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DOCTORAL THESIS

**Uneven Routes of Mobilizing 'as Men':
Reconfiguring Masculinities among Anti-sexist Groups of
Men in Italy and Spain**



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To my family

Artwork on the cover: “Astratto numero 6”

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Introduction

The true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations which we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us.

Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 1984, p. 123

1. Gender justice

Our bodies trying not to take too much room in the metro, the dishes in the sink yet to be done, the too-staring gaze of the man at the traffic light, the pay gap, the exhaustion of emotional work that ought to be performed next to paid work. Compulsory sexiness at any age, compulsory toughness at any age, being discredited when angry as ‘hysterical’, being forbidden emotions unless anger. Trying not walking alone when dark, laughing at your boss’ sexist joke, avoiding eye contact with the cleaning lady, admitting ‘I am not racist, but’, having to prove one’s sense of real manliness upon request, avoiding things because ‘too gay’ while playing with men’s Sapphic fantasies.

All of these are material-discursive practices intertwined into the everydayness of our lives as women and men (Hearn 2014), affecting those of us who embody and share a rather normative social position being white, heterosexual, cis-gender, neoliberal consumers and well-behaving employees of the global north. All of these are material-discursive practices which have to do with the negotiation of one’s own feelings and possibilities of action, identity and subjectivity in relation to social interactions and expectations, and thus with questions of power intended as dynamic, affirmative, embodied-embedded (Braidotti 2002, 2011). All of these are material-discursive practices which mainly pass unnoticed and in every case have to do with gender justice on a micro level, yet culturally interlaced with more visibly recognized phenomena of injustice such as campus rape, domestic violence, child marriage, corrective rape, homophobic violence, and human trafficking, for example. Gender justice, thus, can be seen as a spectrum of issues, of intersecting matters of health, violence, sexuality, ethnic and sexual (LGBT+) discriminations, intimacy, economic power, relationships, media representations, personal agency, education, work and care. Gender justice cuts across

the local and the global, the micro and the macro level.

Gender justice is considered here as an everyday practice as well, as nothing we do, express or think, is - so to speak - out of gender. If we understand gender as a doing, as feminist scholarship aims to promote, everyday practices do always involve the interaction of men- and women-identified people, of femininities and masculinities, of multiple genders, sexes and sexualities. Doings and meanings cannot be disentangled from relations of power and intersections of multiple identity differentials of class, ethnicity, generation, cultural background, location and so forth (Crenshaw 1991; Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013). As we swim in the waters of everyday life, many things pass unnoticed, naturalized, given for granted. However, as situated subjects we are all always already involved in doing gender as we participate in reproducing practices, meanings and relations, with chances of reconfiguring them. As social actors interacting with others and with institutions, everybody has a role in confirming current practices - things as they are - and in challenging ways of thinking and doing, trying to shift things towards positive change (Turner and Bruner 1986). Gender justice can be seen, therefore, as a political passion and a sensitive outlook on reality, infused with intersectional awareness, concerned with inequalities and moved by the quest for social transformation.

Mobilizations and passion for gender justice have historically come across mainly as *women's* concerns, or *concerning women*, being women the main subjects of feminist struggles against patriarchal power relations and their discriminatory cultures. Quests for equity have also been associated with subjectivities whose 'marginality' is related to their gender identity, sex and/or sexual orientation. And, historically, the struggle for equal rights and civil rights has been mobilized primarily by these social actors who were personally discriminated against, turning their marginal location into a political one: allowing a variety of women's feminist, anti-racist and LGBT+ social justice movements to exist (Hill Collins 2015; Hooks 2015)

Fortunately, though, claims for justice can come as well from those who are socially embedded in situations of privilege: their critical awareness could materialise itself in various forms of ally politics. For instance, being white does not prevent people from joining anti-racist struggles and questioning white supremacy; living in a wealthy part of the global north can be combined with protesting against global advanced capitalism and its unfair business; walking on the heterosexual path can offer ways of challenging heteronormativity and LGBTphobias; being a straight man does not

necessarily equate with silently supporting sexism and its patriarchal intersections.

Indeed intersectional feminist sensitivity has taught us that social positionings are constructed through the complexity of interactions between different axes of differentiation (class, sex, gender, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, education, health, location etc.), so that social groups ('men' included) are not homogenous. Subjects' experiences of power and powerlessness can coexist and depend on the relations with others (Crenshaw 1991, Romero 2017).

The topic of this doctoral thesis is men's mobilizations for justice. It is based on a multi-situated ethnographic fieldwork conducted by myself following the action of different anti-sexist men's groups in Italy and Spain. When speaking of the possibility of men supporting feminist claims, therefore, it must be remembered that men are differently situated social actors whose experience of privilege and powerlessness differ according to their embodied-embedded positioning. Following a post-structuralist dynamic understanding of power relations (Hearn 2014; Braidotti 2011), in this thesis '**gender justice**' is used to indicate the realities of power differentials related to gender meanings, bodies and practices. 'Gender justice' is a term used in the English-speaking transnational field of social intervention into gender-related inequalities (MenEngage Alliance 2016).¹ When speaking of actors who mobilize in favour of feminist-oriented social change, I use 'gender justice' as an inclusive concept because it allows me to address different approaches that are contextually adopted in the field of contributing to creating more just gender relations. The actors in my fieldwork might indeed speak of 'gender equality, equity, equal opportunities, sexual differences, promotion of differences,' with these terminology encompassing also the initiatives aimed at eradicating gender-based violence, violence against women and LGBTphobia-related violences.

Therefore, I deliberately choose '**gender justice**' an inclusive analytic umbrella term when it comes to accounting for different anti-sexist or feminist approaches encountered in the field. This choice serves the purpose to leave open for ethnographic analysis the question of men's relations feminist claims, how they formulate them, and whether the paradigm of 'gender equality' is used and how (e.g., theoretically, institutionally) by actors in their claims and practices. When I describe different approaches in their contexts of reference-action, I discuss gender justice perspectives

¹ MenEngage Alliance (2016). "Critical dialogue on engaging men and boys in gender justice. Summary report." Available at: http://menengage.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/e-Dialogue-Report_V5.pdf accessed on 05/01/2019.

and initiatives by adopting their situated concepts and terminology. For the sake of linguistic fluidity in this thesis, I sometimes use gender justice interchangeably with gender equity; and I use the term ‘gender equality’ specifically when referring to the actors (institutions or groups of men) that incorporate this concept in their work.

With a qualitative, feminist situated and ethnographically engaged research, this thesis explores different critical-creative elaborations on masculinities and gender relations coming from contemporary anti-sexist men’s engagements in Italy and Spain. Academically based within Gender Studies and socio-anthropological scholarship, this thesis contributes to the studies of men and masculinities by offering theoretical and empirical insights into men’s engagements for gender justice in contemporary Italy and Spain, in the context of neoliberal economic crisis and information society. The analyses are delivered by practicing a critical approach so to highlight the tensions and contradiction encountered in the field of men organizing for gender justice; with an affirmative approach and a new feminist materialist understanding of concepts as figurations, this thesis also wants to provide a generous analysis attentive to the generative nature of concepts and practices.

2. Theoretical routes I

Springing from feminist theoretical enthusiasm, encrafted with the curiosity and commitment of engaged ethnographic practice, and supported by a generous amount of critical faith in social change, this thesis explores the possibilities/paces/paths of men who collectively organize in favour of gender justice.² Relationality is key to meaning-making processes and ‘categories’ do not exist prior to their relations, they rather co-construct relationally with contextualized cultural meanings (e.g., gender is raced and classed, race and class are gendered). Accordingly, this approach helps us understand of the sex/gender system (Rubin 1975) and are therefore studied in their relations with it and its sexual and gender meanings (Ortner and Whitehead 1981).

² The social background inhabited by the majority of the subjects mobilising within antisexist masculinity politics groups under study is white, middle-class, highly educated and between 45-60 years of age. This positioning also refers to the hegemonic features of modern subjectivity as it has been historically constructed in western culture.

³ I have got the chance to explain this further in the chapter I wrote for the volume *Everyday Feminist Research Praxis: Doing Gender in the Netherlands* (Olivieri and Leurs 2014).

⁴ The debate on ‘pro-feminism’ is particularly interesting when it comes to clarifying political orientations in academic work and disciplinary boundaries. Some academics when elaborating on masculinities research as a field

The analysis I deliver in this thesis builds on a critical and affirmative approach that aims to investigate the ethico-onto-epistemological (Barad 2003) **potential** of different material-discursive mobilizing journeys. The affirmative take on of this personal-political practice draws upon New Feminist Materialism focus on the potentialities of concepts and doings and what they can do (Van der Tuin and Dolphijn 2012; Hinton and Van der Tuin 2014; Van der Tuin 2016). The question at the base of this study is the hows of social transformation through looking at men's participation into gender justice politics. The question narrows down to exploring the possibilities of enacting (ethico-onto-epistemological) change from the positions of those who historically enjoy gender-related privileges and have rarely faced their own situated social locations.

Understanding power in a broad post-structuralist manner, every social position is constituted relationally as well as intersectionally, and is inscribed in fluid networks of power differentials. At the heart of the matter we can see that no social position is in itself fixed: experiences of power and powerlessness coexist, emerge and do enter the everyday of almost everybody - yet, qualitatively and quantitatively differently, when moving through different social settings. Beyond the structural dichotomy of oppressors VS oppressed, thus, the workings of power are experienced by different subjects with multilayered and situationally changing elements of *potentia* and *potestas* (Braidotti 2012). From a political level, this allows for the creation of different forms of political formations: identity and ally politics, solidarity movements, aim-oriented assemblages, initiative-driven collectives, strategic campaigning, etc. Therefore, speaking about men joining anti-sexist struggles, next to an affective and/or a rationally-built willingness to support gender justice as allies, what motivates their political vision can also be - when acknowledged - the lived experiences of power/powerlessness (Messner, Greenberg, and Peretz 2015; Peretz 2017).

In different historical times and motivated by different issues, many men of various class, cultural and ethnic background, sensitive to matters of social justice, have been supportive of feminist struggles. Sometimes their support of gender justice could allow them to critically look at masculinity norms as well by realizing that 'as men' they are also affected by a gendered socialization, are inscribed into a cultural *habitus* (Bourdieu 2001) and are reproducing material-discursive everyday practices of power and powerlessness. Previous experiences of this kind and the ethnographic data encountered through my own experience show that gender awareness, i.e.

acknowledging processes of gender socialization and one's positioning 'as man' are pivotal in men's organizing and engaging for gender justice. Based on the reading and thinking through the ethnographic material collected during fieldwork, this thesis explores in particular the forms and meanings, the possibilities, tensions and potentialities of organizing 'as men.' This seems interesting because of the possible different routes this move can create, given that, historically, holders of positions of privilege rarely have seen themselves as such: remaining invisible to themselves, **a lack of critical self-reflection and self-questioning appears to be constitutive of their discursive and material exercises of power**, as a power-knowledge construction and ethico-onto-epistemology of the dominant. In agreement with this, as it has been explained by historical and critical theory scholarship (Hearn 1998; Victor J. Seidler 1989; Boccia 2002; Ciccone 2009), the social position of white heterosexual masculinity has often remained unquestioned for a long time, and its normative position has been very rarely interrogated by men themselves.

As a power/knowledge construct (Foucault 1980) of western modernity, rationalist white masculinity appears as an unmarked social position, as 'the norm' of the human and of modern ideal of subjectivity. This subject is an autonomous, objective observer of the world, detached from his own corporeal living, erecting his epistemological authority on the superiority of his reasoning mind dualistically opposed to a less-worthy affective and fleshy body (Lloyd 1993). This dualistic opposition is built hierarchically and gendered, it is reproduced within western culture alongside many others conceptual binaries and dialectical oppositions. Casting masculinity among the essential characteristics of the knowing subject while granting him epistemic universality contributed to making men's practices unmarked, and to the fact that what men do or think 'as men' is rarely seen as a sexed-gendered set of phenomena.

Major questioning of the invisibility of taken-for-granted rationalist masculinity and what has been termed by Hartsock 'Abstract Masculinity' (Hartsock 1983) has come indeed from feminist situated epistemologies (Harding 1991; D. Haraway 1988) and from feminist poststructuralist philosophies and corporeal feminisms (Milan women's bookstore collective 1990; Irigaray 1985; Braidotti 1994; Colebrook 2000; Boccia 2002). In feminist anthropology, much effort was dedicated to questioning the universality of masculinity (Héritier 2010) and arguing in favour of a grounded and situated approach for studying men's located socio-cultural practices beyond assumptions and stereotypes (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 2016). Within critical

scholarship on masculinities, naming men ‘as men’ has been one of the pivotal steps in situating men and masculinities in the contexts of gendered social relations (Collinson and Hearn 1994); or, as the same authors suggests using a recurring phrase in the field, in ‘breaking the silence’ (Collinson and Hearn 1996) on gendered dynamics affecting men’s practices. Hearn considers this ‘decentering men’ (2014) from a dominant and unquestioned position, acknowledging the processes that material-discursively create power differentials in men’s practices.

In my previous research at Utrecht University I explored some of the ways in which the Italian men’s network *Maschile Plurale* questions Abstract Masculinity drawing upon Italian sexual difference theories and practices. Passionate about feminist statements such as: ‘the future of the world is open: it lies in starting along the path from the beginning again with woman as a ‘subject’ (Lonzi in Bono and Kemp 1991), I was interested in understanding how men’s anti-sexist activism can draw from feminist political experiences to acknowledge themselves as sexed-embodied subjects ‘as men’ and account for their own partial locations; differing from the personal, epistemological, as well political relevance (potentiality) and paths of female-feminist subjectivities. Motivated by feminist situated epistemologies this study aimed to show that ‘no thought comes from nowhere’ and that creating a genealogy with feminisms is part of practicing accountable anti-sexist engagements. My exploration was simultaneously personal, theoretical and political, driven by my own desire to understand and intervene within the politics of gender relations in which I was/am embodied-embedded; in which I felt the urgency to make room for my own female-feminist subject and desire to emerge and speak up as a researcher and as a female-embodied thinking subject.³ Looking back, my research path so far has been a journey driven by the ‘passion for difference’ as in the definition by Maria Luisa Boccia: ‘the symbolic room in which women’s thought and actions can and must operate’ (Boccia, 2002: 67; translation mine). Being passionate for difference remains at the core of this PhD research as well, in the sense that it allows me to practice the type of research I would like to create: tackling the generative aspects of feminist theories, of the concept-practices entanglements, of the theoretical-personal-activist intra-actions (Barad 2003) and studying how movement is inserted into cultural critique and creativity (Van der Tuin and Dolphijn 2012).

Departing from these theoretical interests and building on my previous work,

³ I have got the chance to explain this further in the chapter I wrote for the volume *Everyday Feminist Research Praxis: Doing Gender in the Netherlands* (Olivieri and Leurs 2014).

what this thesis focuses on is a ‘gender-conscious organizing’ of men against sexism (Hearn 2015b), **in which the gendering of men ‘as men’ seems to be a constitutive part of this activism.** The mobilization of men who combine their process of becoming gender aware with their gender justice involvement in their personal, cultural and collective lives has been the relevant topic for the research conducted. As this ethnographic research encountered and aims to show, the key here is the process of acknowledging oneself ‘as man’ and turning this starting point into a transformative gesture towards possibly making a difference in many spheres (ontologically, epistemologically, ethically), traversing the personal and the political.

3. Anti-sexist masculinity politics

Organizations of men and individual men advocating for women’s rights are not a new phenomenon. In the history of western world, they started to become visible between the end of the eighteenth and the early nineteenth century, supporting women’s rights to education and vote in some political progressive circles (2012). These explicit manifestations of men in favour of equality were small and limited to a few intellectuals. In Europe the period between the two World Wars and Fascism put these progressive voices, as well as many others, into silence. Gender justice entered men’s political concerns thanks to women’s mobilizations in the 1970s, sometimes as a response to second wave feminism, others growing from the civil rights movement and the pacifist movement. Since then men’s commitment against sexism has been growing in the Anglo-Saxon contexts and Scandinavia, in collaboration with feminist groups and a strong focus on eradicating male violence against women (M. S. Kimmel and Mosmiller 1992; Messner 1997; Flood 2001; Okun 2014; Messner, Greenberg, and Peretz 2015). In other countries, stimulated by feminist participation in political mobilizations, men’s groups were organized to critically discuss masculinity in relation to power in the personal and the public sphere. Currently, men’s **anti-sexist** efforts are configured as networks, informal groups, organizations; globally connected while operating on a local and regional level.

The organization of men ‘as men,’ as a political form of collective engagement with the aim of advocating change in relation to individual and social men’s gendered practices, is what we call ‘masculinity politics.’ In Connell’s words, masculinity politics

includes ‘those mobilizations and struggles where the meaning of masculine gender is at issue, and, with it, men’s positions in gender relations’ (Connell 1995, 205). Masculinity politics thus interrogates men and masculinities by looking at men as gendered subjects, namely as actors of gender **socialization and meanings** as well as actors of social change. Within these mobilizations I focus on those in favour of gender equitable relations, which are collective engagements of men who take personal and public action against sexism, promote critical reflection on masculinity and men’s practices, and organize activities in favour of positive change in their communities. Being projected towards gender justice, the type of masculinity politics explored in this thesis is thus a feminist-aligned one, and scholars as well as professionals in the field refer to it as ‘men in feminism’, ‘man engaging for gender equality,’ ‘men against violence,’ ‘profeminist politics’, ‘anti-sexist men,’ ‘men against machismo,’ ‘ally work’, or ‘men’s gender justice work.’ Definitions vary depending on their geographical location, the discipline, the terms of reference, the terminology already used by peers, and their positioning towards feminism. Actors themselves use different definitions to refer to their activities depending on the context, on their explicit political stand in relation to women’s feminist groups and on their own feminist vision (if they name it as such). The ways in which men’s public engagement against sexism has taken shape are rooted within different cultural, political and feminist-genealogical contexts. For example, the Italian network *Maschile Plurale* is composed of different men’s groups that agree with ‘exploring men’s difference’, i.e. they borrow sexual difference feminist concepts to express the need to question dominant masculinity and pluralise masculinities, towards a less normative and heteronormative society. In Italian activists contexts ‘equality’ is a term associated with European institutional policy framework, and they rather name themselves ‘anti-violence actors/activists’ or ‘men committed to anti-violence action.’ Spanish men’s groups gather under the umbrella of ‘men for gender equality,’ using this term to identify their position against *machismo* and in alliance with LGBT+ struggles. Despite contextual practices, different strands in anti-sexist masculinity politics agree on the importance of seeing men and boys as agents of change, stimulating their sense of justice and responsibility in improving their own lives and that of others. The primary expression of this form of political action is men’s collective engagement against gender-based violence, and for this reason some research into men’s mobilizations refers to it as ‘anti-violence activism.’ (Flood 2001).

In literature, this men’s collective activity has been generally defined as ‘pro-

feminist' masculinity politics for its supportive and collaborative relations to women's movements and feminist goals. Despite its clarifying aims, the 'profeminist' label also raises a lot of questions in relation to the objects and subjects of feminist claims, identifications and positionings (Harding 1998; Holmgren and Hearn 2009; Peretz 2017). From the perspective of poststructuralist and queer theorists, the term 'pro-feminism' is criticized for assuming hetero-normative spaces of conversation between men and women; for not questioning the binary of sexed bodies (pro-feminist -man- and feminist -woman), and for denying the complexity of LGBT+ identifications. This debate raises the question of the suitability of theories based on the deconstruction of categories, such as poststructuralism and queer theory on one side, or about the importance of sociological-materialist positions, that is, of thinking in terms of social groups, on the other. As some scholars affirm (Hearn 2001) the suffix 'pro' is used by male scholars to indicate a relationship of respect and alignment with feminism (read: women's movement and work), and for avoiding the risk of 'colonizing feminism' as well academic Gender Studies once men would take space in it (ibid.). Within scholarly conversations the debate on 'pro-feminism' is taken up to discuss matters of political engagement, identifications, in/exclusions and also power-knowledge dynamics in producing research on men and masculinities as a field of its own.⁴

The use of the term '**gender justice**' in this thesis is preferred to 'pro-feminist' to address collective forms of agency driven by men that are trying to make a difference in eliciting positive social change in relation to men's practices and gender issues such as (but not only): gender-based violences, discriminations and LGBTphobia, LGBT+ rights, work policies, care work, parenting, gendered divisions of labour, intimacy and sex. This is a collective type of action in which men are understood as potential actors of gender-sensitive change by thinking and practicing masculinities differently. I use the terms '**anti-sexist masculinity politics**' and '**anti-violence activism**' to refer to the groups of men I study, because of their feminist political orientations and their anti-violence stands.

In the wider field of anti-sexist masculinity politics or ally politics, men are seen as the initiators of change in masculinities and subjects of transformation. This is a field not immune to contradictions and **tensions**, as some research shows (Ratele 2015;

⁴ The debate on 'pro-feminism' is particularly interesting when it comes to clarifying political orientations in academic work and disciplinary boundaries. Some academics when elaborating on masculinities research as a field speak about 'feminist parentage' (Whitehead and Barrett 2001), and others support the position according to which studies of men and masculinities should be considered a separate field dependant on feminism, but rather 'part of the feminist revolution in knowledge that has been opening up in the last generation' (R. Connell 2012, 9).

Fabbri 2016; Macomber 2018). Top-down advocacy trends coexist with grassroots networking strategies and different personal-political trajectories. Men in profeminist activism and advocacy develop anti-patriarchal beliefs, and they try to start a journey of gendered self-reflection, critical inquiry into societal norms and meanings, creative instances into their daily negotiation of identities and practices. There is no linear path for such a journey, and many different factors interfere with the motivations, processes and outcomes of men involved in gender justice (personal, political, theoretical and cultural).

