and of exclusion from the private dimension of life (Kimmel et al., 2005) making it difficult for many men to enact an involved fatherhood, as pointed out in the previous section.

The normative construction of masculinity and gender relations emerges, too, when women are depicted as the main responsible party for men's disadvantages. Despite the apparently progressive statements about parenthood, the men taking part in the group share a well-defined traditional vision of femininity and of women's role. In fact, in the group there is a hierarchy of female members: only those who are aligned to the point of view of the male members and perform a complicit femininity can participate and are considered “real women”,

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3 while the others are stigmatized or ignored during the interactions. This is testified especially  
4 by the fact that only complicit practices of femininity grant a full membership in the group and  
5 in the socially constructed category of women, as illustrated by the following post and  
6 interactions.  
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11 As women, we should ask ourselves why, when we press charges against our ex for  
12 violence, justice remains stuck and does not protect us. Well, we, dear women, are  
13 responsible for that because we congest court rooms with 90% of false accusations so  
14 when real charges are made, they become like the story of the boy who cried wolf. Let's  
15 thank ourselves and clap to ourselves (woman, March 2019).  
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22 Ninety-two people liked this post, twenty shared it, and sixty-three commented it with sentences  
23 concerning two main interconnected aspects: real womanhood and false accusations. The first  
24 group of comments was directed at the poster to express approval and agreement, and to point  
25 out her "real" womanhood:  
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30 Here's how a real Woman and Mother looks like! If only half of women and mothers  
31 were like you the children would not have any problems and any pain (man, March 2019).  
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36 This ideal of "real" women is often combined with the opposition between "females" and  
37 women in a continuous process of establishing a hierarchy between women. Indeed, the former  
38 are all contemporary feminists and the bad women who want to damage men – and their  
39 husbands, more specifically – through false accusations and the denial of child custody. Then,  
40 "real women" are only those who do not transgress gender norms and who, in their words, fight  
41 for equality and not to gain privileges to the detriment of men. The hierarchy between women,  
42 in fact, involves feminists, too. On the one hand, there are "nazifeminists" who, as the Nazis  
43 during the Second World War, want to eliminate an entire category of individuals, in this case  
44 men of course.  
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53 Unfortunately, as fathers we are fighting a war against a parasitic Feminist army whose  
54 only goal is not [to protect] children, but to destroy the male human being, the destruction  
55 of the family to put it simply (man, November 2018).  
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3 On the other hand, there are the feminists of the past – the suffragettes, in particular – who  
4 really fought for equality and not for subjugation. These accounts are very popular and often  
5 accompanied by pictures and ironical vignettes such as the two shown below (Fig. 4 and Fig.  
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10 [Figure 4 here]

11 [Figure 5 here]

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13 As we can surmise from the pictures, the cleavage around which the differences between the  
14 feminists of the present and those of the past are stressed is values. The first image portrays  
15 very “decent” women fighting for the “fair” rights compared to the women of the present who  
16 fight against the social construction of women’s respectability and who therefore do not deserve  
17 to be considered “real women”. The loss of traditional values is also underlined by the second  
18 picture, which highlights the greed of feminists – but also of women in general. In fact, the  
19 vignette uses a pun to make fun of the name of the contemporary feminist movement “*Non Una*  
20 *di Meno*”, the Italian equivalent of #NiUnaMenos (“Not one [woman] less”), rephrasing the  
21 name in “Not a Euro less”, meaning that the feminists of the present are only interested in  
22 money.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, in the words of MD members the feminists of the present do not try to  
23 advance women’s rights but to defend women’s privileges, especially economic ones.  
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34 Children are an opportunity for every woman/mother to have a LEGAL ANNUITY (man,  
35 August 2017).  
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39 Indeed, the second group of comments to the post quoted above focuses on the theme of “false  
40 accusations of violence”, which, in their view, is strongly connected with money. These are  
41 very hot topics and leitmotifs of several interactions of the group that show how these men see  
42 women, exemplified by adjectives such as “bastard”, “slut”, “scum”, “snake”, “monster” used  
43 to refer to their former wives.  
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48 Many members of the group, in fact, have been accused by their former partners of  
49 marital abuse and/or stalking and some are still on trial. However, all of them, even those who  
50 have been convicted, maintain that they were falsely accused. On the one hand, false  
51 accusations would be encouraged by lawyers and by workers in women’s shelters to fuel “the  
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58 <sup>4</sup> “*Ni una menos*” was born as an Argentinian feminist movement that campaigned against gender-based violence.  
59 The name derives from a 1995 phrase by the Mexican poet and activist Susana Chávez, killed in 2011, “*Ni una*  
60 *muerta más*” (Spanish for “Not one more [woman] dead”), to denounce the phenomenon of femicides in Ciudad  
61 Juárez.