Men's public involvement in contributing to gender justice cuts across various professional fields: education, social intervention, community work, therapy, outreach campaigns, research, policy consulting. Activists and professionals in one setting can work or volunteer as practitioners or advocates in others, with different labour and funding conditions. Anti-sexist men's engagement can take the shape of individual activism or can be organized in informal men's groups, non-profit associations, non-profit organizations' networks and transnational alliances. Some notable examples of transnational networks active at the moment of writing are the *White Ribbon Campaign*; the US-based *National Organization of Men Against Sexism* (NOMAS); the *Latin-American Network of Masculinities*, emerging networks in India, *MenCare Global Fatherhood Campaign*, *Sonke Gender Justice* from South Africa, *Promundo Global* and *MenEngage* global alliance. This research has focused on local groups and their networks in Italy and Spain, for analysing their initiatives and efforts in rethinking masculinities and understanding how men's groups engage locally and transnationally if they get to establish transnational connections.

4. Research fields and main questions

As previously stated, the topic of this dissertation is men's involvement in anti-sexist masculinity politics in contemporary Italy and Spain. This research approaches masculinity politics by looking at its less-institutionalized manifestations. With an ethnographic approach, my main units of observation have been the Italian network *Maschile Plurale* (MP) with its affiliated groups, and *Homes Igualitaris-AHIGE Catalunya* (HI-AHIGE) together with other Barcelona-based groups organizing for gender justice. This selection of research cases is rooted in my fieldwork practice, and

builds on my previous research conducted for my RMA thesis at Utrecht University (June 2011) entitled *Questioning Abstract Masculinity: Theories and Practices of the Italian Men's Network Maschile Plurale*. The idea of expanding this work ethnographically onto the scenario of men's networks in Spain came from a specific event, during my first research visit to Barcelona in October 2011.

On occasion of the *Congreso Iberoamericano Masculinidad y Equidad* (Iberoamerican Congress on Masculinity and Equity, CIME2011) co-organized by HI-AHIGE, I had the opportunity to observe that the movement in Spain was actively networking with fellow activists in Latin-America and Portugal, and Italian activists were invited to join the conversation too. The congress cut across the academic and activist levels, and internationally renewed professionals in both fields participated. A representative and co-founder of MP, Stefano Ciccone, who had acted as my gatekeeper during my fieldwork in Italy, informed me about the congress because he was invited to give a plenary talk during CIME2011. This was the first time in which Barcelona-based groups materialized a connection with MP. From my side, my research experience on (and contacts with) the Italian men's mobilization helped me establishing contacts with the organizers prior to the event, acquiring authority among HI members and gaining their interest and trust to access the space of the congress and the field of men's activism there. Research-wise, with my field-notes at hand, from that moment on I understood that my background on Italian culture of gender relations and on the reflection of MP could provide an interesting entry point into the study of men's involvement in gender justice work in Spain as well. Expanding the study ethnographically seemed a fruitful path to start walking.

Building upon my previous research in 2010-2011 and my fieldwork contacts in Italy, in my PhD project I choose the network MP as unit of observation because it acted as the only explicitly anti-sexist men's network in Italy, because of its commitment in grounding men's anti-violence engagement in local networks and because of its theoretical and activist elaborations in conversation with the Italian feminisms of sexual difference. These reasons make MP's work interesting to engage with, from a scholarship and from an activist perspective. MP's masculinity politics seems different from better-known masculinity politics in the Anglophone and Spanish-speaking contexts, commonly relying upon equalitarian feminist traditions. MP's field of work, thus, offers very interesting possibilities to contribute to rethinking and reconfiguring masculinities (Nardini 2014). Drawing upon the existing relations

between Italian and Barcelona-based activists and my fieldwork contacts there, other main unit of observation in my PhD has been HI-AHIGE. During my fieldwork in Barcelona the association HI-AHIGE emerged as a very active association when compared to other existing and emerging men's groups in Catalonia, and also to other associations based elsewhere in Spain affiliated to the same national network *Asociación de Hombres por la Igualdad de Género (AHIGE)*.⁵ This thesis therefore draws upon the research I carried out mainly among MP and HI (AHIGE) members. My engagement with this fieldwork started before I enrolled at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya in October 2013.

Indeed, between October and November 2012, while working as a self-funded PhD student at Utrecht University, I conducted a second fieldwork visit of six-weeks in Barcelona among HI's members. The timeframe of this fieldwork was specifically chosen to be immersed in the anti-violence initiatives and demonstrations organized in the city, because October and November are the months of the year most dedicated to anti-violence initiatives and demonstrations. The group president at that time, Juanjo Compairé, acted as my gatekeeper. I am grateful of his patience, interest and care for inviting me to all the public activities HI took part at (roundtables, talks, street demonstrations, etc.), and for enthusiastically introducing me to other activists in the field. The network of contacts I gained through his connection allowed me to intensively learn about HI's and AHIGE's work, carrying out interviews and joining most of the activities related to men's anti-violence activism run in Barcelona and in nearby cities (i.e., Sant Boi, Sabadell, Abrera).

While following MP's work online, in March 2013 I took part at the national meeting MP organized in Rome entitled *Mio fratello è figlio unico. Cosa cambia se cambiano i desideri degli uomini*.⁶ This was the first MP meeting fully dedicated to deepening and exploring the political relations MP members had with feminist women and groups. My presence in the meeting was welcomed positively and my role was recognized as a student of anti-sexist men activism and as a feminist woman. National meetings are important moments for MP, because people involved in gender justice meet in person and practice political exchange and debates in a horizontal assembly.

⁵ Being part of AHIGE, the organization HI and its members present themselves as *Homes Igualitaris*, or *Homes Igualitaris-AHIGE Catalunya*, or just AHIGE, depending on the contexts and interlocutors. In this thesis I speak about HI when referring to the organization in Barcelona and to AHIGE to indicate the broader association and network of groups existing in Spain.

⁶ MP, 2013, *Mio fratello è figlio unico, cosa cambia se cambiano i desideri degli uomini di MP'* online available at: <https://www.maschileplurale.it/gen-2013-mio-fratello-e-figlio-unico-cosa-cambia-se-cambiano-i-desideri-degli-uomini-di-mp/>, accessed on 19/11/2018.

They are organized yearly and, according to the needs of the network, in some occasions they offer spaces open to the public. This fieldwork was useful to re-establish my connections alive with MP, to meet members from other cities and conduct more interviews; to learn about MP's developments in masculinity-political concerns; and to observe the relations the network was establishing within Italy and with Spanish activists. Indeed, as a representative of AHIGE, Juanjo Compairé participated of HI's interest to continue the relations with MP, and later he published his report on the meeting *Tendiendo Puentes* (building bridges) in AHIGE's online journal *Hombres Iguaritarios*.⁷

In October 2013 I started my work as a PhD researcher at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC, Barcelona) with a grant of three years, and I had the opportunity to further ethnographically my PhD project. In my first academic year at UOC I continued fieldwork among HI and other men's groups in Barcelona and its nearby areas. In the following academic year (October-June 2014/2015) I carried out fieldwork in Italy thanks to my visiting stay affiliated at the Università di Bologna being hosted by the *Collegio dei Fiamminghi*.⁸ Bologna is one of the most politically engaged cities in Italy, including feminist, LGBT+ and other gender activisms (Radicioni and Virtù 2013). In Bologna I followed the action of gender-related activisms encompassing men's anti-violence engagements; feminist and LGBT+ initiatives; Gender Studies academic activities at the University and seminars and book presentations at the Women's Documentation Centre of the *Associazione Orlando*. While maintaining a more regular base in Barcelona and Bologna for research and for accessibility reasons, I conducted fieldwork by following the action, relevant to understand the anti-sexist men's engagement in these cities and their surroundings. When necessary, I travelled to other locations for specific meetings or events.

My previous experience as a Gender Studies student carrying out fieldwork among men's activism provided me with a no-threatening and positive role to access fieldwork spaces and informants' trust; moreover, my abilities to write and connect different contexts and languages made me attractive for acting as a networking agent among men's engagements. During my fieldwork I was invited to take part as a speaker

⁷ Compairé, J. (2015) 'Tendiendo puentes' in *Hombres Iguaritarios* online journal accessed on 10/04/2018 http://www.antiguahombresigualitarios.ahige.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1626:tendiendo-puentes&catid=37:articulos&Itemid=57

⁸ I was granted the opportunity to stay at the *Collegio dei Fiamminghi* in 2012 while being affiliated as a PhD student to Utrecht University.

at public talks, to organize roundtables, to connect activists and groups, to write reports of events, to write dissemination articles and to contribute to online and printed activist-academic publications. I enthusiastically joined these activities as part of the work of ‘*corresponding* with people’ when performing participant observation as my ‘ontological commitment’ *with* the field and my interlocutors (Ingold 2017, 23). Joining these activities, moreover, offered me the possibility to practice the ethical and epistemological accountability that I preach in this thesis when advocating for responsible situated knowledges (Sáez Tajafuerce 2018); and for ‘the ability to respond’ (Haraway 2008, 224) as a knowledge-producer entangled with(*and*)in the field. Working on gender justice, I would like to understand my commitment to this research as ontological, epistemological and ethical, in connection with my feminist political desire to contribute transformatively to gender relations. My engagement with many activities with(*and*)in fieldwork is coherent with such a desire as gender justice initiatives helped me connecting research with social intervention.⁹ I have been alternating periods of multi-situated fieldwork and bibliographical research, with periods as a volunteer, a communication and networking agent, a gender justice educator, and a consultant. These experiences allowed me to respond, to gain accountability and trust among research informants, and to learn how men’s gender justice engagement is practiced in academia, advocacy, activism, and educational interventions (and their interferences).¹⁰

The transnational accent of this work put me in conversation with some relevant debates from different cultural and geopolitical contexts (North-American, South-American, Nordic and West-Central European), and made me understand the significant contribution that my own situated analysis grounded into my fieldwork research could provide to this field. During the research process, I had the chance to make public some of the outcomes of this work with conference presentations and with both academic and dissemination-oriented publications. My participation in the design and organization of

⁹ Importantly, where Gender Studies are not institutionalised such as in the Italian academia, doing gender-sensitive critical research is performed as an activist project infused with political awareness. This is currently increasing in those European contexts affected by both the economic crisis, contributing to the neoliberalisation and precarity of academic labour, and the rise of ‘anti-gender’ movements supported by institutional Catholic conservatism, namely in south and central-eastern Europe (Galletto et al. 2009; Revelles-Benavente, González Ramos, and ATGENDER 2017).

¹⁰ From my work as researcher, indeed, I collaborated with some of the groups not only as a participant observer and active listener, but also engaging myself actively in advocating for involving men and boys in gender justice. On a transnational level I joined MenEngageEurope and I have served on several occasions as volunteer researcher, consultant or trainer (during EIGE’s Civil society meeting in Vilnius 2017 and 2018; IMAGINE project final conference, Amsterdam 2018; Membership Meeting in Vienna 2018). Please consult my activity report and CV for more details.

the ‘Men in Movement’ conferences in Barcelona (November 2015), Rome (December 2016) and Barcelona (November 2017) contributed to creating collaborations; with the aim of merging academic and activist efforts. These activities offered me important learning opportunities next to strengthening fieldwork contacts and establishing new ones; accordingly, they allowed me to grow the epistemic authority and trust in the field (Enguix 2014) that granted me the access to more research sites.

Indeed, being reminded that ‘we are always already methodological’ (Van der Tuin 2011), I acknowledge that I have navigated fieldwork with my previous research experience at hand and, theoretically, bringing with me my feminist theoretical interests: the interaction between concepts and practices, about how this contributes to stimulating men’s activism for gender justice, and the way their feminist-inspired critical reflections are intertwined with their contributions in changing heteronormative sexist power relations.

Following the action during fieldwork, I approached Italian and Spanish groups beyond comparative nationalist methodological boundaries. During the research process it became clear that the heterogeneity of national contexts provided more complex and differing scenarios than I had imagined initially. In this sense, it was more interesting and fruitful to engage with the debate taking place around a topic locally than carrying out generalized comparisons. The large amount of topics addressed in the field and my participant observation required a methodology able to account for situated genealogies as well as for the researcher’s involvement in the knowledge production, that is why I opted for a diffractive approach (Mazzei 2014).

My interest in understanding men’s transformative elaborations and their ethico-onto-epistemological potentialities brought me to formulate my research question as: **in which ways *critical-creative* approaches to men and masculinities are created by men’s networks for gender justice in Italy and Spain?** The ethnographic outlook of this research digs into the field of men’s engagement in gender justice, the practices and reflections mobilized, the strategies adopted and the challenges faced by the groups. It draws upon their anti-violence campaigns and actions; their initiatives on issues such as prostitution, love and care work and their educational projects aimed at reconfiguring masculinities. Finally, the research is focused on their constant *critical-creative* efforts for encouraging changes in the personal experiences of men, starting from their own. The attention has been directed to how shifts in thinking and practicing masculinities are mobilized considering the theories discussed, goals and political positionings, and

the initiatives and campaigning launched ‘as men.’ I am interested in the generative potential of reconfiguring men’s practices and gender relations, and in the problematic tensions faced and produced within this field of activism.

The action of men’s groups I have followed during fieldwork immersed me into different feminist genealogies, mobilizing different questions and making different material-discursive proposals for intervention. The differences encountered within the networks selected as research units, as well as among groups that are active in the same area or city, generated an interesting scenario to analyse ethnographically and made clear that it would be more interesting to be centered in the central issues for each group rather than on the national contexts of reference. A comparative analysis between Italian and Spanish men’s mobilizations proved itself to be too static and methodologically inaccurate and unproductive to account for the situated realities of men’s engagements and their elaborations. In my research, I formulated some secondary questions: which ideas do men in gender justice think with? How can some practices/concepts (can) become transformative and relevant for the personal-political routes of situated men? Which images move them at the personal intimate level and which become mobilizing questions at a collective level? How is their political (transformative) force understood and practiced? These are feminist questions as they acknowledge the workings of power at the personal, embodied and relational level; these are also feminist new materialist questions as they inquiry, with an affirmative visionary approach (Van der Tuin 2016), into the routes of embodied-embedded subjectivities who are creatively engaging with concepts for social transformation.

The analyses provided in the different chapters of this thesis have been written in order to answer these questions. They keep an engaged and situated approach grounded in fieldwork encounters, they are informed with the content analysis of online and offline texts, and are aware of and addressing the genealogies of concepts and practices between feminist and men’s’ political experiences. This research aims to offer a critical reading of the theoretical and practical outcomes of men’s engaging with specific themes and to explore the creative potential for **gender justice reconfigurations (theoretical and practical) of these issues**. This, combined with the large amount of data I confronted with, led me to the decision to write this thesis according to a **selection** of relevant questions for men’s anti-sexist gender-conscious organizing (self-reflectivity, love politics, sexual politics and fatherhood politics) analysing them within the contexts where they emerged during fieldwork.

5. Thesis structure

The structure of this thesis follows the selection of themes that, according to my ethnographic work (the practice of careful participant observation and engaged analysis), emerged as the most relevant issues in their contexts: they are consciousness-raising, love politics, sexual politics and parental-care politics. By considering them as relevant I mean that they were recurrent during fieldwork, a mobilizing force claimed by men's personal journeys (personal level) and by the collective action of reconfiguring more just gender relations in the context they live in (socio-cultural and political level). They have a transformative potential, differing according to context, for men's relational practices (social intervention level), and this makes them 'matter' in relation to core feminist debates in activism and scholarship (political-theoretical level). Drawing this connection is for me personally a crucial part of my work in order to create accountable feminist research: aware of power relations and critical in its inquiry, motivated by the desire to positively contribute to social transformation, merging the academic with the activist, and able to relate to different actors in the field.

According to this structure, after positioning my research theoretically and methodologically (first chapter), I present an overview of gender justice men's engagements from a transnational and local point of view (second chapter). Each of the following chapters is dedicated to the exploration of how men's anti-violence engagements (MP in Italy or HI-AHIGE in Barcelona and Spain) mobilise critical and creative actions for the anti-sexist reconfiguration of masculinities and gender relations.

The **first chapter** of this thesis is dedicated to recalling the theoretical and methodological routes that allowed me to formulate and approach my research question(s), that is, to the onto-epistemological questioning of *Abstract Masculinity* from feminist philosophical formulations and from an urgent need to study ethnographically how men involved in gender-conscious activism in Italy and Spain are articulating critical-creative positions as embodied-embedded subjects.

In the **second chapter**, 'Geographies of men in gender justice', I offer an overview of the current field of men's anti-sexist involvement, from a transnational level to the local level of the cases. Main networks encountered during fieldwork are presented and their gender justice approach described, individuating anti-violence commitment as the first mobilizing force and as the most prominent issue in the public demonstrations of men's groups within MP in Italy and AHIGE in Spain. Anti-violence

engagement is connected to members' processes of gender-awareness and self-reflection. Those processes are pivotal for practicing their gender justice politics starting from the personal level. Mobilizing 'as men' against violence emerges as a crucial point for the elaboration of MP and AHIGE masculinity politics in their critical and affirmative elements. The following chapters are devoted to the exploration of those critical-creative proposals that, according to my fieldwork experience, emerged as the most relevant and interesting ones in relation to their contexts.

In **chapter three** the attention is drawn upon how the Italian network MP borrows the feminist practice of sharing experiences starting from oneself (*raccontarsi a partire da sé*) in consciousness-raising groups. Here, I examine the relations between sexual difference feminisms and their genealogies and men's gender justice engagements in Italy. Masculinity politics is performed with self-reflectivity in the group setting among men, with the affective and relational implications this can have for men's relationships with women and other men (*cura delle relazioni*).

Chapter four is dedicated to the debate on the deconstruction of the cultural norms of romantic love. This is a prominent question among Spanish anti-violence actors, (feminist activists as well as scholars). This chapter explains how romantic love becomes a political issue for anti-sexist men's groups in Barcelona and shows different men's groups approaches to this question. The relations with feminist genealogies here is taken into consideration, given the institutionalization of equality policies in local municipalities and the possibilities these programmes offer for NGOs and men's groups as well. Love politics enters masculinity politics and affects anti-violence initiatives, violence prevention s and sexual-affective education.

Analysing the work conducted by MP from 2010 until 2016, **chapter five** is drawn upon a very important and recurring topic in MP work: men's demands of paid sex and what this implies in terms of heterosexual male sexual desire, their cultural sexual imaginary and masculinity, and men's erotic experiences. Contextualized within the last phase of Berlusconi's government and his sexual scandals, sexual politics emerges at the core of masculinity politics among Italian men's groups, MP interrogates sexual norms so to understand and improve male embodied experiences and relationships with the strategy analysed in Chapter 3: the self-reflective approach of speaking 'as men' among men, starting from oneself. This practice draws upon separatist and male homosocial dynamics to deconstruct norms at a personal-collective levels and opening spaces for alternatives.

Starting from the online campaign launched by AHIGE in 2015 on occasion of the ‘Egalitarian Fatherhood Day’ (*Día del Padre Igualitario* on March 19th), **chapter six** approaches care politics within masculinity politics among Spanish anti-sexist mobilizations. The online campaign is analysed in its efforts to mobilize men ‘as caring men’. Care work is reclaimed by activists in three connected ways: to reformulate men’s relationships and practices, to establish networks among activists and groups, and to increase visibility by disseminating positive images of men in care-taking activities. This chapter reflects on the potentialities and limitations of mobilizing ‘as men’ as an engagement strategy both online and offline, and discusses this common practice in anti-sexist men’s groups as an onto-epistemological figuration that enables mobilizations and transformative initiatives not without criticisms and tensions.

The **discussion and conclusion** of this thesis links the analyses presented in all the chapters as well as the problems, tensions and contradictions encountered in men’s gender justice engagement across groups.

My ethnographic methodology allowed me to connect, in each chapter, locally grounded masculinity politics with relevant feminist debates. The relevance of the topics I focused on - thinking and doing anti-violence, consciousness-raising, reconfiguring love, sexual and parental-care politics - springs from the *situated relations they are part of and could contribute to*. These topics are relevant because they are at the core of the intersection of the urgent need to transform gender relations, the personal and collective mobilizing force of gender issues and the *political-theoretical debates generated upon them*.

As already stated this thesis relies on an onto-ethico-epistemological potential for transformation and makes a contribution to contextual and transnational feminist politics. For the sake of ethnographic and analytical depth, in the writing structure of this thesis the analysis of each theme is limited to its fieldwork context. With this structure, the chapters can be read independently from each other (with their own introduction and conclusion) and do not follow a linear logic.

In the conclusion of this thesis, the lived experience as embodied relational subjects is acknowledged as a dynamic realm of personal politics and activism. The importance given to embodied experience, relationships, care, love and sex within the masculinity politics studied is connected to the practice of mobilizing ‘as men.’ These political manifestations are discussed through feminist situated epistemological considerations, highlighting their onto-epistemological potentialities and the paradoxes encountered

during fieldwork. As a way of concluding, I reflect upon a researcher's reflexivity and responsibility, about the limitations of research and point out relevant issues for further research.

Chapter 1. Theoretical and methodological routes in my study of men's anti-sexist mobilizations

1. Drawing a map and entry points

The scholarship on men and masculinities allows, among other connections, also important conversations between academia, activism and policy making practices regarding the achievement of gender justice worldwide. Mostly within the frame of social sciences (anthropology, sociology, social policy) and interdisciplinary gender/sexuality studies, men and masculinities can be studied focusing on a range of numerous topics: media, violence, family, consumerism, education, ethnicity, labour, art, social policies, wealth, care, development, crime, theories of power, sexualities, activism and so forth.

Studying men as gendered social actors emerged within feminist anthropological endeavours (Benedict 2005; Mead 1949; Strathern and EBSCOhost 1990; Cornwall and Lindisfarne 2016; Gutmann 1997); what labelled itself as 'masculinity research' comes from sociological contexts mostly within the Anglophone north-western academia. Its growth is visible through several academic locations such as research centres, doctoral degrees, academic journals, international conferences, publications of handbooks and encyclopaedias (i.e., Kimmel, Hearn, and Connell 2004; Flood et al. 2013; Whitehead and Barrett 2001, and Gottzén, Mellström and Shefer, forthcoming). The increasing institutionalization of masculinity research characterises Anglophone and Nordic European universities because the state and gender equality policies support the construction of this scholarship and men's engagement in anti-sexism and feminist-oriented research has enabled the beginning of 'critical studies of men and masculinities' (Hearn and Morgan 1990). Critical studies of men, with their wide range of theoretical and disciplinary perspectives, are contributing to gender scholarship from

other geographical contexts as well following different processes of epistemological authorization and on the ground collaborations, depending on geopolitical locations and the type of institutionalization of Gender Studies (Hearn and Howson, forthcoming). The EU has funded policy-oriented projects on topics such as fatherhood and care (Scambor et al. 2015), gender awareness and men (Hearn, Pringle, and CROME (Organization 2009), and the IMAGES survey led by transnational organization Promundo since 2009 producing reports on men's practices in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Chile, Croatia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Brazil, Chile, and Mexico, Mali, Middle East and North Africa: Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Moldova, Mozambique, Nigeria, Rwanda, Serbia, and Ukraine (see (UN Women and Promundo 2017).