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3 divorce factory” and because, as in the words of one member, “violence has no gender, funding  
4 for women’s shelters against violence does” (man, April 2019). On the other hand, former wives  
5 allegedly use false accusations to gain better conditions of divorce that include the full custody  
6 of the children and a more consistent alimony.  
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10 Two interesting aspects are common in the interactions focused on this topic: one related to  
11 violence, the other to money. First, unsurprisingly, MD members never question the  
12 deceitfulness of the accusations of women, while they blindly believe the stories of the men.  
13 Indeed, to support their claims, they use in a misleading way the data coming from several  
14 national surveys on gender-based violence against women. On one side, despite the worrying  
15 data about femicides and gender-based violence in Italy,<sup>5</sup> they maintain that these phenomena  
16 do not actually exist and that  
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24 [...] Italy is statistically ONE OF THE SAFEST COUNTRIES IN THE WORLD for  
25 women. [...] And yet, in the country, in the last 10 years, in response to Act 54/2006 on  
26 joint custody and to protect anachronistic privileges – passed off as children’s rights –  
27 activist feminism, common to all political parties, has staged an anti-father and anti-male  
28 criminal campaign: a guilty instigation to gender hate. It is a psychosis, spread thanks to  
29 the proliferation - through rich public funding - of women’s shelters and of a huge social  
30 apprehension around a STATISTICALLY INSIGNIFICANT phenomenon. The aim is to  
31 defame and slander the male universe, the man and the father, in order not only to create  
32 the best background for the thousands of women’s false accusations of violence against  
33 non-resident fathers, but also meant to achieve a society without families, emasculated,  
34 without genders (man, October 2018).  
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45 On the other hand, the figures for convictions for gender-related violence against women, from  
46 rape to domestic violence, reported in a member’s post, are indeed very low (ranging from 12%  
47 to 35%), and are hastily interpreted as a proof of the insignificance of the phenomenon and of  
48 the high number of false accusations against men:  
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56 <sup>5</sup> According to the Italian Office for National Statistics (ISTAT, 2015), in 2014, 6788000 Italian women (31.5%  
57 of women aged between 16 and 70 years) had experienced some form of physical/sexual violence during their  
58 lives, while 2800000 were physically and/or sexually abused by actual or former partners. In 2017, 123 femicides  
59 were perpetrated (about 1 out of 3 days) and 80.5% of them was committed by a known person: in 43.9% of the  
60 cases the perpetrator was the partner (35.8% current, 8.1% former) (ISTAT, 2018).

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3 These are the official figures that, if read carefully, portray the phenomenon of false  
4 accusations [...]. This is violence and should be fought as much as physical violence on  
5 women, which is equally perverse and shameful (man, November 2018).  
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10 They completely ignore the fact that the vast majority of judges and lawyers are men and these  
11 institutions are gendered as masculine (Kimmel 2000), and that therefore these data could show  
12 how difficult is for a woman to get justice for the violence experienced.  
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15 These claims are strongly interrelated with the issue of violence against men: if violence  
16 against women does not exist and it is made-up, it is evident that violence against men does.  
17 To support this idea, several posts list cases of men who committed suicide because of the  
18 violence perpetrated by women which is conceptualized in various ways. First of all, men suffer  
19 from economic violence because of the economic terms of divorce and alimony. In fact, on one  
20 side they depict themselves as victims of the greed of their former wives, as shown by Figure 6  
21 in which (stereotyped) men were strong before and robust during the marriage, and eventually  
22 emaciated after the divorce.  
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29 *[Figure 6 here]*

30 On the other side, they are victims of the State and especially of the courts and judges that are  
31 all part of a plot against men.  
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34 Violence against men is also conceptualized as adultery, and even breaking a  
35 relationship is considered as a form of violence enacted by women. These claims evidence that  
36 the freedom of women to end a relationship is negatively judged, as if it were an outrage against  
37 men, and also raise the suspicion that they hide men's non-acceptance of the end of a  
38 relationship (Deriu 2007).  
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43 In this process of denial of violence experienced by women, and of magnification of  
44 violence suffered by men, the paradoxical claims that justify violence against women and  
45 femicides, as exemplified by the following dialogue occurred in December 2018, are striking:  
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49 (Man1) "They drive you to despair, to the point of exhaustion. They turn you nasty. I  
50 would create a special parliamentary commission that will examine all the so-called  
51 femicides [committed] during separation..."  
52  
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54 (Man2) "Yeah, that's why I understand those who commit extreme actions".  
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58 These men not only put on the same level the violence experienced by women and that  
59 experienced by men, but also interpret the former and especially its most serious manifestation  
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3 (i.e. femicide) as a reaction to women's attacks and, then, a form of male defence. It seems that  
4 the results of some research conducted in other contexts (Boyd 2004; Dragiewicz 2008; Faludi  
5 1991) also hold true for Italy: the rhetoric and practices of this kind of groups are backlashes  
6 against feminism, but especially against women and their rights.  
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10 These data are also useful to shed light on the construction of masculinity in online  
11 communities of practices (Paetcher, 2003). It is evident that fatherhood – in its disembodied  
12 version – is an excuse to have access to these communities of practice, but it is not at the core  
13 of the construction of masculinity of their members. In fact, the practices that grant a full  
14 membership are not those of care towards the children, but hateful discursive ones towards  
15 women and ex-partners. Online harassment of women and the justification of this phenomenon  
16 in real life are, in online communities too, a source of virility (Connell 1995, 2002) and a way  
17 to perform masculinity in homosocial environments. The “whore stigma” (Pheterson 1993),  
18 usually used against feminists, in relation to their former partners is combined with the “witch  
19 stigma” (Oddone, 2020), a discursive strategy to justify violence against women in their  
20 intimate relationships and to discredit women in general.  
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29 In this case, the online context of production of texts is particularly important: this  
30 “rancorous masculinity” – as we have decided to call it – reflects a need to restore a hegemony  
31 that is described as lost in offline life because of “females” and feminists.  
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## 38 **Conclusions**

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41 The aim of this article has been to explore the politics of fatherhood and masculinity of an  
42 Italian non-resident fathers' rights activists on one Facebook group.  
43

44 Through an explorative content analysis, we found that our results are consistent with  
45 previous research conducted in other contexts, but also shed light on some peculiarities of the  
46 Italian context.  
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49 First, claims for involved fatherhood and equal co-parenting are used in a strategic way  
50 to rebuild and reinforce traditional masculinity and gender relations (Deriu, 2007; Kaye and  
51 Tolmie, 1998; Petti and Stagi, 2015). Second, these demands open the way to antifeminist and  
52 antifeminine ideas that can be interpreted as backlashes against women's emancipation (Boyd,  
53 2004; Dragiewicz, 2008; Faludi, 1991).  
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58 Moreover, the data allow one to locate this Facebook group in the anti-feminist backlash  
59 corner of Messner's (2000) terrain of the politics of masculinity. Its members, in fact, show  
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3 some similarities with the other groups analysed by Messner, especially in emphasizing men's  
4 pain and women's/feminists' responsibility for it, denying and ignoring their privileges as  
5 white, heterosexual men, promoting antifeminist instances. This strategy of privilege reversal,  
6 in which they become the victims, is interesting because it allows them to organize around a  
7 shared identity which is actually shaped by the system that produces the privilege they refuse  
8 to recognize.  
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13 However, MD shows some peculiarities. First, unlike the Mythopoetic movement,  
14 which defines its members' work as apolitical, MD members explicitly claim their advocacy  
15 and they do not hide their strong connections with politicians who publicly write on the group  
16 with their official Facebook accounts. Second, unlike other groups, such as *Maschi Selvatici*  
17 (the Italian expression of the Mythopoetic movement) or Promise Keepers, who hold  
18 essentialist beliefs about masculinity and men's and women's roles, the group officially – and  
19 instrumentally – advocates for a reconstruction of parental roles on a more egalitarian basis.  
20