In Southern European and global South locations (Africa, Latin America and developing countries in Asia), in many cases researching gender and masculinities with a clear feminist orientation comes from the interaction between academia, politicized social interventions, institutional funding, and grass-roots organizing. This interaction can materialise itself through EU research-policy projects and during international events and conferences. In Barcelona, as I recalled in the introduction of this thesis, the conference CIME2011 (*Congreso Internacional Masculinidades y Equidad*) co-organized by the Spanish 'Association of men for gender equality' (AHIGE) brought together activists, professionals and researchers from Spain, Latin-America and Portugal; it has been this event that offered me a way to enter the field of anti-sexist masculinity politics in Spain and to witness the relations with Italian activists.

Bridging the academic, social intervention and activism fields has been one of the goals of the project we organized at UOC called 'Men in Movement,' establishing collaborations and networks among scholars doing research from and on men in Southern European contexts, through organizing international conferences on men, masculinities and gender justice in Barcelona (2015), Rome (2016) and Barcelona (2017). These collaborations have resulted in two journals' special issues: *About Gender* (Ciccone 2009; Gasparrini 2018) (Ciccone and Nardini 2017) and *Quaderns* (Enguix, Nardini and Abril 2018). In Italy, where gender scholarship is constitutively politicized and rarely institutionalized in academia, research on men emerges from these spaces and contributes to the problematization of men and men's practices (Ciccone 2009; Gasparrini 2018) gaining in collaboration and visibility through the conferences organized in Padua (2014, see the edited volume: (Chemotti 2015) and in Bergamo

(2017) and through collective publications grounded in social intervention fostering gender justice related to men and care (Deiana and Greco 2012), men, desire and love (Mapelli 2013), men's engagement with feminist theories and practices (Mapelli and Ciccone 2012) and anti-violence work with VAW (Violence Against Women) perpetrators (Bozzoli, Merelli, and Ruggerini 2017).

Some relevant publications in Spain on men and masculinities come from collective endeavours (Guasch and Lozoya 2012; Freixanet 2013; Fernández de Quero 2015; Tellez Infantes 2017; Enguix, Nardini and Abril 2018).¹¹ Two research groups devoted to masculinity exist in Catalonia. The first one is *MEDUSA, Genders in Transition*, coordinated by Begonya Enguix, and recognised as a consolidated group of research by the Catalan Government. This group, although interdisciplinary, mainly focuses on socio-anthropological perspectives on genders and bodies (particularly masculinity). The other group, coordinated by Angels Carabí, *Construyendo Nuevas Masculinidades/Constructing New Masculinities* is focused on Cultural Studies and is located at the Universitat de Barcelona.

In Latin-America in the past twenty years (Olavarría and Valdés 2009; Aguayo and Nascimento 2016) the process of research on men and masculinities has given rise to different theoretically inspired studies. They contributed to questioning sexism in men's practices, promoting the social acceptance of a plurality of masculinities, and offering important insights into the interplays among gender, violence, inequalities, sexual and reproductive health, and into men's involvement in feminist activism (Fabbri 2016). This process has also been significantly constituted by transnational collaborations among researchers, social intervention actors and social movements; as with the recurring conference *Coloquio Internacional de Estudios sobre Varones y Masculinidades* firstly organized in Puebla, México, in 2004. International agencies such as UN-Women intervene in the scene giving support for organizing such conferences.

The theoretical and methodological routes this thesis has walked to engender itself come from the interaction from research and grass-roots initiatives, and it is located within a feminist Gender Studies' perspective, contributing to the critical studies of men and masculinities. In feminist academic contexts, men and masculinities are studied as actors of intersectionally constituted gender meanings and relations,

¹¹ From an academic viewpoint, research on men was initiated in Spain during the 90s, it is worth mentioning the research Project from 1993 '*Masculinidad y construcción de los géneros en la sociedad contemporánea*' leaded by Begonya Enguix and funded by the *Institució Valenciana d'Estudis i Investigacions*, Generalitat/Diputació Valenciana.

considering their role in reproducing and/or challenging established power dynamics in which the affective personal experience is entangled with structural and global relations (see Hearn 2015a). Intersectional perspective, relational social meanings in sex/gender systems, and different geo-political contexts and social positionings are, therefore, crucial in understanding men's practices. This approach considers the label 'men's studies' misleading about and disrespectful of the activist and political heritages and implications of 'women's studies' as a body of knowledge coming from the emancipatory politics of the feminist movement. By seemingly stressing an analogy with 'women's studies,' the definition 'men's studies' as a field on its own is criticized also for contributing to hiding and negating the gendered asymmetry in power (and) knowledge (Hearn 2017, 24). Therefore, critical and self-reflective perspectives on studying men *as men* are advocated for, and feminist scholars prefer to study men and masculinities as a sub-field of Gender Studies. Hearn and Howson argue in favour of 'critical studies on men and masculinities,' stressing their feminist alignment (Hearn and Howson forthcoming). Interestingly, this discussion reminds us of the multiple (political, epistemological) locations that researching men and masculinities can have. Although 'men's studies' comes to mind most often, the definitions are different in use; in some ways illustrating the political and epistemological choices made by different scholars (a political stand within a definition cannot be escaped). The position claiming 'men's studies' as a separate field parallel to 'women's studies' is not the most popular in contemporary transnational academia, and it might express anti-feminist sentiments similar to the ones we can find in father's rights movements (see Collier and Sheldon 2006; Crowley 2008), and, in various measures, in mythopoetic men's movements (Clatterbaugh 2018).

However, despite the recurring narrative regarding men and masculinities studies that, under neoliberal academic pressures, emphasises the novelty, growing expansion, diversity, and development of the scholarship, 'there is nothing new in conducting research on men' remind us Cornwall and Lindisfarne in 1994 in *Dislocating Masculinity* (2016). Men have always been studied, mostly by other men, and have been the protagonists of knowledge in all fields. Nevertheless, the question of men and masculinity as part of socio-cultural, gendered constructions and power dynamics is relatively recent. Indeed, the historical dominant presence of men within the public realms of politics and academia set the long-standing deal according to which masculinity could take his own gender for granted and become invisible to men

themselves. Many scholars in feminist studies would agree that this deal regulated the *who* and the *how* of political and scientific practice, but also set out the criteria for evaluating the issues under question in these realms of power (and) knowledge.

My interest in studying men's gender-conscious politics is a feminist political one: it comes from my urgency to study how power works, how subjectivities come into being and becoming, and how social transformation can be engendered from different embodied-embedded locations. These questions are rooted in my engagements with post-structural critical theories of power and subjectivities (Braidotti 2002, 2011; Hearn 2014), and especially with feminist situated epistemologies (Van der Tuin 2009). This genealogy constituted my entry point into studying men as subjects of feminist-oriented change from an epistemological perspective (Harding 1998), in relation to acknowledging masculinity as a given for granted yet invisible feature of western universalistic rationalism (Seidler 1989).

2. Genealogy of an Absence or questioning *Abstract Masculinity*

In western political and philosophical thought, masculinity is an unmarked and disembodied category, partaking in the required attributes of the thinking Subject; dualistically opposed to it, we find femininity and its own baggage of corporeality and sexual difference, Otherness. Following the work of Genevieve Lloyd *The Man of Reason* (Lloyd 1993), Claire Colebrook explains how, in western Philosophy, reason and masculinity are co-defined in a dualist opposition against the body and femininity:

not only western thought devalued the body and femininity; both the feminine and the body are *negated* in the constitution of thought *as thought*. Reason does not just occur through a subordination of the body. Reason *is* disembodied and is essentially and radically divided from materiality (Colebrook 2000, 28); emphasis in the original).

Thus, one of the dualisms on which western philosophy is built on is precisely the one that opposes (dichotomically and in a gendered manner) Thought to embodiment, and that constructs the power of rational philosophical thinking on the negation of corporeality-femininity.

Within the framework of French post-structuralism, sexual difference theories (with the prominent figure of Luce Irigaray) powerfully criticize, both on a symbolic and on a social level, the centrality of disembodied, rationalist and universal masculinity in western culture (phallogocentrism). Sexual Difference philosophies denounce the universal value attributed to the masculine gender through diagnosing the ‘perverse’ (Braidotti 2017) logic underpinning the phallogocentric system, the *asymmetrical* Same/Other dualism that organizes all the other dichotomous couples in a hierarchical and gendered way: femininity/masculinity, passion/reason, body/mind, immanence/transcendence, being/thought, nature/culture, personal/political, etc. Willing to overcome dualistic oppositions and disembodied subject-positions, Sexual Difference Theories argue that corporeality is constitutive of what it is and means to *exist* and *think*; therefore, they stress the importance of the embodied nature of subjectivity as the site of resistance for being (ontologically) and thought (epistemologically) against the sexually undifferentiated (universally masculine) logic of *the Same*.

Thanks to feminist theories and epistemologies it became possible to deconstruct the system that gave the thinking subject the attributes of disembodied masculinity or *abstract virility* (Braidotti 2017, 299). Therefore, by deconstructing phallogocentrism and situating it within its historical geopolitical context, it is clear that, as a result of historical *power/knowledge* relations (Foucault 1980), the located position of a white, male, heterosexual, rational, able-bodied and property-owner subject became the ‘anthropological paradigm of modernity’ (Boccia 2002)- namely the Human (the unexamined norm)- against which *embodied others* (Ahmed 2000) were marked by a pejorative negative difference and did not make it into full-humanity. Drawing upon the feminist political theorist Nancy Hartsock’s formulation of the problem and following the line of the above mentioned criticisms coming from sexual difference theories and feminist nomadism, in my analysis I employ the concept of *Abstract Masculinity* to refer to the subject position that stands at the centre of phallogocentric ontology (social relations) and epistemology (modes of thought). It is with the notion of *Abstract Masculinity* that Hartsock (Hartsock 1983) pointed at the position of universal-disembodied masculinity as what structured western-modern historical conditions both on a social, cultural and epistemological level.

With ‘Situated Knowledges’ Haraway (1988) takes part in the critical project of questioning *Abstract Masculinity*, adding her own contribution to other critical approaches coming from different perspectives (e.g., feminist theories and

epistemologies, critical theories, critical sociology, postmodern anthropology etc.). The ‘enemy’ indeed, Haraway writes, has been clearly described with Hartsock’s concept of *Abstract Masculinity* (Haraway, 1988: 578): it is similar to the very *modest witness* of scientific experiments that works as ‘the legitimate and authorized ventriloquist for the object world, adding nothing from his mere opinions, his biasing embodiment’ (D. J. Haraway 1997, 24). He is self-invisible, transparent, and his words are ‘not polluted by the body’ (Haraway 1997, 32). The way out from *his* position of *God’s Trick*, Haraway argues, is only possible through a responsible commitment to self-positioning and to a knowledge-practice that is necessarily embodied, situated and partial:

We seek not the knowledge ruled by phallogocentrism (nostalgia for the presence of one true world) and disembodied vision. We seek these ruled by partial sight and limited voice – not partially for its own sake but rather, for the sake of connections and unexpected openings situated knowledges make possible. Situated knowledges are about communities, not about isolated individuals (Haraway 1988, 590).

Haraway’s critique is meant to expose the power location of the unmarked category whose viewpoint comes ‘from nowhere’, who can unfairly enjoy what *he* calls ‘Objectivity’. However, as Haraway states ‘the only position from which objectivity could not possibly be practiced and honored is the standpoint of the master, the Man, the One God, whose Eye produces, appropriates, and orders all differences’ (Haraway 1988, 587). Importantly, following Haraway, **feminist situated epistemologies** are concerned with how power relations contribute to making knowledge and how knowledge practices affect power differentials among subjects.

3. Naming men ‘as men’: situating men

The universalistic epistemic tendencies of the modern Subject grounded their certainties on faith in a disembodied western Reason that allows Man to become ‘the invisible gendered subject’ as one of the chapters in the *The Masculinities Reader* discusses (S. Whitehead and Barrett 2001). Accordingly, while taking his own gender for granted, the *modest witness* (Haraway 1997) male Subject of modernist philosophy and social theory did not regard sexual difference as a topic of inquiry; let alone gender as a crucial

element playing a role in the making of power/knowledge relations. Thus, the silence on/of men as objects/subjects of critical approach included the absence of women as subjects of knowledge; the silence on women's issues as topics that matter; the absence of a discourse on men as gendered subjects and men's silence on their own sexed, embodied, gendered, raced, partial, personal relational experiences, etc. In his account on the varieties of discursive practices in men's theorizing of men, Hearn explains the relation between absence and 'centerings of men:'

one of the dominant ways in which men theorize (or do not theorize) men has been through absence. The taken-for-grantedness of men is reaffirmed through the absence of men. Men are unspoken and so reaffirmed. This applies to men as a topic, as authors of texts and subjects of discourse, and as the dominant purveyors of rules, experiences, objectivities, and knowledges. Such absences may obscure implicit centerings of men, for example, in their reference to society, class struggle, dialectics, law, social solidarity, social contract (Hearn 1998, 787).

As a matter of fact, the critical take on men as gendered subjects and on masculinity/ies as both material and discursive factors and immerse in societal power relations, is approximately 35 years old. This awareness comes indeed from the critical and transformative impact that feminist, gay, black and other liberation movements have had from the 1970s onwards in some of the world's societies and academic contexts. The emergence of anti-sexist men's movements in some national contexts also acted as a force for engaging critically with the study of masculinities. Importantly, with the making of women's and Gender Studies, 'gender' became a useful category of analysis (Scott 1986) and also a tool for tackling great political and epistemological challenges - such as intersectional analysis of power- in relation to dominant structures of academic and political practices.

Scholarship in Gender Studies is close to activism, politics and experiences. It pretends to make women's lives visible, giving voice to the marginal subjects and topics which did not appear in the mainstream (male-stream) agenda. It aims at filling in the blanks of a male-dominated scientific culture and, at the same time, put into question the very epistemological assumptions sustaining the exclusion and absence of women and others 'Others' from the making of knowledge. This involves a political project that intends to expose power-structures operating at different levels simultaneously (personal/geopolitical/epistemological), especially regarding men's practices of

domination ('second wave' feminisms). Following the wave of feminist criticisms and Gender Studies suggestions (Hanmer 1990 cited in Hearn 1998, 783), the act of 'naming men as men' acquires onto-epistemological and political relevance so to pay attention, self-reflectively, on men's (intersectional) gendered practices. This is the critical and feminist-oriented approach that led many scholars problematizing the silence on men and on themselves as social theorists (Hearn 1998, 807–8; Rutherford 1992; Collinson and Hearn 1996). In denouncing this silence, Seidler reminds us of its connection with questioning the invisibility of the social theorist as well:

For many years now, feminist theory has illuminated the experience of women, but there has been a strange and unsettling silence when it comes to the experience of men. In part, it is for me to analyse their own experiences, but this can only be done if we break with the invisibility we have to ourselves (Seidler 1989, 13).

In agreement with this position, Jeff Hearn elaborates on the question of men's silence and social theory silence on itself and on men, as related practices of theoretical politics in which what counts as social theory is constructed:

The unique reflective problem of a social theory of and by men (when social theory itself has been dominantly masculinized) is the problem of men theorizing about a line of theorizing that *has made itself what it is by silence* - not about women and about others but about itself and about men. Social theory, that is, dominant social theory, has persisted in its dominance by avoiding both the theorizing of men and a range of other difficult and potentially subversive issues and questions, such as those around dichotomy, ambivalence, alterity, reflectivity, political consciousness, and silence on itself. These are not simply matters of technique, they speak to the very basis of what counts as social theory within dominant Western traditions of scholarship. Men's critical theorizing of men and social theory more generally need to engage with these silences and include reflective and socially-grounded understandings of them within that Theorizing (Hearn 1998, 807–8).

This move has been conceptualized as the first necessary step towards studying men's gendered power positions and practices and towards making sexual difference and gender visible beyond the all-too-comprehensive yet invisible 'Man'. Advocating for critically addressing the above-mentioned silences and in favour of reflective and socially grounded theories is what characterises Hearn's contribution to making *Critical*

Studies of Men and Masculinities (CSMM). Self-reflectivity and sensitivity to power allowed me to connect feminist epistemologies with CSMM as a subfield of feminist studies.

Studies of men, with an explicitly critical and gendered outlook, appeared officially during the 1980s, in response to the feminist challenge of Second Wave struggles. One of the successes of Gender Studies has been making gender visible, to women and men, and bringing the attention towards intersectional approaches for the analysis of (gender) social inequalities. Therefore, gender has been understood as one of the many and co-constitutive intersecting factors contributing to the making of identity and social position together (intertwined with) class, ethnicity, sexuality, geopolitical location, age etc. Accordingly, differently situated women and men live different experiences and perform different identities by class, age, sexuality, ethnicity and culture. The question of difference(s) for rethinking subjectivity has been a topic of great importance to feminist scholarship and activism. Accordingly, by moving beyond the onto-epistemological model of subjectivity centred on Abstract Masculinity, not only the face of a disembodied and invisible Man is unmasked, but also room is created for the exploration of multiple, embodied-embedded sites of masculinities, femininities and other gendered positions. This means understanding masculinity not only as socially and culturally constructed, but also as plural and marked by gender privilege as well as by power differentials of differing class, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, age etc. Reworking the article 'Invisible Masculinity' from 1993, in 'Men and Women's Studies: Promise, Pitfalls, and Possibilities' (2012) Michael Kimmel writes: 'when the voice of the canon speaks, we can no longer assume that voice is going to sound masculine or that the speaker is going to look like a man. The problem is that *'many men do not yet know'* (Kimmel 2012, 3; emphasis mine). Invisibility is one of the hegemonic features of dominant masculinity that passes as the unquestioned norm, problematically shaping not only epistemological practices but also ethical and material relations. It is with this feminist onto-ethico-epistemological understanding that I draw upon Braidotti's critique of universalism and her proposal for situated perspectives as epistemological and political resources for social transformation:

Situated perspectives lay the pre-conditions for ethical accountability for one's own implications with the very structures one is analyzing and opposing politically. The key concept in feminist materialism is the sexualized nature and the radical immanence of

power relations and their effects upon the world. In this Foucauldian perspective, power is not only negative or confining (*potestas*), but also affirmative (*potentia*) or productive of alternative subject positions and social relations (Braidotti 2012, 22).

Inspired by situated epistemologies and this feminist nomadic approach to power, I would like to contribute to the productive move in the critical project of ‘naming men’ and ‘decentring men’ (Collinson and Hearn 1994; Hearn 1998) by studying what men do and think as *embodied-embedded* subjects (Braidotti 2011). This involves situating men as subjects of socio-cultural practices in which power is constantly operational: subjectivities are produced by material-discursive power mechanisms (power as *potestas*) to the same extent that subjectivities create possibly-transformative routes (power as *potentia*).

This approach involves denaturalizing sex/gender norms and meanings by analysing them critically in relation to other material-discursive practices; it also involves understanding gender as relational and as a doing, and engaging affirmatively with the creative proposals encountered in the field. The attention on the transformative potentials is motivated by the affirmative take of new feminist materialism, very relevant for my research on men involved in anti-sexist groups for many reasons. This approach led me to engage personally in gender justice activism during the research process; and, with this research, I hope to contribute to the feminist understanding of gender-related struggles from different social positionings and through different epistemological-political strategies. I also want to reflect on the possibilities and encouragement of men to take part actively in gender justice and the tensions it provokes by studying the creative proposals and challenges encountered in the field of anti-sexist masculinity politics.

In this project it is crucial to remind ourselves about the risks of re-centering men when producing academic attention and discourse on men, this risk being the ‘acute contradiction’ that could emerge in deconstructing approaches (Hearn 1998, 798). Studying men’s practices is therefore rooted within my interest into power relations and social transformation as investigating anti-sexist men’s organizing offers the possibility to explore the roles of men in questioning norms and power differentials towards gender justice. In the understanding of power relations as material-discursive, proposals for socio-cultural critique and change (critical and creative) can come from majoritarian subjects and from actors with privileges such as most of the participants in

the groups I studied. It is thus of high importance here discussing conceptualizations of power that approach differently the question of men's engagement in anti-sexist politics.

4. Hegemonic masculinity, its discontents and antecedents

The concept of hegemonic masculinity appears as a structuring and structured concept in the 1980s in the Anglophone academia and mainly in Australia, US, UK and Nordic Countries (Hearn 2001, 200). Hegemonic masculinity distances itself from notions of determinism (dominant in the sex-role theory and in functionalist and psychological approaches of earlier research on men) (Parsons and Bales 1955).¹² Investigating the processes and contradictions of 'becoming men' in various contexts, social constructivism-informed research recognises differences among men and accounts for a complexified (and materialist) understanding of power relations: for these reasons sex-role theory, that, prior to the making of women's studies, was investigating sex roles in an essentialist and classificatory way, is criticized for its inadequacy and lack of critical outlook (Kimmel and Messner 1998).¹³ By reworking the sex-role paradigm while responding to 'second wave' feminist theoretical challenges, a social constructivist analysis of masculinities emerged, together with a politically grounded attention to the power relations affecting and produced by men. Exemplary, with the article *Towards a New Sociology of Masculinity* (Carrigan, Connell, and Lee 1985), directions are set for a new sociological study of men and masculinities: *hegemonic masculinity* is introduced. Patriarchal gender inequalities are understood and analysed via the notions of (hegemonic) 'masculinity,' as a tool to study power and hierarchical relations between men and women (via the *arena of reproduction*) and among men (via *homophobia* and *homosociality*). *Hegemonic masculinity* stands as the normative standard structuring power differentials among other (*complicit, subordinate and marginalized*)

¹² The study of men and masculinities in US-based sociology, since the mid-1950s, draws on many theories and frameworks: structural functionalism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, critical structuralism, poststructuralist and postmodern theories.