21  
22 Indeed, in the online sphere they can express and pour out their resentment against  
23 feminists, but also (sometimes especially) against their ex-wives, enacting what we decided to  
24 call a “rancorous masculinity”, a local form of masculinity that complies with hegemony as it  
25 enacts practices aimed at maintaining the subordination of women (Connell and Messerschmidt  
26 2005), and it expresses itself in toxic and violent ways. As has been argued (Connell, 2016),  
27 though, male aggressiveness and violence might not be an expression of hegemony, but rather  
28 a symptom of power erosion. In our formulation, rancorous masculinity is, indeed, a hybrid  
29 form of masculinity (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014) that combines egalitarian values and ideas of  
30 involved fatherhood with traditional normative features of masculinity, and which relates in  
31 different ways to hegemony according to local circumstances and social environments (Connell  
32 and Messerschmidt, 2005). On the internet, we find hegemonic patterns of practices that include  
33 – at least in theory – equal co-parenting, but not gender equality: the use of involved fatherhood  
34 in a strategic way is meant to maintain (or restore) hegemony, where the imbalance of power  
35 between men and women is never questioned. In this sense, rancorous masculinity is hybrid  
36 because it appropriates progressive ideals and practices of fatherhood in order to support the  
37 current gender order. In fact, vocabularies of “equality” and of “rights” serve as rhetorical  
38 devices to support the credibility and rightfulness of their claims (Kaye and Tolmie, 1998) and  
39 to depict themselves as the real promoters of equality, in contrast with the greedy and deceitful  
40 women and feminists.  
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59 These aspects yield insights about the wider manosphere and justify our choice to  
60 include this specific case study as part of it. These online communities are, indeed, communities

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3 of practices of masculinities where the expression and support of violence against women and  
4 the will to restore traditional gender roles grant full membership and overlap, in their members'  
5 view, with the recovery of men's rights. However, the peculiarity of our case study is that these  
6 men not only use reverse privilege to promote hate against women, but also incorporate  
7 egalitarian and feminist instances in their claims nullifying their transformative potential of the  
8 gender order. In fact, co-parenting ideals, that could lead to more egalitarian gender relations  
9 and practices, become a tool to reinforce inequalities between men and women: we can  
10 hypothesize, then, that even if these men may be co-parents and involved fathers, both in online  
11 and offline life, for sure they would not be egalitarian partners. Their representation of the  
12 "good" father, indeed, does not include a respectful relationship with their former partners and  
13 mothers of their children.  
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16 In those cases, conversely, when the claims for higher involvement with children were  
17 made before separation and/or are not used instrumentally, it might be possible that in some  
18 offline social contexts – as, for example, the courtrooms for child custody – these men enact a  
19 non-hegemonic masculinity that changes their positioning in the current gender order and the  
20 related configuration of power relations.  
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23 This fact could be important in order to provide a better interpretation of the decisions  
24 courts make around child custody and financial support and, in particular, to better address  
25 men's resentment without simply dismissing their demands.  
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28 The main limit of the research concerns the narrow focus on only one, though large,  
29 group of Italian activists. Moreover, a more accurate picture of the Italian manosphere is still  
30 missing. However, to this aim, this work can provide methodological tools and represent a  
31 starting point for further research in two directions: to reinforce the status of the manosphere as  
32 a relevant cultural and social phenomenon; and to shed light on the ways discursive strategies  
33 and the appropriation of progressive ideals are used to support power imbalance in other social  
34 contexts.  
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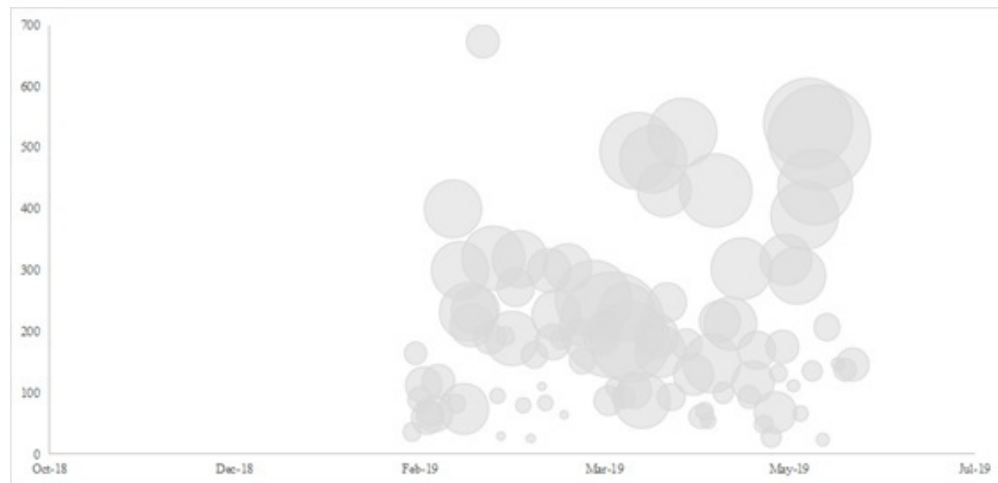
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For Peer Review