¹³ Sex-role theories understand masculinity as a series of attributes one can acquire through processes of socialization. With this process men and women are socialized into polarized notions of gender roles, assumed to be ahistorical, quantifiable and measurable. Accordingly, in the frame of sex-role theories it is possible to measure the amounts of masculinity in a person: this will illustrate the level of (un)successful socialization into pre-defined gender roles.

masculinities. The plural concept of ‘masculinities’ also serves as a tool to unveil patriarchal gender inequalities, to denote the variety of men’s practices and locations, and to analyse different power positions among men.

Characterized by a general feminist-aligned engagement, and based on the above-mentioned theoretical moves, what some scholars (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 2016; Connell 2005) would classify as the ‘second wave’ of sociology of masculinities constitutes nowadays a mainstream approach in masculinity research and it supports critical, transformative, materialist accounts of men’s practices and masculinities in different contexts.¹⁴ In most literature published on men since the early 1980s, the theoretical framework has drawn on a plural account of *masculinities*, almost as an axiomatic category to provide more nuanced and complex descriptions of men’s practices. The shared goal of this literature, which has become now a mainstream approach in the study of men, is stressing the socio-cultural process of gendering which a/effects men’s lives in relation to intersectional dynamics of domination and marginalization thus putting power in the spotlight (Morgan 1992; Connell 2001; Whitehead 2002).

Studying masculinity as a way into studying power has generated a diverse body of research concerning hegemony framed as ‘hegemonic heterosexual masculinity’ (see Frank 1987), ‘male hegemony’ (Cockburn 1991), ‘the hegemonic male’ (De Almeida 1996), ‘hegemonic men’ (Dominelli and Gollins 1997; Lorber 1994). But ‘hegemonic masculinity’ has been the one far most influential and used.¹⁵ The concept of *hegemonic masculinity* has been so widely used as widely criticized. It enabled critical descriptions of hierarchies among masculinities but also created the room for engendering criticisms of the concept and reformulations of the framework itself. As a result, in 2005 Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) undertook a revision of the concept having into account its earlier formulations and its widespread use –and criticisms- in social research. They reformulated it in a more productive way.

Introducing *hegemonic masculinity* in 1985, Connell and other sociologists (Carrigan, Connell, and Lee 1985) proposed it as an organizational principle to understand power, ideology and relations among men, and a useful tool for analysing

¹⁴ Some examples of this research from Anglo-phone contexts are: *The gender of oppression : men, masculinity, and the critique of Marxism* (Hearn 1987); *Masculinities* (Connell 1995), *Manhood in America: a Cultural History* (M. Kimmel 2017). Collectively, the three authors edited the *Handbook of Studies on Men and Masculinities* (M. S. Kimmel, Hearn, and Connell 2004).

¹⁵ For a detailed analysis of the theoretical debate on notions of *hegemony* and *hegemonic masculinity* in social theory see Howson (2006).

the hierarchical stratification of masculinities. The terms offered to understand different power positions among men are: *hegemonic* (legitimizing ‘patriarchy’), *complicit* (benefitting from patriarchy without effort), *subordinated* (by gender/sexuality, e.g., gay), and *marginalized* (by class and/or ethnicity). In most of the current masculinity research, the notion of *hegemonic masculinity* is studied in relation to questions of ideology and power, patterns of centrality, complicity and marginalization and hierarchies among men, with ‘homophobia’ being considered as a pivotal element for the construction of boundaries between masculinities (Edwards 2004).¹⁶

Within the literature suggesting criticisms and reformulations of *hegemonic masculinity* we encounter many proposals (Wetherell and Edley 1999; Howson 2006; Whitehead 2002; Hearn 2004; Demetriou 2001; Donaldson 1993).¹⁷ Moreover, Hearn argues for investigating the hegemony ‘of men’ rather than ‘of masculinity’ in his article ‘From Hegemonic Masculinity to the Hegemony of Men’ (2004), as well as in the GEXcel research theme *Deconstructing the Hegemony of Men and Masculinities* (Harrison and Hearn 2009). Beyond essentialist premises attached to ‘men’, those who defend the ‘hegemony of men’ rather than ‘hegemonic masculinities’ consider men as a social category *and* as individual-collective agents, both contributing to patriarchal power relations. As one of the challenges of Critical Studies of Men and Masculinities (SCMM) Hearn explains that in order ‘to develop analysis of the hegemony of men, men need to be thoroughly denaturalized and deconstructed, just as postcolonial theory deconstructs the white subject or queer theory the sexual subject’ (Hearn 2017, 28). Relations between hegemony and men, hegemony and masculinity, hegemony and women, have to be problematized from the consideration of men as material-discursive agents.

On the other hand, in *Transforming Masculinities* (Seidler 2006), Seidler draws on poststructuralist theories of subject and power (Foucault 1980) for a more complex understanding of men’s positions and conceptualizations of masculinities grounded in different contexts. In addition, advocating for more self-reflective attention in social theory, Seidler criticizes the hegemony of conceptual frameworks inspired by modernist

¹⁶ Hegemony does not directly refer to violence but rather to notions of cultural centrality and authority in a socio-cultural context (Gramsci and Spriano 1971) However, hegemonic masculinity is a concept that can be used to understand violence: ‘A pattern of masculinity may be hegemonic that does not mandate personal violence, but is systematically open to violence – celebrating mediated violence, employing practitioners of violence, creating impunity, and supporting the institutional conditions of violence’ (R. Connell 2012, 14).

¹⁷ *Inclusive Masculinity* (Anderson 2010) by Eric Anderson and *The Declining Significance of Homophobia* by Marc McCormack (McCormack 2012) re-examine masculinities and their performative constructions beyond the framework of hegemonic masculinity that saw homophobia as a key factor in 21st century men’s identities.

rationalist universalism (such as, *hegemonic masculinity*): no conceptual frameworks, he argues, can be seen as ‘innocent’, because they too contribute to ontological power relations. Indeed, current Connell’s re-working of *hegemonic masculinity* is leading towards an analysis of *hegemony* in global dynamics of power (including a reflection on ‘epistemological imperialism’ and on ‘southern theory’ in men and masculinities studies) and arguing for epistemological accountability (ethics) in the recognition of differing frameworks for understanding power (Connell 2005; Connell 2012).

5. Post-structuralist approaches to anti-sexist men’s engagement

The literature on men and masculinities informed by post-structuralist redefinitions of power (Foucault 1980) and performative accounts of self and identity (Butler, 1990) contributes to challenging the theoretical assumptions that framed earlier notions of *hegemonic masculinity* and *masculinities*. Post-structuralist analysis of gender and identity, drawing on critical theory, semiotics, anthropology and interdisciplinary Gender Studies, try to understand how power (‘oppression,’ ‘resistance,’ ‘in/exclusion’) works in culture, history and language through a discursive approach (in studies on men: e.g., Seidler 2006; Whitehead 2002) or through materialist/dialectical models of inquiry rather than as relational/positional theories. Simply put, in a poststructuralist view, men do not exercise, practice or perform power without submitting to a set of norms. The notion of *hegemonic masculinity*, thus, is challenged in its materialist assumptions on power and masculinity (for discussion: Aboim 2010; Petersen 1998).

Discursive approaches to power (oppressive and productive of subjectivity through discursive practices) allow for unpacking cultural norms and for deconstructing what (falsely) appear to be naturalized truths about ‘men,’ ‘women’ and ‘hetero/sexuality.’ According to Butler and Scott (Butler and Scott 1992) post-structuralism indicates a field of critical practices that:

interrogate the formative and exclusionary power of discourse in the construction of sexual difference. This interrogation does not take for granted the meanings of any terms or analytical categories, including its own. Rather, it asks how specific

deployments of discourse for specific political purposes determine the very notions used (Butler and Scott 1992 quoted in Bederman 2011, 19).

Informed by Foucauldian theory of power and discourse, a central point in post-structuralist studies of masculinities is the discursive construction of subjectivities and identities and the deconstruction of the socio-cultural making of categories which create, discursively, patterns of inclusion/exclusion.

Butler's *Gender Trouble* (Butler 1990) is also a post-structuralist work. Here she introduces the notion of a *heterosexual matrix* and explains how this regulates and normalises the binary structure of sex/gender/sexual orientation.¹⁸ Queer Theory, and Butler in particular, question the link between 'men,' 'male bodies' and 'masculinity' and, as a result, masculinity as gender performance is decoupled from male cis-embodiment (being this a naturalized association of the heteronormative gender order). Envisioning masculinities also without men is the productive outcome of another queer criticism coming from Halberstam's work on *Female Masculinity* (Halberstam and Halberstam 1998). Other works in which masculinity is delinked from male-body include: Petersen 1998; Enguix 1996; Pease 2000; Edwards 2004). Some researchers (Haywood and Mac an Ghail 2003) claim that sociological scholarship on men provided little insights in the understanding of men's identities when it comes to grasping the contradictions and fluidity in performances of masculinities.

Anthropological works on men and masculinities have been fruitfully influenced by post-structuralism. Ethnographies of masculinities criticise stereotypical understandings of masculinity and machismo and the unquestioned links between men, male bodies and power (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 2016). The ethnographic study of men opened the way to research masculinities across Latin America (Olavarría and Valdés 2009), Africa (Shefer, Ratele, and Strebel 2007), Islam (Ouzgane 2006), changing masculinities in India (Chopra and UNIFEM South Asia Regional Office 2006), China (Zhang 2010), masculinity and colonialism in South Africa (Morrell 2001; Shefer, Hearn, and Ratele 2015) and so on. There are publications on global perspectives and transnational processes (see Pease and Pringle 2001; Ruspini 2011; Cornwall, Edström, and Greig 2011; Hearn 2015a). From this perspective, not only

¹⁸ 'The institution of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire. The act of differentiating the two oppositional moments of the binary results in a consolidation of each term, the respective internal coherence of sex, gender, and desire' (Butler 1990, 31).

gender relations under colonialism but also colonialism itself is analysed as a gendered process (Mies 2014; Connell 1998), embedded in the making of imperialism; and transnational space is seen as gendered from the start.

The body of work on men and masculinities inspired by post-structuralist theories brings forward the following possibilities: to study power as a productive/oppressive dynamic of subjectivity construction; to see identity (gender and sexuality) as a fluid, performative, and discursively enacted process; to unpack the making of categories; to deconstruct binary terms in thinking men and masculinities; to criticize the use of ‘men’ and ‘women’ as unitary categories dominated by a tendency to oppose two different types of sex/gender/sexual-orientation), and to challenge ‘masculinity’ as an exclusive and essential trait of male bodies.

The links between post-structuralism, sexual difference theories and feminist nomadism are under-researched. They are not often considered as productive frameworks to study men and masculinity/ies for three different reasons: disciplinary reasons (philosophy versus sociology) and the focus of feminist nomadism on ‘the feminine’; and the binary-thinking associated with sexual difference feminisms.

Reading sexual difference feminisms together with and through Deleuzian feminisms, I would like to point at the potentialities implicit in highlighting embodied subjectivity: namely, the possibility and the importance of acknowledging the necessary partial view of every subject as *embodied-embedded* (Braidotti 2002, 2011) into located and yet shifting relations of power because power (*potestas* and *potentia*) manifests itself material-discursively. I see the emphasis on the body not as an attempt to fixate the subject in his/her biological destiny dominated by sexual binarism, but rather as the critical-creative move towards the deconstruction and the opening up of the rigid and oppressive logic of *Sameness* that structures both the *ways of being* (ontology) and the *ways of thinking* (epistemology) of phallogentric culture. Criticizing the self-present and neutral (yet male) Subject of phallogentricism, the power of sexual difference lies in the demand for a reformulation of being and thought *as such*. This approach allows me to understand men’s gender-conscious activism in an affirmative way and explore the potentialities of mobilizing against sexism *as men* as well as its limitations.

6. Theoretical routes II

The theoretical positioning of the thesis draws **upon a post-structuralist and new materialist understanding of power relations** (*potestas* and *potentia*, and *material-discursive*). This theoretical cartography is rooted in my personal-academic journey (from Utrecht University to UOC, Barcelona) and combines Braidotti's affirmative take on feminist politics, new materialism's emphasis on onto-ethico-epistemological connections, and the critical study of men's gender-conscious feminist-oriented mobilizations. Accordingly, with **such understanding of power relations**, this thesis argues that possibilities for social transformation can come from every social positioning, albeit through differently situated material-discursive practices.

Within men's implication in gender justice activism, speaking of '**men**' for me does not imply assuming a homogeneous social group or a reified category. I approach this location by analysing the material-discursive relations it comes from and following the possibilities and limitations it engenders in terms of power as *potentia* and *potestas*. Moreover, I would like to leave room open to also understand the location *as men* as a figuration (Braidotti 1994). A figuration, in Braidotti's approach inspired by Deleuzian philosophy, puts the emphasis on the creativity of a concept (Deleuze and Guattari 1994), on what it does and can do in terms of onto-ethico-epistemological possibilities, practices and relations. This implies focusing on the situated aspect of theory-making as well as on the generative potential of this process. Methodologically, this requires an onto-epistemological exercise because it does not separate the material from the discursive in a representationalist manner (but understand them as co-constitutive. It is also an ethical exercise because its aim is to map out relations and shows open room for motion and change within them.

Moving beyond the gesture of separating thought (epistemology) from being (ontology), the transversality of new materialism engages with ethico-onto-epistemological questions, where what exists in the world is always already in a relation of intra-activity with what we know and say about it and vice-versa, because, as Barad states, 'we are part of [the world] we seek to understand' (Barad 2003, 828). In this sense, realities are conceptualized in a monist way in which the knowledges of the world, rather than being thought to 'represent' or 'illustrate' reality objectively, are produced by and produce material-semiotic processes of change. The affirmative

approach I practice in this thesis comes from feminist new materialism that argues that ‘we know nothing of the (social) body until we know *what it can do*’ (Van der Tuin and Dolphijn 2010, 17; emphasis mine). With a new feminist materialist reading of concepts as creative figurations and grounded within a dialogue between ethnography, practice and theory, this thesis aims to understand what gender-conscious mobilizing *as men* can do critically and creatively. Accordingly, as I explained in the introduction, I have chosen to write this thesis by structuring the chapters according to a selection of themes and building the analysis around specific questions that are, following ethnographic fieldwork, theoretically and socially relevant for anti-sexist men’s politics, gender scholarship and for feminist debates.

7. Methodologies and research techniques

As my methodological choice, I apply the insights offered by Third Wave Feminist Epistemology in order to ‘capture the new order consisting of non-dialectical approaches in the field of feminist knowledge theory’ (Van der Tuin 2009, 27). This task involves being aware of the power/knowledge nexus; envisioning the **situatedness** and the embodied-location(s) of every knowledge-claim; and thus, being committed toward the accountability of a feminist research - both in the content and in respect to the process of knowledge-production (Narayan 2003; Sultana 2007). Hence, the kind of knowledge this research provides is situated and partial as it emerged from the interactions between various embodied locations: fieldwork encounters and events, researcher/researched, and interviewer/interviewee relations (DeVault and Gross 2007; (Ramazanoğlu and Holland 2009). These field interactions created the experiences and the research material that I worked through in order to elaborate my qualitative analysis of men’s engagements in anti-sexisms. Importantly, this approach requires a qualitative perspective in the research process and among the qualitative methods I considered ethnographic fieldwork and content analysis the most adequate tools to answer my research question.

In order to investigate how shifts in reconfiguring masculinities are emerging within and around the men’s networks for gender justice *Maschile Plurale* Italy and AHIGE in Spain, collection and analysis of research material has been informed by offline and online **ethnographic methodologies** (Bernard 2002; Hammersley and

Atkinson 2010; Madison 2011; Hine 2013; Kozinets 2010)Velasco and Diaz 2003). Considering online and offline practices part of a monist ontology, online participation and data collection have contributed to the research process, so to observe how men's groups and members rely on online platforms for local and transnational networking, raising-awareness, campaigning, community building and creating engagement. As the focus of the project is on how critical-creative approaches to men and masculinities are developed by members of men's networks, and given the dynamic and fragmented action of these collective mobilizations, **multi-sited ethnography** (Marcus 1995) has guided my intense fieldwork activity and enabled the qualitative exploration of the research questions.

Research material has also been produced through other ethnographic **research techniques**, as participant observation offline and online, and semi-structured interviews. My **participant observation** during public events and meetings of the groups participating at MP and AHIGE has proved to be an accountable source of information and a very relevant moment for observing relations among members as well as establishing and strengthening the contacts between researcher and (new) informants. Participant observation has been conducted during demonstrations, local group meetings and national meetings, conferences, and workshops organized by the networks MP and AHIGE (and during the activities in which members are invited as activists for gender justice, i.e., debate, roundtables, public talks). Participant observation took place during the fieldwork in Barcelona (Oct-Nov 2012 and during the academic year 2013-2014) and in several visits to Italy (Rome, March 2013; Milan, March 2014) and during my research stay in Bologna during the academic year 2014-2015. During these two first academic years I conducted fieldwork by following the action (Graeber 2010) of men's mobilizations of the networks HI-AHIGE and MP, in particular groups working in Barcelona and Bologna. When I was not participating in fieldwork activities I dedicated my work to reading and bibliographical research, writing for dissemination, and attending academic as well as activist events to present my ongoing research as well as to gain more understanding on men's engagement for gender justice.

As I explained in the introduction, the selection of the **case studies** came from my practice of following the action of the Italian men's network *Maschile Plurale* and its connections with the men's group *Homes Igualitaris*-AHIGE Catalunya in Barcelona. I conducted fieldwork in Barcelona in October-November 2012 and during my first PhD year at UOC (2013-2014) with *Homes Igualitaris*; I was welcomed

positively in the field and I could participate in all the activities and initiatives I was invited to. Indeed, although my presence was generally appreciated during fieldwork, not all the gatherings of the groups were open to me. In all the places I have been to, my participation was not granted during ‘internal meetings’ (such as those ones organized for strategic or organizational purposes), and during separatist sessions among members (only men reflection groups).

In Italy I conducted fieldwork during the national meetings of MP in March 2013 in Rome and in March 2014 in Milan, and I followed the action of men involved in anti-violence engagement while based in Bologna during my research stay there in 2014-2015. The initial comparative curiosity proved itself too narrow to explore the reconfiguring of masculinities occurring among the men involved in gender justice in the research locations I engaged with. Methodological nationalism (Amelina 2014) turned out epistemologically inaccurate for assuming homogeneous cultural contexts separated from the rest. For the purposes of my research, comparative approach could not answer either my research question. The generative aspects of elaborating critical-creative approaches to gender relations and masculinities were in many cases emerging from the same location (city, region, group) rather than from apparently separate and homogenous national contexts. In sum, this contributed to my decision to build each chapter around a political question (self-reflectivity, romantic love, sex, fatherhood and care).

Most informants were members of MP or AHIGE. Recruitment occurred following the snowball method, with the generous collaboration of key informants that introduced me to other members and facilitated my entrance and acceptance in the field. Participant observation provided information about the debates and the dynamics of the groups. Along the fieldwork events I participated, I established contacts with activists in other gender-sensitive mobilizations (organized by groups of women and LGBT+ activists) that collaborate with members of MP and AHIGE. When possible, I turned fieldwork encounters with feminist and LGBT+ activists into more structured conversations and interviews in order to learn about their perspectives on men’s anti-sexist engagement and their politics. With the members of the main networks of men this research is based on, I conducted a total of 30 semi-structured interviews. All interviews were recorded by me after getting an informed consent from the interviewee. I have adopted an ethically-informed research practice of ‘feminist interviewing’ and ‘active listening’ (DeVault and Gross 2007). This consists of engaging with the

interviewee by acknowledging the interaction between interviewers and interviewer, the power at play and the role of categories/labels in structuring interviews.

Interviews provided valuable information when it comes to addressing men's processes of becoming gender-aware, their critical reflectivity in relation to masculinity, their personal and political motivations and their process of involvement in the network, and the topics most relevant to their masculinity politics. Sometimes the set-up of the face-to-face interview opened up the room for the interviewee to share personal experiences, recognizing me as a trusted interlocutor in the field while being empathic (one of those skills anti-sexist men's engagement aims to stimulate). Interviews sometimes spoke to a narcissistic perception on the side of the interviewee, to his desire to speak up and be visible his honest willingness to be listened-to; other times during formally set-up interviews recurrent narrative emerged on what interviewees believed is expected for them to know, share and claim publicly. Individual or group conversations, chats, and email exchanges with informants allowed me to engage with the field in a less-structured manner and receive important information less limited than the information produced in the interview setting.

In order to study the material-discursive reconfiguration of men's practices and masculinities, the study of written texts, offline as well as online, could not be left out. Participant observation and fieldwork encounters guided me through the relevant textual material produced within the men's networks studied. Accordingly, what I encountered as 'political texts' (i.e., foundational documents, manifestos, meeting's reports, opinion articles, poems, academic contributions, activist texts, flyers, etc.) have been included in my analysis when they were pivotal material for demonstrations, online mobilizations, personal and group reflection, consciousness-raising practice, letters, movement building and public advocacy. In other words, I considered 'political texts' those circulating as an onto-epistemological force within, through and among networks' members. Importantly, many texts I have been orientated to (Ahmed 2008) during fieldwork hold affective and political power. They are produced by experiential processes of men's mobilizations and they are meant to stir such processes of critical and creative engagement with gender justice.

In order to orientate myself through the large amount and variety of research material I gained with participant observation, textual material analysis, with the informal conversations and the interviews, I put into practice the method of **diffractive analysis** (Mazzei 2014). This method allowed me to construct analysis by 'reading

insights through one another' (Barad 2007, 25) so to let questions that matter emerge according to my field research experiences, informed by and informing theoretical research. Diffractive analysis comes from Barad's concept of diffraction; this term serves to understand knowledge production as a process in which data become intelligible when read through one another, and in which the observer and her methodology are acknowledged as necessary and generative part of the epistemological process. Ontologically, this tunes with agreeing that beings do not pre-exist their relations (Haraway 2008; Barad 2003), and with an anti-representationalist onto-epistemology. This method is part of my situated epistemological framework, as it helped me to understand the field while I was doing fieldwork, acknowledging my active presence as an undeniably 'always-already-methodological' perspective (Van der Tuin 2011). My background in Gender Studies and fieldwork experiences built my partial perspective through which I could participate in the field.

Inspired by 'reading insights through one another,' I *engaged with* ethnographic fieldwork by reading events and my participation through one another. With this engaged diffractive methodology, creative insights could emerge in the process: I have approached the concepts encountered in the field as material-discursive spaces for affirmation ('as men'). This process allowed me to follow meaningful concepts and to map out meaningful debates that are created by *and* constitute feminist-oriented masculinity politics. I could build my analysis and writing by letting these situated debates emerge while keeping in mind their speakability to contemporary local and transnational feminist debates.

The choice of situated epistemologies necessarily affected my **writing** style and my argumentative mode, with the difficulty to put in a linear manner what contrarily happens in a transversal, monistic and on-going way. The apparent 'messy' nature of fieldwork and ethnographic research process (Plows 2018), thanks to the interactions it engenders and to the fact that 'we are always already methodological,' also creates possible routes to follow in order to understand this experience. As presented in the chapters of this thesis, my experience in the field and its interactions provided me with the analytical criteria for choosing the themes and the debates I considered most relevant to focus on. Regarding my writing style, in order to provide situated insights emphasizing the critical and the affirmative approaches, I engaged with ethnographic writing to connect the more performative and personal accounts with the theoretical elaborations emerged from the field and with current poignant questions debated in

gender scholarship. My writing peaks (more or less explicitly) from the locations of my own embodied-embedded positioning within fieldwork in order to show the material-semiotic ethnographic processes by which this thesis is engendered. In this way, I wanted to ground my analysis in fieldwork experience, offer situated debates to the reader, and contribute to feminist conversations by thinking with the field interlocutors. Moreover, a performative writing style exemplifies the non-representationalist nature of a text (Van der Tuin and Dolphijn 2012) as not intended to ‘represent’ its ‘object of writing’, but rather, with the reading practices that it will engender, meant to stimulate other material-semiotic processes of becoming(s). For this reason, for the purpose of linear academic writing, this thesis is the materialized result of my engaged writing process in which the selection of chapters’ themes and debates are grounded in fieldwork and carry with them the potential to speak to larger conversations in activism, social intervention and scholarly settings.

8. Ethics in research and my positioning in the field

This project took into account research **ethics** in relation to data collection and the process of knowledge production. An informed consent was required before and during the study when gathering personal and sensitive information from research participants. Permission of access to research locations (internal and public gatherings of men’s networks) and data gathering was asked for in advance and privacy of the informants was ensured with the use of pseudonyms when citing conversations and interviews. Considering the interactive nature of any research process and its implications, I have committed to the epistemological and ethical *Politics of Location* (Rich 1987; Hinton 2014) this involves being aware of the power/knowledge nexus (Foucault 1980) and being committed to the ethical accountability of research in its formation, moments of reciprocity with participants and its potential for social impact (Madison 2011).

During fieldwork I noticed that my previous experience as a Gender Studies’ student carrying out fieldwork among men’s activism provided me with a no-threatening and positive role to access spaces and also to get the informants’ trust in other contexts. Moreover, my abilities to write and connect different contexts and languages took them to see me as a networking agent among men’s engagements. During my fieldwork, I was invited to take part as a speaker at public talks, to organize

roundtables, to connect activists and groups, to write reports of events, to write dissemination articles and to contribute to online and printed activist-academic publications. I enthusiastically joined these activities as part of the work of ‘*corresponding* with people’ when performing participant observation as my ‘ontological commitment’ *with* the field and my interlocutors (Ingold 2017, 23). Joining these activities, moreover, offered me the way to practice the ethical and epistemological accountability that I preach in this thesis when advocating for responsible situated knowledges (Haraway 1988): I understood my responsibility as ‘the ability to respond’ as a knowledge-producer entangled with (*and*) in the field. My engagement with many activities with (*and*) in fieldwork is coherent with my desire to contribute to gender justice and connect research with social intervention. These activities offered me important learning opportunities next to strengthening fieldwork contacts and establishing new ones; accordingly, they allowed me to grow the epistemic authority and trust in the field (Enguix 2014) that granted me the access to more research sites.

In Barcelona, my position as a gender scholar, and especially as an Italian researcher with a background on Italian gender culture and politics, was very welcomed as many of my interlocutors shared the idea that they could learn a lot from what Italian men were doing in terms of anti-sexist action and I could understand them and the gender culture they live in. I was considered as a ‘rather close’ outsider because they assumed that my culture of gender relations was similar to theirs. The perceived proximity of my position facilitated the trust-building process between me and my informants, my access to public meetings and men’s interest in my culturally-embodied and academically-deepened gender knowledge. At the same time, my position as an outsider also gave me enough distance to be curious about the things that appeared ‘new’ to me, and interesting as ‘different,’ and enabled me to formulate what might have appeared to me as very simple questions yet they turned to offer a fruitful way into their use of labels, meanings questions, meanings created and reconfigured, and the personal stands and tensions in relation to them. I learned to speak Spanish and understand Catalan while I learned about the culture of gender and masculinity politics from my informants in Barcelona. During my fieldwork in Italy I was welcomed as well; my presence in the field was as a proof of the relevance of men’s activist involvement in feminist issues. Being perceived as a native and as the ‘other’ because I am a woman, this position also provided fruitful as it gave me a background of

knowledge to work with, and a new field to engage with.

Being open about my gender justice commitment, and showing positive support of men's involvement facilitated me access to research locations. Among Italian as well as Spanish members, my gender and age, that is, being a young woman, positioned me as a rather unthreatening person and at the same time my position was 'attractive,' as it spoke to cultural gendered assumptions according to which women embody the erotic capital and the emotional skills to listen, understand, relate, communicate and give visibility (to men's activity). In this sense, my work as a researcher, the time spent among men, and my dedication to interviews have been very positively received by informants (Ruokonen-Engler and Siouti 2016). This access and trust did not come without effort, though; I had to gain it through the work I provided as a networker, as a writer or consultant. In some cases, the active listening I offered in the interview consisted in emotional labour I performed in exchange of personal information. I had to carefully negotiate my own personal boundaries as a woman, my professionalism as a practitioner and my political stand as an activist in the field, changing my roles as a researcher according to the field locations and events I researched. I noticed a change in some members' reaction to my presence. While at the beginning of fieldwork my status as a student facilitated my participation during public activities, in the final stages of fieldwork (and after that) a twofold reaction occurred: on one side, I received more and more requests of collaboration, being perceived as a trusted and knowledgeable ally; on the other, I was excluded and distanced exactly because of my too-many insights of the field. As I said, during internal organizational meetings of the groups and during personal reflection sessions among men, I was not welcomed. In separatist spaces, I was not granted access because of my gender identification, and this resulted in a clear limitation of my research.

Research ethics for me also meant that, while participating in the initiatives, my **engagement with(in) fieldwork** invited me to contribute to feminist activism and to men's anti-sexist involvement as a participant observer, reporter, translator, consultant, public speaker, advocate and conference organizer. This way of working -rewarding and demanding-, motivated by an affirmative feminist ethics, has been the way I made sense of doing engaged ethnographic research. My own gender justice involvement as an advocate and volunteer consultant during my research contributed relevantly to gain trust and epistemic authority not only among informants but also field practitioners, and to access knowledge about transnational dis/connections and policy-activism-

interventions. As a researcher trained in qualitative methodologies and working intensively on the ethnographic field, I developed the willingness to actively become a networking agent myself within anti-sexist men's organizing. My engagement in academic settings asked for presenting this research at various conferences and seminars, and academic, activist and policy-consultant endeavours often met or crossed each other fruitfully.

Chapter 2. Cartographies of Men for Gender Justice

1. Introduction: transnational networking for gender justice

Balloons in the air, some colourful scarves and eye-catching posters. A crowd of mostly women, of different ages and backgrounds, is gathering while the sun is up above us, after the ice-cold weather we had a few days earlier. On March 8th 2015, early afternoon, standing between the 47th St. and 2nd Av., Manhattan, I am there too: waiting for the International Women's Day march to start. 'If you believe in women's rights, then you are a feminist' the sign held by the girl in the front-row states clearly. I take a quick look around and I see, next to many women, also quite a number of men standing in the crowd. Some of them are familiar faces, as some of us are participating in the march right after the closing of the International Conference on Masculinities *Engaging Men and Boys for Gender Equality* hosted by the *Center for the Study of Men and Masculinities* (CSMM) at Stony Brook University, partnered by the *American Men's Studies Association* (AMSA), the global alliance *MenEngage* and the *Man Up Campaign*.¹⁹

Observing more carefully around me, I see many United Nations stickers: I understand lots of people are at the march after landing in New York for the fifty-ninth session *United Nations Convention on the Status of Women* (CSW59/Beijing+20), happening in the following couple of weeks. For me, a PhD student from Europe, the moment feels beyond impressive: in the morning, I presented my own work on Italian and Spanish men's anti-sexist engagements at the international masculinities conference; now, surrounded by newly met friends and colleagues, I am walking my way through the streets of midtown Manhattan, joining the determined and festive

¹⁹ The International Conference on Masculinities, as an event where academics, activists and policy practitioners came together under the umbrella of 'engaging men for gender equality', has been a great place for strengthening existing networks and creating new ones, exchanging ideas and experiences, understanding differences in standpoints, activating media visibility on the issues at stake, and, importantly, keeping in mind the positive outcomes as well as the problematic tensions of doing ally (Nardini 2016).

crowd mobilizing for gender justice on March 8th. I am next to international activists, human rights advocates, students, friends, academics, people from various parts of the world, journalists, families, different humans of New York, passing-by-curious and all those who care participating in this gender justice mobilization. Yes, it feels great, a perfect alignment of academic and activist involvements, a feeling that still gives a smile on my face. While at the march, many questions could not get out of my mind: What is gender justice in 2015? How do men participate in this, in different contexts of the world? What does it mean to ask this question while walking the women's rights march, materializing through the streets of mid-town NYC, from one of the most powerful global-North locations?

Right after the conference on engaging men, and just before the 59th UN Convention on the Status of Women (CSW), the specific event of this demonstration seems like an interesting momentum to start with, interrogating issues of gender justice and engaging masculinities. As I was fortunate enough to participate, I walked the second half of the march together with Ben Atherton-Zeman, anti-violence advocate and actor from Boston, coming to NYC for the conference and for the CSW. Both of us were holding signs with a 'Beijing+20' on them, both of us coming there after the closing of the masculinities conference on engaging men. Evidently excited to join the demonstration, Ben shared with me his feelings of enthusiasm and surprise, bringing back his memories from twenty years before when he got the chance to travel to Beijing on occasion of the UN-Women convention in 1995.²⁰ In fact, the debate on men as part of gender justice appeared as more and more visible with second wave feminist movements in advanced capitalist societies. The women's rights conversation in Beijing already discussed 'the role of men as allies in the achievement of gender equality', and agreed on the importance of this point in the Declaration signed by the UN in 1995 (MenEngage Alliance 2017).²¹

²⁰ Ben Atherton-Zeman gave his permission to mention him in this thesis. After walking a part of the women's march together, Ben and I had lunch and kept sharing our experiences about gender justice activism, from different geopolitical, professional, generational and gendered perspectives. After this meeting we have continued our conversation and friendship online. We met again when we was invited to perform his work 'Voices of men' in Barcelona and I facilitated his stay in the city.

²¹ MenEngage Alliance, April 2017, 'Language from the Beijing Platform for Action and UN CSW agreed conclusions (1995-2017) on the roles of men and boys in achieving gender equality' online available at <http://menengage.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/UN-CSW-Agreed-Language-MenEngage-mapping-April-2017.pdf> accessed on 07/01/2018. More information about the UNWomen and role of me in making gender justice is available at its dedicated webpage 'Engaging Men': <http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/engaging-men>, accessed on 06/01/2018.

Later, during the CSW in 2004, the UN officially started talking about masculinities discussing more formally ‘the role of men and boys in achieving gender equality.’ Since the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, the question of engaging men in gender justice has reached the public agenda of national and global policy making institutions, NGOs and gender justice initiatives. The discussion paper on ‘Men, masculinities and changing power’ published on occasion of the 2015 UN-CSW by MenEngage Global Alliance (ME), in fact reminds us of the legacy of institutionalized gender equality activism and of the timeliness of the question at stake: ‘the Beijing framework envisions male engagement as a necessary piece to challenge the structure, beliefs, practices and institutions that sustain men’s aggregate privileges to achieve full gender equality’ (ME 2015)²². MenEngage is currently the broadest alliance of NGOs working to involve men and boys in gender justice on a global level. Founded in 2004, MenEngage acts as networking agent among initiatives and NGOs, as a human rights advocacy international network, and as a programme and campaign organization worldwide. The organization’s 2014 global Symposium in New Delhi is an important date for the future work in this direction. Prior to its presentation at the 59th CSW, the paper entitled ‘Men, masculinities and changing power’ was circulated among MenEngage (ME) representatives attending the international conference on engaging men (including myself), and it was discussed during a meeting at the UNDP headquarters where I was invited to participate together with representatives from men’s gender justice organizations and individual advocates from Sweden, South Africa, the Netherlands, Mozambique, United States and Canada. This meeting, and the following days, when I attended some of the civil society events at CSW together with ME members, provided me with the chance to observe how, at a transnational agency level, questions of gender justice and men are discussed.

The growing affiliations and initiatives launched by MenEngage are symptomatic of the fact that, during the last decade, a joint effort between local non-governmental organizations, international campaigns and global agencies allowed ‘engaging men in gender justice’ to become a necessary part of social policies. Addressing crucial issues of **violence against women, sexual and reproductive health, parenting and care work**, this thesis agrees to see boys and men not only as ‘part of the problem’ in gender

²² ME ‘Men, masculinities and changing power’ online available at: <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/Men-Masculinities-and-Changing-Power-MenEngage-2014.pdf> accessed 07/12/2018.

inequalities, but also as positive **agents** of change and thus ‘part of the solution’ towards gender justice.

The majority of men do not act violently against women or do not explicitly express sexist/misogynistic beliefs, but very few take public action against sexism and violence against women (VAW). To become publicly and collectively engaged in favour of gender justice could constitute a challenge to men’s socialization as men, as it involves the questioning of the male code which requires men to distance themselves from anything that is perceived as feminine/women’s issues. That is why, in order to involve boys and men in gender justice work, existing programmes show that it is crucial to address men’s great costs – in terms of health and emotional wellbeing - associated with men’s privileges; and to address men’s potential gains – material as well as interpersonal – once hegemonic and sexist practices are becoming questioned. For men, the process of becoming active participants in gender justice work involves a personal-political journey of self-interrogation and self-transformation. Talking to boys’ and men’s sense of frustration and marginalization can help engaging them in social justice and prevention of VAW project. In some contexts, for example, the increase in unemployment among men has been associated with an increase in VAW.²³

In this cultural reconfiguration, when it comes to gender relations, values and identities, men’s practices are interrogated and the process of gendered socializations are made visible. Men are invited into the conversation because, in a fundamentally patriarchal gender order, despite geo-political differences and intersectional interferences, men are seen as holding the power as cultural **gatekeepers**, decision makers and community leaders (Cornwall, Edström, and Greig 2011). Including men in gender justice work is necessary because gender inequality is ‘intimately tied to men’s practices and identities, men’s participation in complex and diverse gender relations, and masculine discourse and culture’ (Howson and Flood 2015, 4). The relevance of engaging men in gender equal change is related to the fact that men are inevitably always already participants within social, personal and economic relation with women on a daily basis, as gender meanings are structured relationally and gendered practices are relational (Stolke 2004).

When it comes to **topics discussed in relation to men and masculinities in/for gender justice**, most of these programmes are framed under the umbrella of preventing

²³ International Alliance of Women, ‘CSW 57 – 2013. The effects of the economic crisis on gender-based violence’, online available at: <http://womenalliance.org/old/pdf/CSW57-Statement.pdf>, accessed on 07/12/2018.

violence against women and girls. By intervening in the culture of gender norms, these projects seek to unmask the discourses and practices sustaining and legitimizing sexist behaviours, and create gender awareness - especially among boys and men. In this sense, intersectional approaches to men's positioning are departure points for the important work on deconstructing harmful dominant norms; pluralizing men's experiences of identity, power and oppressions and for making visible men's gendered privileges, which are transversal to differently located masculinities. Attention is set on the challenges involved in engaging men and boys in addressing their own privileges (Ratele 2015); there is also a consensus on stressing the affirmative force in the process of considering and involving men as agents of transformation (WHO 2007; Kulkarni 2018). To do so, educational programmes and campaigns provide information and awareness on sexual-reproductive health, foster caring masculinities and positive role models of parenting on one side, and stress men's role and responsibility in contributing to human trafficking as sex buyers on the other. But issues of global poverty, migration and racism are also on the table of gender justice work (Peacock, Barker, and Hearn 2014; Ruxton and Oxfam GB 2004).

Since the beginning of the conversation on engaging men in gender justice during the 1970s, different trends emerged in the field. The analysis provided by (Howson and Flood 2015) highlights the increase in global networking, in which international alliances of NGOs are partnered with global agencies, whose support allows for a stronger advocacy power, and more funding for evaluations, manuals and reports. When looking at the field of gender and development, recent policy interventions cannot do without the 'involving masculinities' approach, as men need to be addressed as co-responsible agents in, for instance, economic matters, care-work and reproductive health. Moreover, opening up the dialogue on men's roles in society (because of the novelty and resonance that male advocates can have), could bring attention to gender issues in the contexts where gender equality policies are scarcely addressed, and where institutional concerns on women's issues are marginal (Italy is a good example of this).

Next to the work performed by international advocacy agencies, networking bodies and trans/national policies, the transnational field of engaging men in gender justice is also characterized by the local programmes implemented in communities. The impact of transnational agencies is visible on national and international policies on gender justice and the involvement of men and boys. This is translated into the implementation of local programmes aimed at discussing gender in communities. This

level, aimed at involving masculinities, corresponds mainly to top-down social intervention enacted by local governments in collaborations with NGOs (like the ‘ManCare. Global Fatherhood Campaign’ launched by *Promundo* and supported by Save the Children, Sonke Gender Justice, and MenEngage Global Alliance). Moreover, community initiatives and programmes are also globalized, and influence policies and legislations. In general, but especially within the gender and development context, we can find overlaps between transnational policies, advocacies, community interventions and grassroots level.

2. Zooming into Europe

When it comes to the European policy context, achieving gender justice is considered a vital aim for the EU’s growth, employment and social cohesion objectives. For a long time, a commitment to ‘fostering gender equality’ in diverse areas has focused on women’s empowerment and has been driven largely by women. In the past decade, however, the examination of men’s roles and men’s responsibilities in relation to gender justice has been part of current trends in research and policy-making (Belghiti-Mahut et al. 2013). Moreover, recent publications of the EU show clearly a growing commitment in accounting for men’s roles and responsibilities when analysing gender inequalities (EIGE 2012; Belghiti-Mahut et al. 2013; Scambor et al. 2014). Next to a top-down policy interest in implementing gender mainstreaming that clearly addresses men as actors within the ‘gender equality’ project, civil society organizations and grassroots mobilizations also contribute to the debate on the politics of men and their actions towards gender justice. Attention on men’s anti-sexist engagement has come from feminist organizations like the network *European Women’s Lobby* (EWL) with their opening seminar *The other half of gender: feminism and men’s role in achieving equality* (EWL 2011) and from the *European Institute for Gender Equality* (EIGE) with the *Study Report* mapping out existing organizations, projects and grassroots initiatives aimed at involving men in gender equality (EIGE Study Report 2012). This mapping project, with the creation of an online database as a result, comes at the convergence between EU gender mainstreaming policies, established Gender Studies programmes and growing interest in masculinity research, the glocalized protests against VAW and

femicide that started in Argentina with the movement *Ni una menos* and the context of economic crisis and neoliberal practices (Cornwall, Karioris, and Lindisfarne 2016). Also important are transnationalization processes affecting the off/online materialization of power differentials (Hearn 2015a) and the emergence of anti-feminist sentiments in some cases overlapping with xenophobic populist discourses (Mellström 2016).

Networking among organizations, local initiatives, and anti-sexist mobilizations of men in the field has provided the ground for creating the **European section of the *MenEngage Alliance***. While I was conducting my PhD research, MenEngage Europe (MEE from now onwards) focused on establishing its strategic plan, its operational and organizational structure, and its funding possibilities as a network of organizations, and on elaborating its criteria for individual and NGOs' membership. Most of its work has been carried out by a small group of NGOs' representatives acting as a volunteer steering committee (established in Amsterdam in 2013).²⁴ Growing in affiliations and transnational connections after the membership meeting held in Zagreb, Croatia in 2014, MEE currently acts as a networking and agent among organizations, while the activist and intervention work is carried out locally by associations on the ground.

Current actors connected through *MenEngage Europe* include: the association *Connexus* (Spain), *Man for Change* and *White Ribbon* (UK); *Män för Jämställdhet* (Sweden); *Emancipator* (the Netherlands), *Männer Gegen Männer-Gewalt* (Germany); StatusM, (Croatia), *Centar E8* (Serbia), *Men's Development Network* (Ireland), *Promundo* (Portugal) and many other groups.²⁵ Locally grounded and globally connected, their gender justice work includes an array of activities that spans from conducting anti-violence awareness campaigns, activating gender sensitive educational projects on positive and non-violent masculinities, collaborating with local women's groups and shelters, fostering men's engagement with caring fatherhood and other care-work related practices, disseminating a culture of gender awareness, policy advocacy and social movement building. However, these forms of collective organizing differ in degrees of institutionalization, structure, governmental support, policy advocacy impact and strategies of action. One important and interesting difference lies in the mobilizing

²⁴ As part of engaged research ethics, during my PhD research I accepted MEE's invitation to collaborate with the steering committee as consultant and volunteer researcher (see appendix for more details on meetings and publications).