Posts of MD Facebook page by number of reactions (position of the bubble) and number of comments (size of the bubble) from October 2018 to June 2019

47x22mm (300 x 300 DPI)

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Word cloud of keywords emerged by the web scraping on Mantenimento Diretto Facebook page (translated from Italian to English)

22x17mm (300 x 300 DPI)

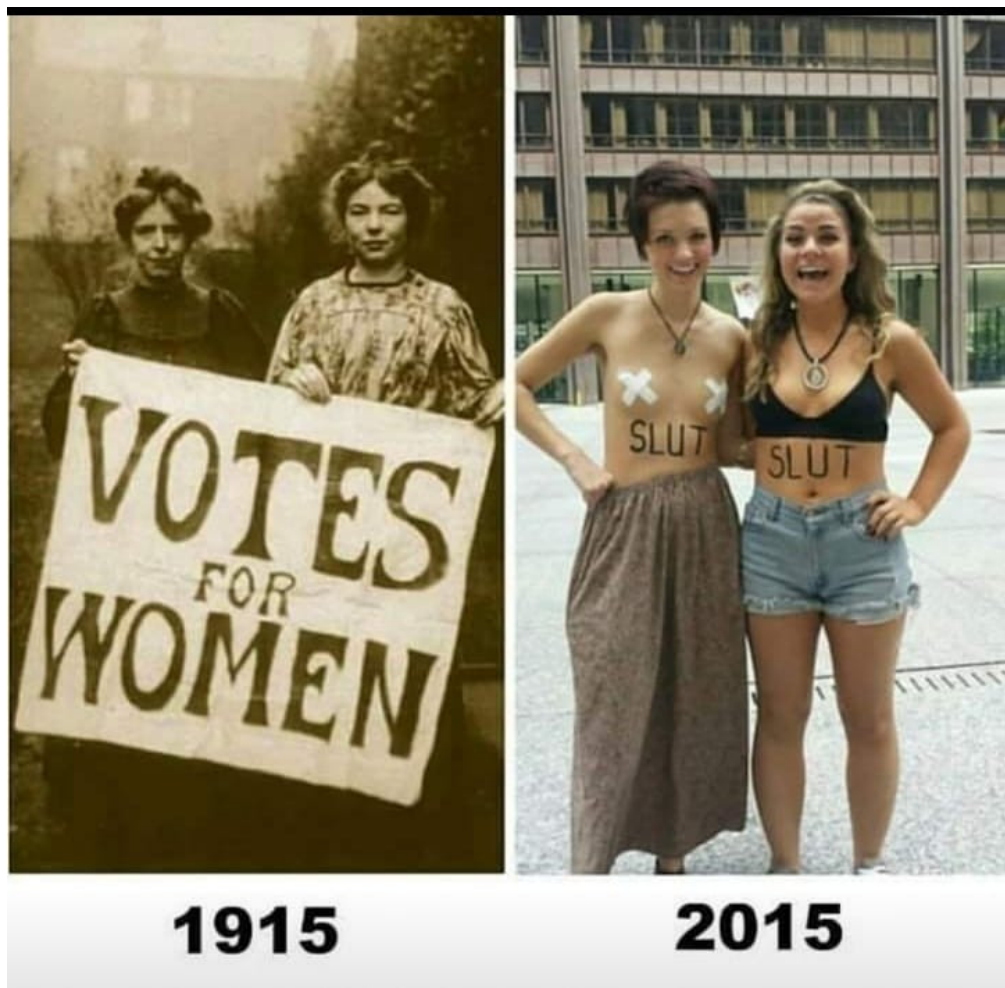




Ironical vignette on men's privileges

38x33mm (300 x 300 DPI)

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Example of sarcastic vignette portraying contemporary feminists

60x59mm (300 x 300 DPI)



Example of sarcastic vignette portraying contemporary feminists

47x49mm (300 x 300 DPI)

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Vignette representing divorced women's greediness

40x40mm (300 x 300 DPI)