²⁵ Currently MEE connects associations and NGOs working on gender justice and masculinities in the countries: Albania, Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan, Macedonia, Malta, Moldova, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Russia, Serbia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom.

themes, which are closely related to the cultural and political context in which organizing occurs. For example, the youth organization *Centar 8* from Serbia has been working on growing into manhood in a post-conflict and nationalist context; in Italy the sexual scandals of Berlusconi government gave food for thought for critically engaging with heterosexuality, masculinity and sexual politics; in the Netherlands the NGO Emancipator started by organizing workshops for unemployed men about the intersection of fatherhood cultures and men's migrant background. The network MEE gathers these different realities of engaging with boys and men, and in October 2018 celebrated its second membership meeting in Vienna. In the case of Italy, MP will soon be officially registered as a NGO and will join MEE together with another recent small network *Il Giardino dei Padri*; and when it comes to Spain, AHIGE is already part of the network together with the *Red de Hombres por la Igualdad*. Because of language barriers and because of MEE's transnational and 'Nordic European' ways of working (availability of funding, value associated with social entrepreneurship and collaboration with international human rights agencies), some groups might find it difficult to join the network.²⁶

The question of the involvement of men in gender justice is considered as an urgent topic also at a European academic level (e.g., (Holter and Hearn 2014; Scambor et al. 2014) contributing to the research on masculinity politics within Critical Studies of Men and Masculinities in Europe (Hearn, Pringle, and CROME 2009; Pringle 2006) as we commented in the Introduction. The question *where do men stand in relation to gender justice?* traverses policy, activist and scientific debates, and its answers can lead to different relevant situations and solutions (Ratele 2015; Shefer, Hearn, and Ratele 2015). Shedding light on men's practices and shifts in masculinities from different perspectives and empirical cases, this area of studies is attracting more and more academic attention in Europe and beyond (Pease and Pringle 2001; Shefer, Ratele, and Strebel 2007; Ruspini 2011; Kulkarni 2018), emerging from and contributing to research networks by working through the interactions between academic-policy-grassroots levels.²⁷ Research on men is in many cases made possible by EU-funded projects, mostly aimed at preventing VAW, working with violence survivors, gender-awareness among youth, and men's engagement into care work and caring roles. Some

²⁶ My engagement with MEE and with organisations in Italy and Spain has served facilitating communication, networking and members' participation.

²⁷ The project 'Men in Movement', which Begonya Enguix, Paco Abril and myself started in Barcelona in 2015, is meant to be part of this interaction.

examples of these are the projects ‘FOCUS – Fostering Caring Masculinities’ run in Germany, Austria, Slovenia Norway and Spain (Morales and Díaz 2006); the project ‘*IMAGINE: Inspiring Male Action on Gender Equality In Europe*’ in Sweden, the Netherlands and the UK; the ‘Five Man Project’ in Italy aimed at delivering a web-series that problematises the roles of men and men’s gendered practices in sexism and violence against women, with the participation of ‘*Dire: Donne in Rete contro la violenza*’ and *Maschile Plurale*; and the project IMPACT aimed at delivering an overview evaluation of European VAW perpetrators programmes, launched in 2013 with the collaborations of organizations based in Austria, the UK and Spain (Gilchrist et al. 2015). These studies are aimed at providing tools for intervention and policy making, and show that the main questions regarding men as gendered actors in European countries are concerned with the prevention and eradication of VAW and the promotion of non-sexist masculinities with a focus on caring practices.

These are also urgent issues related to gender politics in the contexts where I conducted my fieldwork research, during the years following the economic crisis. In contemporary Spain and Italy, VAW enacted by men (*violenza maschile* in the terminology of MP in Italy and *violencia machista* for AHIGE in Spain) and the current reconfigurations of men’s positions in society due to the economic crisis and its changes in the structures of paid (and unpaid) labour are the most important issues at play with regards to men’s practices.

From an institutional perspective, masculinity and men’s gendered practices (and power relations in general) remain largely unproblematised, with the risk of leaving them unchallenged. In the public media discourse, men's actions are mostly discussed in relation to VAW with a pathologizing approach, leaving to individual factors the social and political gendered dimension of violences (Giomi and Magaraggia 2017). Sometimes, media use a stigmatizing representation of ‘otherized masculinities’ in which populist strategies catalyse social inequalities’ resentments against migrant men (Rizzo 2017). Moreover, the recent rise of feminist, anti-racist and queer politics, in connection with other social movements, calls into question the ways in which gender relations of power intersect with the current economic system and its consequences for society on a national, European and global level. While the centrality of white heteronormative masculinity is being challenged, renewed neo-liberal hopes of global economy merge with populist politics of white supremacy and the dominance of a ‘transnational business masculinity’ with its material practices (see Connell and Wood

2005; Connell 2012; Hearn 2015a). This situation lends urgency to rethinking how normative attitudes towards gender relations and masculinity can be engaged with or challenged in policy-making, media, research and activism. As they lose their normative centrality, men – and especially white middle-class heterosexual men – can find themselves ‘a bit disoriented,’ as one Spanish interviewee explained when I asked him about the reasons for his involvement in an anti-sexist men’s network.

In this scenario, grass-roots mobilizing and socially engaged research are pivotal for producing a critical and grounded approach to gendered and gendering processes (Magaraggia and Vingelli 2015) with the collaboration of social intervention, gender-conscious mobilizing and critical scholarship. During the years following the beginning of the economic crisis, feminist mobilizations entered the political arena in Italy and Spain and struggled to give a gendered critique of the socio-economic processes otherwise considered neutral; they provided a materialist analysis of personal-relational issues otherwise left to individual and pathological explanations in line with capitalist neoliberal individualism (Hernando Gonzalo 2018). These questions touch the lived experiences of gender injustices crossed by economic and labour precarity, gender-based violences, everyday sexism in the public and private sphere, gender asymmetries in unpaid care work and childcare, and active proposals for - and resistances to - gender and sexual-affective education.

Accordingly, urgent questions tackling men’s practices in contemporary Italy and Spain are related to personal-political practice lived in close relation with others, starting with the problem of VAW.²⁸ According to the 2015 Italian National Institute of Statistics report, almost one in three women in Italy have experienced physical and/or sexual violence (European Institute for Gender Equality 2016); the number of women killed because of gender-based violence is, on average, 150 per year according to the *Inchiesta con analisi statistica sul femminicidio in Italia* by the Ministry of Justice.²⁹ The term *femminicidio* or femicide is indeed not only used in feminist contexts (Violi 2015 in Contarini and Marras 2015) but also in institutional ones. Gender research is intended to understand the socio-cultural underpinnings of VAW (see Magaraggia and

²⁸ International agencies such as UN and WHO use ‘violence against women’ (VAW) or ‘gender-based violence’ (GBV) interchangeably, so do I in this chapter, while I bring attention on the terms used by anti-violence organisations and members themselves (*violenza maschile, violencias machistas, violències masclistes, violencia de genero*) to situate politically their action.

²⁹ Fabio Bartolomeo, Ministero della Giustizia 2017 ‘Inchiesta con analisi statistica sul femminicidio in Italia (2010-2016)’ pdf document available at: [https://webstat.giustizia.it/Analisi%20e%20ricerche/Femminicidio%20in%20Italia%20-%20Inchiesta%20statistica%20\(2010%20al%202016\).pdf](https://webstat.giustizia.it/Analisi%20e%20ricerche/Femminicidio%20in%20Italia%20-%20Inchiesta%20statistica%20(2010%20al%202016).pdf) accessed 08/12/2018.

Cherubini 2013), in which a central role is played by meanings and practices associated with the social construction of masculinity (Seidler 2007; Oddone 2017). Women's associations conduct research on social intervention, they shelter survivors, and analyze the centres aimed at anti-violence work with perpetrators (see Bozzoli, Merelli, and Ruggerini 2017).

When it comes to violence against women in Spain, the *Delegación del gobierno para la violencia de género*, part of the Ministry of Health, Social Service and Equality, produces annual reports on the issue and publishes them online. According to the most recent national survey on VAW, a 24% of women over sixteen have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by a partner or non-partner in their lifetime (Survey on VAW, 2015).³⁰ The most recent annual report available is the one from 2016, showing a decrease in femicides (44 cases in 2016 against 60 in 2015, with 60 being the average number in the past decade).³¹ The terminology used speaks of '*violencia de género*' and of '*violencia machista*' when the aim is identifying sexist dynamics of power underpinning the acts of violence. Because the majority of violences occur within heterosexual-affective relationships, VAW is also called '*violencia en la pareja*' or in the case of Catalan activism '*violències masclistes en la parella*'. The social practices related to the legitimization of men's violent attitudes are studied in relation to gender meanings, imaginaries and practices of masculinities and femininities (Lorente Acosta and Camps 2001; Salazar Benítez 2013) so to inform policy programmes and educational initiatives (Freixanet 2013; Compairé et al. 2011), with the collaboration of feminist organizations on the ground. In socio-psychological studies on VAW, the emphasis is set on identifying acts of *micromachismo* affecting the social acceptance of VAW (Bonino 2008; García Campaña et al. 2018), on understanding the relation between the social construction of men's practices and violences (Ponce 2013), and on deconstructing mainstream cultures of romantic love and the emotional injustices associated with it (Bosch and Ferrer 2002; Esteban 2011; Enguix and Roca 2015). One example of this is the campaign designed by the Catalan Women's Institute (*Institut Català de les Dones*, ICD), inscribed into the 2012-2015 plan of intervention and

³⁰ Ministry of Health, Social Services and Equality (2015). *Survey on violence against women 2015 — Main results*. Available online: http://www.violenciagenero.msssi.gob.es/violenciaEnCifras/macroencuesta2015/pdf/SPAIN_SURVEY_ON_VAW_2015.pdf accessed 27/06/2018

³¹ Ministry of Health, Social Services and Equality (2016). *Violencia de género. Boletín Estadístico Anual*. Available online: http://www.violenciagenero.igualdad.mpr.gob.es/violenciaEnCifras/boletines/boletinAnual/docs/BE_Anual_2016.pdf accessed 27/06/2018

prevention of violence against women of the *Generalitat de Catalunya* (ICD 2012). Research on men's violent behaviours in Spain is conducted also by organizations working with perpetrators like the Barcelona-based CONEXUS (Gilchrist et al. 2015).

Most people involved in gender justice agree that gender and sexual-affective education is the path to follow (Compairé et al. 2011) and agree on promoting men's participation in care labour (Deiana and Greco 2012; Abril and Puchert 2005). The social and material effect of the economic crisis resulted in a high unemployment rate among men, that contributed to questioning the central role of men as providers, fathers and partners (Abril 2016). In Italy the survey on the gendered distribution of housework time (2013-2014), showed that more than half of men over 18 (54.2%) agreed with the statement that 'for the family it is better that men dedicate themselves to economic needs and women to take care of the house', and among women, 46.9% agreed with this statement (ISTAT, 2017).³² According to the same analysis, 70 percent of workload related to house and childcare is performed by women, with a great gender dissymmetry in the sphere of unpaid care work. Recent changes in labour patterns (increased flexibility, precarity, unemployment and a less structured organization of productive work in Italy and Spain) ask men to re-negotiate their identities as men (beyond the normative association of manhood-productive work) and as fathers (beyond the breadwinner role) (Abril 2016, 67). This process is not linear, it encompasses men's socio-economic diversity and their different degrees of personal willingness to become fathers more involved in care and reproductive labour (Crespi and Ruspini 2016; Bosoni and Westerling 2018; Musumeci and Santero 2018). Men mobilizing for gender justice in Spain (see chapter 6 of this thesis) have coined the term 'egalitarian fatherhood' politics to refer to this process.

The importance given to research on VAW, and to men and masculinities in Italy and Spain underlines the connections between violent practices and gender meanings and socializations, as other European research suggests (Wojnicka 2015). According to gender justice actors in Italy and Spain (activists, socially-engaged researchers and social workers), the problems lie within socio-cultural practices affected by local and transnational gender politics. In order to critically understand the material-discursive conditions underpinning VAW we should consider sexism within sexual-

³² ISTAT 'Dossier. Quadro informativo su alcuni elementi di contesto culturale Audizione del Presidente dell'Istituto nazionale di statistica' (Giorgio Alleva), Commissione parlamentare di inchiesta sul femminicidio, nonché su ogni forma di violenza di genere Roma, 27 settembre 2017' pdf available at: https://www.istat.it/it/files/2017/09/Audizione-ISTAT-femminicidio_Dossier.pdf accessed on 08/12/2018.

affective relations (Giuliani, Galetto, and Martucci 2014; Mapelli 2013; Esteban 2011; Nardini 2015); and sexism within men's demand of commercial sex (Corso and Landi 1998; Serughetti 2013; Morniroli and Oliviero 2013; Abbatecola and Benasso 2016). Moreover, for transforming gender relations in a broader sense it is also fundamental to address the mutual interferences between the construction of masculinities and LGBTphobias (Mérida Jiménez 2016; Enguix 1996). As it has been addressed by different authors (Gilmore 1994; Casado 2008), in many contexts the social construction of men's practices is culturally associated to compulsory heterosexuality, the rejection of femininity and internalized homophobia. Feminist activists and women's movements, and men engaged in feminisms, propose in Italy and Spain gender-sensitive politics for social transformation (see Galetto et al. 2009; Aguado and Ortega López 2011; Compairé 2013; Montalbano 2015; Ciccone 2009; Gasparrini 2018; Guasch and Lozoya 2012; Fernández de Quero 2015). Problematization of men's practices is made public through activist-academic events, such as the conference *La Questione Maschile* in Padova (in 2014; see the edited volume: Chemotti 2015), *Maschilità e cura* in Bergamo (2017) and the Conferences Men in Movement.

3. Men's anti-violence activism in Italy and Spain

The scenario of men's involvement in gender justice in Italy is in general very scattered, with many small groups located in different cities, primarily active locally in collaboration with anti-violence feminist organizations and presenting various degrees of visibility, action and institutionalization. Some of the groups have a long history of men's only consciousness-raising practices, others focus mainly on anti-violence advocacy or on promoting responsible and caring fatherhood; others exist in connection and lineage with local women's and LGBT+ activist groups. The overall panorama of anti-sexist masculinity politics seems in Italy highly fragmented, growing in participation among gender-sensitive circles, internally diversified, and theoretically lively. An example of this diversity in approaches is the group *Uomini in Cammino* based in Pinerolo. This group has a clear Catholic inspiration and mainly focuses on gatherings among men to share personal experiences with the feminist method 'starting from oneself'. The group *maschileplurale* (member of the network MP) from Rome has strong leftist political connotations, its members are in favour of a social critique of

gendered practices and of institutional politics, and some of them collaborate with feminist associations in Rome and/or co-write political critiques with feminist women. Associated to the MP network we find the *Centro d' Aiuto per Uomini Maltrattanti* (CAM) in Ferrara, that works on perpetrators' programmes and VAW prevention. Other groups are for example the one from Bari called *Uomini in Gioco* in Bari, that started as a consciousness-raising group; *Livorno Uomini Insieme* (LUI) established from the initiative of two psychotherapists; the group *Il Cerchio degli Uomini* institutionalized as an NGO in Turin, and a less institutionalized group with same name in Milan, whose members establish individually political relations with women activists in the *Casa delle Donne di Milano*. Until 2014 the 'Network of clients and ex-clients and false-clients of prostitution' was associated to MP. However, because of the lack of a clear public stand of MP against the act of buying sex, the latter decided to leave MP and to advocate against commercial sex and sexual-trafficking on its own.³³

MP is a network of men's groups that started from an informal group-practice among men during the mid-80s. In 2007 it became a national association based in Rome. The goal of creating a national association was to serve and improve the structure of the network and to be able to collectively establish a fruitful dialogue with other anti-violence organizations, with feminist associations and with local municipalities (MP 2016).³⁴

MP has contacts in every Italian region and men's groups are now located in Bari, Rome, Palermo, Livorno, Viareggio, Pisa, Lucca, Bologna, Parma, Brianza, Milan, Turin, Pinerolo and Verona. Each group of the network has five-to-ten men. Participation is generally fluctuating in numbers. While some of MP groups are established as local NGOs, others work in a less institutionalized manner. In general, the network-like structure of MP and its reliance in local communities, allows maintaining internal diversity in positionings and in the ways how groups collaborate locally with other organizations. On the other hand, this prevents the association from operating in a more structured way on the national level. The general lack of attention to gender issues from mainstream politics and media complicates MP's goals of establishing national visibility and receiving funding for projects. While the network MP remains the main reference for Italian-based men's ally work, rather active groups such as *Laboratorio Smaschieramenti* and the project called *La ragazza di Benin City*,

³³ More information and contacts of each group are available on MP's website at <http://www.maschileplurale.it/contatti-associazione-rete/>, accessed 27/06/2018.

³⁴ Statute of MP, published online in 2016 <http://www.maschileplurale.it/statuto/>, accessed 25/06/2018

do operate separately and in open debate with MP. The use of social networking sites by MP is performed to create a virtual space of discussion on gender-related topics through a quite successful Facebook group in which anybody genuinely interested in the conversation is welcomed.

Men taking action in favour of feminism and gender justice in Spain have, since the turn of the millennium, organized themselves in groups, associations and networks (Lozoya et al. 2008). The array of groups of men working for gender justice in Spain is thus constituted by a plurality of actors such as non-profit organizations like AHIGE (*Asociación de Hombres por la Igualdad de Género*) with delegations in almost every Spanish city; the *Forum* and the *Red de Hombres por la Igualdad* from Sevilla; governmentally-led projects to involve men in gender justice initiatives like the *Gizonduz* project from the Basque Country and locally-based men's associations and smaller groups (such as *Aliats del Feminisme* and *Homes en Diàleg* from Barcelona). These groups albeit to different degrees, partake in the Men for Equality Movement *Movimiento de Hombres por la Igualdad* (MHE), an umbrella term and a symbolic location which allows all the men involved to be connected, to feel part of a shared project, to communicate on future goals, sometimes to disagree on different approaches as well as to set shared objectives or launch national or state-level campaigns. All these actors engage in online networking, using Facebook pages (or groups, or communities) or Twitter accounts in order to encourage participation, disseminate information, and inform about their own organization.

During the past decade, the activity of these Spanish men's organizations has mainly focused on promoting gender justice through a variety of initiatives, cutting across the realms of street activism, advocacy, social education, online campaigning, and also academic research. Their main objectives are raising gender-awareness among men and involving men in taking responsibility against sexism, so to end gender-based violence (men's violence against women, domestic violence and homophobic violence). Other important topics of reflection and action of the group are oriented to fostering what they call *nuevas masculinidades* ('new masculinities'), namely those men's practices which question dominant machoist discourses and everyday micro-practices of machismos (Bonino, 2008). New masculinities are, for example, men's caring practices in fatherhood and in man-to-man friendships, men's involvement in housework and in emotional work (*corresponsabilidad*), men who publicly criticize machismo and

homophobia (*hombres igualitarios*), and men who support a plurality of non-violent masculinities in line with feminist and LGBT+ civil rights movements .

The vast majority of participants in gender justice activism both within MP and AHIGE are heterosexual, middle-class, white men, aged between 35-60, and have previous and/or current experiences in volunteer work or public engagement of various kinds (social, political, environmental, religious-catholic, etc). Most of these men are highly educated and hold university degrees. They work in primary and secondary education, social work, academia, local governments, NGOs and hospitals. Recently, membership also has come to include young fathers, university students involved in gender-research, and gender-aware young media-activists. Their motivations spring from personal-affective reasons combined with the desire for social change in relation to ending men's violence against women. As it has been noted (Kaufman, 2001; Flood, 2003), taking public action against gender-based violence is often the first step for men to engage with anti-sexist activism and become more gender-aware in other spheres as well. As in the experience of my fieldwork research, **anti-violence action is indeed the most visible activity of men's anti-sexist engagement – and one of the most mobilizing forces as well, in its critical instance and in its affirmative proposal for changing men's gendered practices for violence prevention.**

Both MP and AHIGE networks grew out of the activity of small groups of men (in Rome and in Malaga), created to speak up and share among men ideas and problems in opposition to normative masculinity. The initial trigger that brought men together was the urgency to discuss dominant masculinity in the light of the widespread phenomenon of male violence against women. Speaking up as men among other men, was in both cases the primary motivation for raising critical questions and expressing their masculinity politics. AHIGE's first statement makes this clear:

In the beginning of 2001, in Malaga (Spain), we gathered for the first time in a group with one aim: speaking.

Exchanging ideas, ways of thinking and feeling about ourselves helped us reflect upon the implications of being men in our times. We had many questions and very few answers: What is it like and what does it mean to be a man today? Why are men this way? To what extent does the traditional model of masculinity determine us? Why do we relate to our partners, sons and daughters, with our fathers and mothers in the way we do? Why

do we have this sexuality? Why do we have this relation with power and social status? Why violence? What are we doing in respect of all this? (AHIGE website).³⁵

In the case of MP, the forerunner Stefano Ciccone published the book *Essere maschi. Fra potere e libertà* in 2009, in which he reflects on the group practice of speaking among men:

The choice to speak-up as men has not meant the voluntary commitment toward the affirmation of a ‘gender-guilt’, but rather it represented the opportunity to open up a room for freedom within our speaking-ourselves-as-men as well as within our conflicting experiences with the norms and modes of relationships no longer meaningful to us (Ciccone 2009, 17).

Discussing male violence went hand-in-hand with men’s processes of gender-awareness: questioning abstract masculinity, and their anti-violence activism expanded alongside their efforts to promote the critical reconfiguration of men’s practices. Indeed, in the group, men face each other’s willingness and commitment to contribute to the eradication of violence in gender relations. This process, in both approaches, entails a thorough rethinking of normative masculinity.

4. MP: Violence Concerns Us, Let’s Speak Up as Men

As already said, mostly inspired by Italian traditions of sexual difference feminism and by the practice of consciousness-raising (Milan women’s bookstore collective 1990), members of MP gather in groups to give voice to their experiences ‘as men’ (*come uomini*), namely generating what they call *partial sexed-gendered perspective* (*prospettiva parziale e sessuata*). This practice is dedicated to sharing men’s experiences, desires and discomforts while digging into the personal-political scripts affecting men’s gendered lives. Through adopting and re-adapting the Italian feminist method of speaking by ‘starting from oneself’ (*a partire da sé*), members of MP

³⁵ AHIGE webpage: ‘Historia. Los comienzos.’ Available at <http://ahige.org/nosotros/historia> accessed 08/12/2018. All translations from Italian and Spanish are mine unless indicated differently.

developed a practice of situating themselves ‘as men’ in order to make masculinity norms and experiences visible to themselves, and question the centrality and the universality attributed to the all-too-neutral Man (*Neutro Maschile*). The process of coming to terms with the gendered character of men’s practices and with the history of normative masculinity is also defined as ‘situating within male sexual difference’ (*situarsi nella differenza - al maschile*), because they agree that

what became visible, what was expressed, has been the difference thought by women; masculine experience has remained *unspoken*, confused with the normative patriarchal system and its historical representation that denies and hides its partiality (Ciccione 2009, 10); emphasis mine).

The urgency of *speaking as men* appears in MP’s public anti-violence approach. In the autumn of 2006, members of the MP network wrote their first public statement, ‘*La violenza contro le donne ci riguarda: prendiamo la parola come uomini*’ (MP, 2006)³⁶ which was published in national left-oriented newspapers. Denouncing the widespread phenomenon of violence against women, the text was in fact a call for raising a collective gender-awareness among men, and it was MP’s first occasion to make a national statement as a men’s network after many years of internal group activism. This call invited everyone, and men in particular, to see violence as part of gendered practices of masculinity: the slogan, repeated in the title was ‘violence against women concerns us: let’s speak out as men.’ Gathering the signatures of a thousand men, the call was considered a success within MP network in terms of visibility and collective awareness. Then, in the spring 2007 MP became a national association. The same call was relaunched in 2009, establishing the slogan as MP’s anti-violence motto. The 2009 version of the call became the foundational text of MP, and contains two messages: that because violence against women is perpetrated by men it is a men’s problem; and that this problem originates from discourses and practices of normative masculinity. In the letter *Da Uomo a Uomo* (From man to man), made public online in November 2009, we can find a clear example of this perspective:

³⁶ MP 19 September 2006 ‘La violenza contro le donne ci riguarda: prendiamo la parola come uomini’ available at <https://www.maschileplurale.it/appello-ci-riguarda/> accessed 08/12/2018.

When I hear of husbands beating to death or locking their wives at home, when I hear of boyfriends who kill their girlfriends out of jealousy, of men who abuse or sexually harass women in public places I don't think 'they are mentally ill, drunk or perhaps migrants!' I don't say 'she was asking for it!'. [Instead I think:] *All this concerns me, concerns us* (MP 2009; emphasis mine).³⁷

And, reading further in the same document, the relation of violence to masculinity becomes even more evident:

When I observe the mockery, the contempt and the discrimination that precede violence against lesbians and gays I don't think: 'they can do as they like, as long as they do it in private'. I know it concerns me, concerns us: I am familiar with that mockery and contempt since I was a child: they function as a threat for those who don't behave *as a man* (ibidem; emphasis in the original).

Accordingly, among the members of MP it became common to problematize the phenomena of gender-based violence, homophobic violence and violence against women under the umbrella term of *violenza maschile* (male violence) so as to emphasise its embeddedness in discourses of normative masculinity. This approach formulates an important counter-discourse to Italian mainstream approaches to such phenomena.

The current mainstream tendency in Italian media, cultural and political discourses is to discuss violence against women, despite its frequency, as an *accidental* effect of passionate-crime, a jealousy-impulse or inexplicable madness when the violence is committed by white Italian men. When violence is perpetrated by non-white Italian men, then it is discussed as an issue of public safety, very often discursively linked to racist and anti-immigration arguments. Contrary to this mainstream framework, by talking about *male* violence as something that concerns men *as men*, MP aims to uncover the structural and transversal power dynamics that legitimate violence, and that are related to normative masculinity and gender relations. Accordingly, as Alessio Miceli has claimed in his reflection on the MP national meeting on anti-violence commitment (Bologna, 2012) entitled *Le parole non bastano* (Words are not enough): 'The main problem remains how to make this *political debate* explode within

³⁷ MP November 2009 'Da Uomo a Uomo' available at <http://www.maschileplurale.it/da-uomo-a-uomo-appello/>, accessed 25/06/2018.

the whole society, so as to change the dominant culture of masculinity underpinning violence' (Miceli, 2012; emphasis and translation mine).

Within MP's approach to male violence, a central role is given to deconstructing normative male heterosexuality and its social definition. In the document from 2006 male violence against women is presented as 'extreme expressions of male sexuality and prevarication'.³⁸ Resonating radical feminist claims, MP considers the realm of sexuality to be at the core of power relations, and as the field in which gender relations are ultimately negotiated. MP members declare that 'the female body is negated through violence. The female body is humiliated and considered as a mere object of exchange, as recent sexual scandals of powerful men demonstrate' (ibidem). This reflection has been at the heart of MP rethinking of the heterosexual male imaginary put in connection with prostitution and of sexual politics, as shown during MP national meetings [*Quell'oscuro soggetto di desiderio. Immaginario sessuale maschile e domanda di prostituzione*](#) (That obscure subject of desire. Male sexual imaginary and prostitution. Turin, 2010) and *Il Cav. Che resta in noi. La crisi politica come questione maschile* (The Berlusconi within us. The political crisis as a masculinity issue. Bologna, 2011). The content of both meetings was also inspired by the Italian political situation when MP decided to tackle the problematic knot of heteronormative masculinity/money/sex/power.³⁹

MP's anti-violence call from 2006 states that, in times of 'social changes, crisis of patriarchy and women's empowerment,' what men need is

a new capability of reflection, self-consciousness, in-depth research of the *dynamics underpinning their sexuality* and on the character their relations with women and other men' (MP, 2006; emphasis mine).

MP's approach includes asking whether and to what extent men's erotic experiences are impoverished by the dominant monolithic model of sexual performance and male heterosexual desire. In order to answer this last question, MP members find it crucial to rethink their embodied practices within their personal relations of love, sex, care,

³⁸ MP 19 September 2006 'La violenza contro le donne ci riguarda: prendiamo la parola come uomini' available at <https://www.maschileplurale.it/appello-ci-riguarda/> accessed 08/12/2018.

³⁹ As I could share with the members of *Homes Igualitaris-AHIGE Catalunya* after my first filwork visit in 2012, a short article of mine translated by Juanjo Comparé appeared about this on their online journal *Hombres Igualitarios Online Journal* in March 2013: 'Como lo hacen los Italianos? El Deseo Masculino (de Cambio) en la Reflexión de Maschile Plurale' (How do Italians do it? Male Desire (for Change) in the Reflection of Maschile Plurale).

fatherhood and friendship ‘beyond the normative reaffirmation of virility and power’⁴⁰ and to turn them into more engaging and enriching experiences (as from the collective publication edited by (Deiana and Greco 2012; Deriu 2004; Mapelli and Ciccone 2012; Mapelli 2013).

In March 2013 MP organized the meeting *[Mio fratello è figlio unico. Cosa cambia se cambiano i desideri degli uomini?](#)* [My brother is an only child. What changes if men’s desires change?] (Rome, 2013) which was dedicated to affirmatively discuss anti-sexist men’s desire for social transformation and the conflicts that emerge with other social actors (including institutions) that do not share similar concerns. As MP neither receives large visibility nor considerable funding, it remains very difficult to create anti-violence projects beyond the voluntary efforts of individual activists and small groups. The question posed as the title of the meeting remains open: the work of MP is a constant challenge, an ongoing journey grounded in individual reflection pointing out that ‘I am a man and I see *male violence* around me. I can also see, however, the *desire for change* of many men. I choose to *face that violence* and to *listen to that desire of change*’ (MP, 2009; emphasis and translation mine).

5. AHIGE: Silence Makes Us Complicit, Let’s Speak Up Against Violence

The Spanish *Asociación de Hombres por la Igualdad de Género* was created from local groups of men in the area of Málaga and became a national NGO in 2001, now collecting a total of a hundred memberships connected with delegations locally based in Andalucía, Madrid, Comunitat Valenciana, Islas Baleares, Catalonia, Castilla-La Mancha, Rioja, Cantabria, Murcia, Castilla León, Extremadura and the Basque Country. AHIGE is structured as a regular NGO, with a rather pyramidal structure made up of members, executive board, research coordination, presidency and treasury. AHIGE is well connected with regional institutions, so as to receive attention from media, and from the gender equality administrations in local governments. In Barcelona AHIGE

⁴⁰ MP November 2009 ‘Da Uomo a Uomo’ available at <http://www.maschileplurale.it/da-uomo-a-uomo-appello/>, accessed 25/06/2018.

members collaborate with the municipality of Barcelona, contributing to making social policies oriented towards gender justice both individually and through the association *Homes Igualitaris-AHIGE Catalunya*. One of the results of this collaboration is the project ‘*Canviem-ho*’ (let’s change it!) that includes online information, workshops, anti-violence social intervention initiatives like the *Servei d’Atenció a Homes per a la Promoció de Relacions no Violentes* (SAH), and also promotes co-responsible fatherhood.⁴¹

The activist and institutional engagements of AHIGE operate under the general framework of gender equality feminism. The activities organized by AHIGE fall into social policies of prevention of gender-based violence and, affirmatively, are aimed towards ‘including men in building gender equality’. The historical and political feminist tradition of *Igualdad de género* (gender equality) is currently the paradigm most often used in rethinking masculinities and discussing men’s practices among Spanish men. Although sexual difference and queer feminisms also inform current cultural criticisms, the tradition of equality feminism allows men’s organizations such as AHIGE to develop a critical discourse from men’s locations and to be ‘included’ in gender equality political agendas, so as to interact with local governments and to receive funding for projects on *nuevas masculinidades* (new masculinities) and against *violencia machista* (masculinist violence).

AHIGE’s anti-violence approach is rooted within its members’ perspectives on gender, justice, and society. The foundational text of AHIGE is *Por una igualdad inclusiva. La perspectiva integral de género* (In favor of inclusive equality. Gender comprehensive perspective).⁴² It expresses AHIGE’s stance in terms of gender relations and is grounded in AHIGE’s acknowledgement of patriarchal society:

For men, the assigned gender identity entitled us to a privileged position. This situation generated a model of dominant masculinity, which we call patriarchal, heterocentric or hegemonic, based on values such as domination, invulnerability, competition, rivalry and imposition. In this model, personal introspection is devalued and the outside world, the socio-political, is overvalued.⁴³

⁴¹ Web page of the project ‘*Canviem-ho*’ (let’s change it): <http://w110.bcn.cat/portal/site/Homes/>, accessed 23/07/2018.

⁴² AHIGE: ‘POR UNA IGUALDAD INCLUSIVA. La perspectiva integral de género’ available at http://www.ahige.org/pdfs/AHIGE_perspectiva_integral_genero.pdf accessed 08/12/2018.

⁴³ AHIGE: ‘POR UNA IGUALDAD INCLUSIVA. La perspectiva integral de género’ available at http://www.ahige.org/pdfs/AHIGE_perspectiva_integral_genero.pdf accessed 08/12/2018.

This model of masculinity, according to AHIGE members, is the norm that sustains sexist practices within what they call *cultura machista*. In such a culture, normative masculinity is ‘based on superiority, disaffection, repression of affectivity, the imposition of strength, competition and violence, which dehumanises and impoverishes men while it oppresses women’ (ibidem). *Machismo* is thus seen as the cultural framework in which gender-based violence and violence against women occur, are legitimated and silenced. AHIGE’s motto affirms that *el enemigo común es el machismo* [the common enemy is machismo]: this idea is shared with feminist struggles for gender justice, LGBT+ movements and different masculinities. Given these conceptual and societal premises, we can understand why, among AHIGE members, violence is referred to as *violencia machista*.

Every October and November, in preparation for the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women (25th November), AHIGE’s delegations organize public demonstrations to denounce violence against women, create gender-awareness and gain visibility within local communities. AHIGE’s document ‘*Agenda Común de los hombres por la igualdad. Declaración de Barcelona*’ (Common Agenda of Men for Gender Equality. Barcelona Declaration), signed on occasion of the Ibero-American Conference on Masculinity and Equality (CIME, Barcelona, October 2011), establishes October 21st as the anniversary of men’s first anti-violence demonstration (*rueda de hombres*) organized for the first time in Sevilla in 2006. Since then this date was adopted as the official date for performing this demonstration.⁴⁴

On this date groups of men perform the *rueda de hombres* (circle of men): the most visible public demonstration of men’s stand against masculinist violence, enacted with the aim of publicly positioning themselves against violence. Literally, men stand in a circle holding hands and reading their anti-violence manifesto. Candles are used to symbolize peace and equality and are set around a white rope shaped as the one used as the symbol of the global White Ribbon Campaign.⁴⁵ Information about *ruedas* is published a few weeks before October 21st, so to reach as many members as possible to perform *ruedas* in many towns during the same week. Men’s groups from different

⁴⁴ AHIGE 2013, ‘AGENDA COMÚN DE LOS HOMBRES POR LA IGUALDAD. Declaración de Barcelona’ available online at http://www.ahige.org/pdfs/DECLARACION_DE_BARCELONA.pdf accessed on 08/12/2018.

⁴⁵ The White Ribbon is a campaign founded in Canada in 1991 to involve men in working against violence against women. From its beginnings this campaign became globally famous as it has been launched in many other countries as well. More details about the Canada-based campaign and its projects are available online at <https://www.whiteribbon.ca/>, accessed on 04/11/2018.

towns support each other in organizing *ruedas*; step-by-step instructions are provided on AHIGE's website. The manifesto or foundational document that is intended to be read during the circle of men, can be downloaded from the website (<http://ruedasdehombres.ahige.org/queson.html>). Social networks are the preferred platforms to raise awareness, disseminate information, publicise events and invite participation. Social media campaigns are launched to fuel men's online and offline engagement before and in preparation for the public *rueda*. Women and non-members are welcomed to take part in the circle, as it is the ritualized enactment of a free of violence community. The second aim of organizing a *rueda* is to attract other men into the movement, as they move, literally, into the circle of members. Since its first enactment, *ruedas* are organized each year. *Ruedas* are fundamental for the Spanish movement of men for gender equality and its institutionalization: AHIGE's website <http://ruedasdehombres.ahige.org/historia.html> displays a compilation of their *ruedas*.

Under the project '*Vivamos sin violencia. El silencio nos hace cómplices*' (Let's live without violence. Silence makes us complicit), created in 2007, AHIGE continues to develop its anti-violence initiatives, aimed towards speaking up and breaking the silence on *violencia machista*. Combating violence, through speaking up, also involves a commitment to stimulating positive changes in society:

we work in our daily life for equality between women and men, researching the causes which, on a personal and social level, contribute to inequalities. We believe that social changes become impossible when their supporters forget about personal transformation.⁴⁶

This aim is closely connected to AHIGE's anti-violence strategy, because, as one interviewee explains:

Our anti-violence approach is not intended to accuse men, risking reactions like 'I am not the bad guy, this [*violence*] does not concern me'. We want to go beyond the mere denunciation of violence by men. We want to stimulate men in questioning their practices, and asking: in which ways is this violence also about myself? (Joan, October 2012).

⁴⁶ AHIGE: 'POR UNA IGUALDAD INCLUSIVA. La perspectiva integral de género' available at http://www.ahige.org/pdfs/AHIGE_perspectiva_integral_genero.pdf accessed 08/12/2018.

According to AHIGE, a very important strategy is to make men aware of what they can gain when moving towards a more egalitarian masculinity. AHIGE's other motto is *ganamos con el cambio* (we benefit from change), since normative masculinity, in their perspective, also impoverishes men's experiences. 'We search for alternatives to this model of masculinity, alternatives grounded in men's development of solidarity, empathy, peace, love and joy, starting from the positive expression of our emotion'.⁴⁷ Examples of positive alternatives in masculinities can trigger men to get involved in taking action against *machismo*. Affirmatively, AHIGE stimulates alternative practices to *machismo* and tries to involve men in taking an active role in more egalitarian practices in the family, with their partners and friends, in academia, education, the workplace, etc.

Differently from MP, AHIGE defines clearly their anti-sexist practices and models of masculinities: breaking with *machismo*, reconfigured masculinities are those directed towards becoming *hombres igualitarios* (egalitarian men) and *nuevas masculinidades* (new masculinities). Some examples of the practices included under the umbrella of 'new masculinities' include developing feminist-inspired critical standpoints on society; speaking up against *violencia machista* and committing to its eradication; engaging in equal and non-violent love and sexual relationships; adopting caring and active father roles; contributing to domestic work (*corresponsabilidad*); combating homophobia and transphobia; practicing more affectionate friendships among (heterosexual) men and expressing an interest in exploring one's emotions and corporeality (Nardini 2018). However, combating *machismo* does not come without a price. Deconstructing dominant practices and doing anti-sexist activism, as some AHIGE members have described, involves becoming 'non-hegemonic, [...] minoritarian masculinities' (Alvar, November 2012). Some of those that call themselves *igualitarios* recognise a loss in social status (especially among other men) and a loss of attractiveness in the eyes of women. For this reason, AHIGE members find it important to create positive role models in order to make egalitarian masculinities more popular and 'attractive'. This brings AHIGE activists even closer together in fighting against *machismo*, and motivates their socio-pedagogical aims.

As part of its anti-violence commitment, AHIGE devotes much attention towards prevention by activating workshops and other courses (*talleres*), debates and

⁴⁷ AHIGE: 'POR UNA IGUALDAD INCLUSIVA. La perspectiva integral de género' available at http://www.ahige.org/pdfs/AHIGE_perspectiva_integral_genero.pdf accessed 08/12/2018.

roundtables (*jornadas*), secondary-school programmes with boys and creating local men's groups (*grupos de reflexión*). Included in AHIGE's strategy of prevention of violence, instead of explicitly blaming men for *violencia machista* (and creating a distancing-effect in men's reactions), members of AHIGE agree on digging into the conditions underpinning VAW. With the help of feminist activism and research, they uncover culturally situated normative practices and their interactions with discursive configurations of dominant masculinity. Then, on a personal level, a question is raised: "where does violence come from?" Some answers are found in men's gendered frustrations with the constant threats of effeminacy. These frustrations originate in the limited emotional expressions granted to men (men ought to show no vulnerability, boys don't cry), in the disciplining of men's bodily experiences (boys do not hug or comfort each other, boys have to be strong 'against the world') and in the difficulties to communicate their feelings (verbally and corporeally). In my conversations with some interviewees, a common answer to my question 'why do men use violence?' was 'because men are afraid.' When I asked 'afraid of what?' the answer I got was: 'men are afraid of showing vulnerabilities and of not knowing how to deal with their own emotional reactions' (Joan, October 2012).

Accordingly, AHIGE denounces the social construction - inherent to machismo - of men's *analfabetismo emocional* (emotional illiteracy) and organizes educational workshops based on exploring men's emotional and corporeal expressions. For AHIGE, then, one strategic answer against *violencia machista* consists in offering courses and workshops designed for boys and men to feel and boost their *inteligencia emocional* (emotional intelligence) and their *conciencia corporal* (bodily awareness) together with their mutual connection. To make the life of boys and men richer, more egalitarian and happier, these educational group practices create the space for thinking and performing something 'new,' something that hopefully triggers a critical negotiation of one's embodied practices. In their view, if a more fulfilling embodied and sensorial experience is encouraged, from this experience different masculinities (egalitarian, non-violent) should follow. Transformation in men's practices is evoked with AHIGE's motto '*Cada hombre es una revolución interior pendiente*' (every man is a personal-revolution to come). To what extent and in which conditions these transformations are occurring in men's practices are interesting and complex questions that remain open. Taking the lived experience of men's embodiment as a central

element in the rethinking of masculinities leads AHIGE to argue for reinventing various domains where men's corporeal and affective relations are at stake.

6. Conclusion: anti-violence engagement and mobilizing 'as men'

Generally, men in anti-sexist activism and advocacy develop anti-patriarchal beliefs, and they try to start a journey of gendered self-reflection, critical inquiry into societal norms and creative instances into their daily negotiation of identities and practices. There is no linear path for such a journey, and many different factors interfere with the motivations, process and outcomes of men's involved in anti-sexist action (personal, political, theoretical and cultural). Different currents of political stands regarding sensitive issues such as sexuality education or sex work legislation co-exist depending mainly on community and personal values, and on the feminist political genealogies men engage with. MP and AHIGE anti-violence approaches show that different feminist-inspired routes are followed and put into practice to move beyond sexism: sexual difference theories and practices as well as equality feminisms inspire men's gender justice engagement. These routes are in fact intertwined with historically located features and with the ways in which feminist politics and alliances are negotiated in each context.

Despite the contextual differences and values, different strands in anti-sexist masculinity politics agree on the importance of seeing men and boys as agents of/for change, stimulating their sense of justice and responsibility in improving their own lives and the lives of others. For anti-sexist anti-violence activists thinking about themselves as sexed/gendered people is a very important (new) step towards adopting a gender-sensitive perspective. They assume that gender-awareness among men is pivotal for making visible the relation between normative masculinity, men's practices and violence (Flood 2001; Peacock, Barker, and Hearn 2014), including within the programmes addressed to perpetrators (Oddone 2017). Coming to terms with the gendering of masculinities *collectively* among men, including the possibility of change and violence prevention, constitutes both the premise and the final goal of MP and AHIGE's anti-violence activism.

In the analysis presented here, both MP and AHIGE's anti-violence approaches spring from the urgency of rethinking masculinity in its normative manifestations. By directing attention to 'male violence' both organizations call into question the dominant configuration of masculinity in relation to violent discourses and practices against women, ethnic others and sexual minorities. In the Italian context of anti-violence activism men discuss *violenza maschile* and in Spain they discuss *violencia machista*, both problematize masculinity in its associations with violence. MP emphasises the author of violence (normally invisible in public discourse) by stating that *as a man, male violence does concern me* (come uomo, la violenza maschile mi riguarda). The choice for the term *violencia machista* expresses AHIGE's specific approach of *perspectiva integral* in which gender-based violence is understood as part of a patriarchal heteronormative set of violences (including violence against women, against LGBT+ people, against men who do not conform to dominant masculinity, etc.). In both cases, it is possible to see that MP and AHIGE's approaches have generated a critical understanding of the socio-cultural norms that affect masculinities in each context, and both have raised awareness that these norms should be changed to prevent violence.

The groups associated with AHIGE and MP networks deploy various strategies (theoretical and practical) through which alternatives for thinking about and experiencing masculinity can be explored. Men's gender awareness at the personal level is often combined with the acknowledgement of patriarchal heteronormative patterns that affect men's lives negatively. A crucial point in the project of eradicating gender-based violence performed by men is to show what men can gain by pushing the boundaries of normative masculinity and to explore alternative ways of being men. Both perspectives address the limitations of men's experiences in terms of bodily and emotional life, trying to uncover the socio-cultural processes that en-gender men and masculinity in opposition to femininity and emotionality. The affirmative emphasis on activating changes in masculinities emerges both in MP and AHIGE's approaches (i.e., *desiderio di cambiamento* and *ganamos con el cambio*). In both cases, interestingly, reconfiguring men's practices touches upon questions of embodied experiences and corporeality. Whereas in the Italian case more attention is given to rethinking male normative heterosexuality and desire, in the Spanish context the focus is directed towards developing men's emotional intelligence and bodily awareness. Despite this difference in approaches, in both networks the dimension of corporeality is interrogated to stimulate self-reflectivity, self-knowledge and, potentially, social change. At the core

of their work both networks agree that the aim is to offer men the tools to become more relational and effectively-aware subjects.

Nowadays, transversally across regions, cities, and cultures, the main mobilizing question in men's collective anti-sexist commitment is eradicating violence against women committed by men. In general, men's violence on women is seen as the most visible outcome of gender injustice. For this reason, stirring feelings of outrage, acts of denunciation and quests for justice emerge as the most visible affective and political force among men in gender justice. Identifying violence against women as the extreme form of sexism as in the statement *el machismo mata*,⁴⁸ men's anti-sexist groups come to the fore mainly as men committed to anti-violence action. However, depending on the different cultural, linguistic and feminist genealogies they are influenced by, men's anti-violence activism is defined in different ways: some groups use the term 'violence against women', others prefer 'gender-based violence', others 'male violence' or '*machoist* violences' (with an emphasis on masculinity and on men's homophobic violent practices).

Seen as the most visible manifestation of sexism and misogyny, the outrage about VAW triggers mobilizing efforts, men's activist gatherings, and also brings with it the critical examinations of what is considered dominant or hegemonic masculinity in a certain situation or context. In other words, it brings up questions of power and social norms as well as personal relations. As performing violent discursive-material practices is linked to gendered norms and normative masculinity, these are analyzed differently according to the anti-sexist frame of reference that is used in approaching violence and sexism. It is interesting to observe what kind of anti-sexist masculinity politics and personal/political conversations are configured from each localized anti-violence approach. Reflecting on how gender norms affect one's own experience, that is, **becoming gender-aware** as men occurs personally and thanks to the group practices among men and what stems from being involved in anti-violence mobilization 'as men'. This process (slow, complex, fragmented, non-linear) cuts across personal reflections and collective practices of men's- only groups where men's experiences of socializations are shared, compared, listened to, questioned, made visible and, discussed among other men. Often for the first time, members of these groups note that the group becomes a safe space to speak about other things rather than men's violence albeit still

⁴⁸ Literally translated: 'Sexism kills,' an expression frequently used in Spanish-speaking feminist contexts to show violence inherent to sexist practices.

related to it. They also comment on what bothers men, what makes them angry, frustrated, and what boosts their sense of self-worth, love, enthusiasm and emotional wellbeing. Violence prevention is thought and organized to intervene within gender norms in order to change normative men's practices.

Accordingly, taking public action against VAW is, in many cases, accompanied by other initiatives that shed light on men's commitment to gender equality and justice on a more personal level at home, in the family, at work, among friends, colleagues, partners and so forth. As in the grassroots cases observed in this research, the first public initiative as 'men fighting VAW' resulted from a journey of reflection and discussion among men in the setting of an informal men's group. Here, men sharing experiences among men, many questions do come up connected with the willingness of making a difference in gender justice and fighting VAW.

What anti-sexist men agree on is the idea that VAW in all its manifestations is an expression of a material and symbolic power system which is deeply unjust and ought to be transformed. Visible forms of violence are most easily recognized by men as gender injustice, whereas more effort is needed in acknowledging the micro-practices and cultures of sexism which legitimate VAW and traverse everybody's everyday life. . In different degrees, thus, what happens in anti-sexist men's reflection groups aims to answer 'What is VAW, where does it come from? How does it relate to masculinity?,' making of their anti-violence engagement a masculinity politics. In turn, other questions arise: 'How does VAW, and so sexism at large, relate to me 'as man'? How do I feel, act and think in relation to this, and what can I do?' Starting with a feeling of outrage against violence, members of these reflection groups share a commitment to interrogate their experiences 'as men.' The themes that more regularly emerge in the critical discussions are tied to personal relationships of love, sexuality, parenting, care, friendship, and political relations with women and with other men. The attention and desire to experience more (care)fully the spaces and relations of male corporeality is transversal to these reformulation practices. The body is the 'place' where we live (within and through) relationships and so male bodies must be allowed to be.

As I will show in the following chapters, in this thesis I explore some of the ways in which critical-creative approaches to gender norms and men's experiences are elaborated by men's groups for gender justice. Triggered by a commitment to anti-violence and framed within violence prevention initiatives, I analyse how mobilizing 'as men' against sexism can give rise to deconstructive perspectives as well as

transformative proposals for thinking and acting as men, with gender-awareness being central to this activism.

Chapter 3. Speaking ‘as men’ *a partire da sé*: practicing masculinity politics of difference with Maschile Plurale

1. Introduction

The feminist practice of speaking by starting from personal experiences, in Italian ‘*raccontarsi a partire da sé*’ has been at the core of consciousness-raising groups, with powerful self-reflective effects such as creating a room for women’s subjectivities to exist and express themselves; unmasking power relations at the most intimate level and practicing relations among women based on trust, solidarity, and female authority (Milan women’s bookstore collective 1990). This practice is borrowed by members of MP who in small groups of three to five or/six men gather every couple of weeks, and speak up about their personal experiences and feelings ‘as men.’ Personal experiences and feelings are matters that men are commonly reluctant to face and express, because their male heterosexist socialization equates sharing feelings with femininity-weakness-vulnerability, something that would imply crossing the boundaries of socially accepted normative male behaviour (Seidler 2006). MP members agree that, when in conversation with other men, legitimate topics are rather general, abstract or non-personal topics: politics, sports, economy, work, cars, and women ‘as objects to conquer’ are some of them. This culture produces men who usually have a hard time in understanding and expressing themselves emotionally and in intimate relations with others: they have little affective and relational skills to engage in healthy and satisfactory relationships with their parents, their male and female friends, their partners and children.

The practice of speaking ‘as men’ has enormously influenced MP masculinity politics because it has given the method to dig into personal experiences ‘as men’. In doing so, this practice can become political because, as I will analyse in this chapter, it can offer men the space to critically approach norms and meanings related to their gender socializations and, at the same time, they can learn how to relate to others in a more affectively-engaged manner, starting from men-to-men friendships. Therefore **this**

chapter analyses the ways in which ‘speaking as men starting from oneself’ is practiced by MP members and how (if so) it becomes a political (feminist ethico-onto-epistemological) practice.

Before exploring what it means to and how it matters for MP’s members to speak ‘as men’ starting from oneself, I will provide in this chapter an account of the Italian feminist concepts and practices that most influenced MP in order to understand where this practice comes from as a feminist political strategy for engendering women’s subjectivities. In drawing a map of Italian feminist theory and practice, I have chosen to let my writing be guided by a few key concepts that most resonated during fieldwork with MP and in my analysis of the texts published by MP: *partire da sé*, *autocoscienza*, sexed-embodied subjectivity, relations among wo/men, partiality and sexual difference are some of these concepts. The account of Italian Feminist theory and practice I deliver here is partial and incomplete: its aim is not to provide a ‘complete’ picture of Italian Feminism during the 1970s and 80s, but rather to show how certain feminist concepts emerged from situated experiences and travelled through different socio-political locations and relations to create critical-creative approaches.

2. Italian feminist politics of *autocoscienza* and engaging with sexual difference

One thing that Italian 1970s-80s Feminism could not do without was women’s voice. In a political moment in which women’s *silence* (epistemology) and their invisibility as subjects (ontology) were passionately questioned, the practice of consciousness-raising (*autocoscienza*) was pivotal for the constitution of the women’s movement in Italy, introduced by Carla Lonzi in the feminist group *Rivolta Femminile*. Inspired by the North-American feminist experiences of consciousness-raising (de Lauretis 1990), the term *autocoscienza* stressed the self-determined, self-directed quality of the process of achieving a new consciousness/awareness, including a process of self-affirmation of woman as a subject (Kemp and Bono 1993, 9).⁴⁹ Indeed, *autocoscienza* groups were of vital importance to the feminist movement for they provided women with the

⁴⁹ For a more extensive account of *autocoscienza* groups within Italian 1970s-80s Feminism please refer to The Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective (1990). For a comparison between the Italian separatist experience of *autocoscienza* and the north-American ‘consciousness-raising’ please see Teresa de Lauretis (1990).

opportunity to speak-themselves and for-themselves through the self-determining practice of *partire da sé*: i.e., speaking among women starting from their own female-embodied experiences. As the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective wrote:

Autocoscienza groups thought that words have a liberating effect. The idea may have come from psychoanalytic therapy, in a revised version. In fact, the liberating effect comes from words exchanged in groups and among women, without the help of interpretation, because what women suffered from, basically, is not speaking for themselves, not saying by themselves what they are and what they want, but saying it instead to themselves with the words of others (Milan women's bookstore collective 1990, 42).

In the new political space offered by feminist groups practicing *autocoscienza*, not only could women gain awareness of the material and symbolic power differentials they suffered under patriarchy, but they also could give rise to a new female subject (*soggetto donna*) because the practice of *partire da sé* 'had removed a woman's *difference* from the position of being spoken (by others) and had put her in the position of speaking for herself' (Milan women's bookstore collective 1990, 45; emphasis mine).

Then, pivotal to the feminist political space of *autocoscienza* was the practice of *partire da sé*: a self-narrating moment that refused any external mediation and relied only on the female embodied experience. In Lonzi's theorization, the female-embodied lived experience, that which had been excluded from the male patriarchal society/culture, functioned as the bearer of a radical difference that could at once deconstruct power-relations and at the same time be a new starting point for a radically different reformulation of culture/society at large. The notion of (women's) *radical difference* comes up as the opportunity to recreate women's material-symbolic conditions from the start. As Lonzi writes in her *Sputiamo su Hegel* (Let's spit on Hegel) from (Lonzi 1970), 'woman's difference is her millennial absence from history' (Lonzi 1991 [1970]: 41), therefore the empowering and creative potential that lies in the new subject-woman as the bearer of a radically different order is stimulated by the feminist motto 'Let us make a profit from this difference' (ibid.).

Difference is thus a concept that points at the feminist practice potential of overthrowing the patriarchal structure both on the level of modes of thought and of

social relations⁵⁰ by moving beyond the unsatisfactory Hegelian dialectics because ‘woman is not dialectically related to the male world. The demands she expresses do not constitute an antithesis, but a shift to another level altogether’ (Lonzi 1991 [1970], 56). Lonzi wants to *engage* with women’s *difference* positively and productively in order to create the conditions for existing and thinking differently. Therefore, Lonzi’s analysis and theory imply also a different account of what it is to provoke social/historical change:

Our message to men, to the genius, to the rational visionary is this: the future of the world does not lie moving continually forward along the path mapped out by men’s desire for overcoming difficulties. The future of the world is open: it lies in stating along the path from the beginning again with *woman as a subject*. We recognise within ourselves the capacity for effecting a complete transformation of life. Not being trapped within the master/slave dialectic, we become conscious of ourselves; we are the *Unexpected Subject* (Lonzi 1991 [1970], 59; emphasis mine).⁵¹

That is why it is by *a partire da sé*, starting from a female-embodied lived experience without any other cultural (male) mediation, that women’s *difference* can engender a new onto-epistemological order, a different culture of relationships, a different embodied-knowledge, with the constitution of the new female-subject that Lonzi calls the *Unexpected Subject* of feminism.

As a matter of fact, from the perspective of these Italian feminist theories/practices that highly relied on French-speaking psychoanalytic thought in its feminist re-formulations (Irigaray 2010, 1985; Cixous 1976; Kristeva and Moi 2002), the focus on Language-Subjectivity and the question of sexual difference were central issues.⁵² Accordingly, the absence of women’s voices in the traditional public and

⁵⁰ Lonzi about the concept of ‘equality’: ‘Equality is what is offered as legal right to colonized people and what is imposed on them as culture. It is the principle through which these which hegemonic power continue to control those without’ (Lonzi 1991 [1970], 41). For Lonzi becoming equal thus means becoming like a man. But ‘being like’ is never going to be as good as ‘being’; and, on the other hand, being different is unacceptable if it means being inferior (Bono and Kemp 1991, 15).

⁵¹ In the exercise of re-reading Lonzi’s ‘Sputiamo su Hegel’, we can see that her critical argument about Hegelian dialectics develops a conceptualization of time that goes beyond the modernist ‘progressive narrative’ of ‘negative oppositions’. In this sense, Lonzi’s position is close to New Feminist Materialist theories of non-linear temporality (Van der Tuin 2009).

⁵² On the level of feminist theory, the significance of Lacanian psychoanalysis resounds in the work of Luisa Muraro *L’ordine simbolico della madre* from 1991 (Muraro 2006) in which the interconnected issues of language, corporeality, patriarchal power and ‘symbolic authorship’ are addressed. The key word in Muraro’s thought is ‘self-signification,’ where female authority emerges from its great interiority, through the act of digging into the feminine originary relationship with the mother a connection that is never lost or sublimated by consciousness in the case of

political spheres was related to the non-representability of femininity within a phallogentric symbolic order. Thus, the moment of *autocoscienza*, through naming one's own personal experience *a partire da sé*, dynamically allowed for a feminist re-intervention in language and society. Indeed it is 'by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus' as Cixous pointed out in her well-known text 'The Laugh of Medusa,' 'that women will confirm women in a place other than which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than *silence*' (Cixous, 1976: 881; emphasis mine). Accordingly, reading from a direct testimonial of Italian feminist practice:

Let it not be forgotten, the truth we have created originated in a promise: the event of a promise which is fulfilled at the very moment women affirm each other's presence, addressing to one another *unheard-of words*. This is how I would describe that the Libreria delle Donne (Milan) named the 'thread of happiness' circulating among women. Being-together among women has created a *new language*, whose founding act was originally prelinguistic, but which can only be expressed in language (Bonacchi 1993, 231; emphasis mine).

Therefore speaking-up-together becomes, for women, a moment of liberation: it enables them to emerge from the silence and signify their-selves, to surface from the hidden 'darkness' without losing their 'luminous depth' (Cixous, 1976). Speaking *from* and *for* themselves constitutes for women a way to gain full awareness of their own past and present gendered experiences, and to acquire an independent subjectivity *as women*. As a result, the female-embodied experience is given a voice to speak up during the *autocoscienza* groups: the individual level of awareness that each woman can achieve through speaking by *a partire da sé* can have broader political consequences for women in general.

Through sharing personal narratives about themselves, about their experiences of pain and pleasure, frustration and freedom, doubtfulness and discomfort, in practising *autocoscienza*, women found mutual recognition and validation. These were necessary elements in the process of creating *unexpected openings* in order to make women's experience and subjectivity visible. What was important to sustain in this female-embodied epistemology was the process according to which women could gain the

a female subject. The work of Carla Lonzi from 1970 became central to the practice of consciousness-raising for its radical feminist position and its powerful writing style.

autorità simbolica or ‘symbolic authorship’ (Muraro 2006) needed in order to speak up and validate one another’s experience. In order to do so it was necessary to establish a *relationship among women* and to create a *female genealogy* - as what had remained untheorized and invisible under phallogocentrism (Irigaray and Burke 1980). Indeed:

the reciprocal address has transformed being female from a fact into an event which established *relationships among women*. This relationship is the originary event of our movement’s history and politics; from this relationship – in momentary detachment from the current moral modes – the *new ethic* implicit in speaking ourselves was born (Bonacchi 1993, 231; emphasis mine).

Establishing relationality with other women by speaking together through a sense of mutual recognition is a process that acquires political significance as women gain the awareness of the power relations in which their personal experiences are embedded. This process traces ‘the fascinating discovery of her own self which each woman made in the *mirror* that was her fellow woman’ (Milan women’s bookstore collective 1990, 45). Indeed, the figure of the mirror resonates in several feminist texts⁵³ and stresses the fact that, among women:

the practice of *autocoscienza*, in fact, presupposed and promoted a perfect reciprocal identification. Of course, this is valid to the extent that the woman who is speaking has attained self-consciousness, since consciousness is the political act in which one discovers and affirms women’s common identity (Milan women’s bookstore collective 1990, 42; emphasis in the original).

Therefore, the practice of *autocoscienza* offered room for generating female symbolic bonding because it asked women to ‘start from themselves’ and to engage with one another’s embodied experience as a new ethic. The centrality of the image of the **mirror** shows how important it was for women to recognise themselves in another experience in order to deconstruct patriarchal and phallogocentric structures and to create the space for affirming the female-embodied *unexpected subject by partire da sé*.

⁵³ The centrality of the mirror figure in Italian feminist theory/practice is testified also by the title of Kemp and Bono’s book: *The Lonely Mirror: Italian Perspectives on Feminist Theory* (Kemp and Bono 1993). For a deeper analysis of the mirror-function within *autocoscienza* groups in relation to Lacanian psychoanalytic theory (‘mirror stage’) see: ‘In search of the mirror: fusion and differentiation in women’s groups’ by Maria Grazia Minetti; translated from the Italian ‘Alla ricerca dello specchio. Fusione e differenziazione nei gruppi di donne’, in *Memoria*, 1982, no. 3.

As a matter of fact, the new relationship among women ‘allows a single woman to be recognized, in the symbolic and physical presence of other women, but also in the distance and distinction that the space ‘between’ me and the other provides’ (Boccia 2002, 50). Putting the emphasis in the ‘between’ of this practice, Maria Luisa Boccia points out that various modes of *partire da sé* did not create a common representation of womanhood but rather opened the space for (re)elaborating one’s own female-embodied subjectivity and singularity (ibid.). As we can clearly see, the figure of the mirror, while signifying the power of the sight-knowledge link (Haraway 1988), not only shows us the function of self-recognition in the moment of *reflection*, but also points at the possibility of *diffraction* (Barad 2003) towards a plurality of female-embodied subjectivities among women. As a productive optical metaphor, *diffraction* suggests that, within the group-practice of *autocoscienza* and self-reflectivity, not only do women recognize themselves in each other’s experiences through a process of mutual (self) *reflection*, but they are also stimulated to see and map out the complexities of different/diffracted positionings among women. *Diffraction*, in this sense, allows women’s differences to emerge beyond the monolithic Woman (as Other of the Same) and to better understand power differentials among women.⁵⁴

Significantly, important for women’s *reflection/diffraction* among themselves was the focus on the **female body** as something that needed to be re-thought and re-formulated. Female corporeality, investing women’s *difference* and confining it to the realm of immanence in western culture has been conceptualized (epistemology) and lived (ontology) as something to be controlled and disciplined, as something dialectically opposed to the privileged and primary (masculine) sites of disembodiedness, mind and rationality (Lloyd 1993). Moreover, following the same principle femininity has been confined to its own embodiedness, and has been also deprived of it.⁵⁵ As Bonacchi writes, again referring to the mirror-function, ‘in the

⁵⁴ The question of differences and power differentials among women led to many discussions and feminist conversations. Going into depth about feminist debates on women’s common identity/differences within *autocoscienza* groups is neither my task nor my aim here; nevertheless, I am aware that the heterogeneity of feminist groups and their approaches would not allow me to give a straightforward answer to this question. For example, in some Italian groups the practice *affidamento* (entrustment) was developed in order to trace the (material and symbolic) power differential among women. On the theorization and practice of *affidamento* please see: (Milan women’s bookstore collective 1990; Diotima 2003)

⁵⁵ As several feminist anthropological theories have shown (Rubin 1975; Tabet 1987; Heritier, 2004), the female body - and desire, counting as a profitable object of exchange among men to construct sociality and kinship, has been taken away from women themselves by assigning its ownership and usage to men.

groups of the 1970s, each woman was first of all a *mirror* where the other woman could recognize her own ‘body’ (Bonacchi 1993, 233; emphasis mine).

In fact, through the practice of the *partire da sé*, the feminist politics of *autocoscienza* aimed at re-signifying the materiality and the embodied character of one’s own lived experience because, ‘with psychoanalytic insights, the bodily self can best be described as the intersection of many fields of experience and of social forces’ (Braidotti 2017, 304). Thus, the return to the body consists for women in a process of a conscious re-discovery of women’s sexed-experiences and sexualities. In doing so it was possible to engage with women’s *voices* and *bodies*, namely, their desire(s). Cixous’s text beautifully explains the intense connection between language and bodily-self:

To write. An act which will not only ‘realize’ the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; It will give her back her goods, her pleasures. Her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal; it will tear her away from the superegoized structure in which she has always occupied the place reserved for the guilty (...) – tear her away by means of this research, this job of analysis and illumination, this emancipation of the marvellous text of her self that she must urgently learn *to speak* (Cixous 1976, 880); emphasis mine).

The feminist practice of *partire da sé*, with powerful self-reflective/diffractive outcomes, also entails the necessity of facing each other’s differences in order to explore and render visible multiple female-wor(l)ds.

Theories of sexual difference emerged within the Italian feminist philosophical community *Diotima* during the 1980s (Diotima 2003) and they built upon feminist critiques of the malestream universal discourse of western philosophy. In the first publication of *Diotima* (ibid.), the opening chapter about the ‘passion of difference’ (*passione della differenza*) makes explicit the connection with Irigaray’s work by quoting her famous statement according to which sexual difference is one of the major philosophical issues, if not *the* issue, of our age (Irigaray 2004). Therefore, *engaging* affirmatively with women’s thought, *Diotima* adopted the practice of thinking by *partire da sé* as the first original connotation of its thought. Thinking by *partire da sé* (starting from one’s own experiential background), means starting from addressing sexual ‘originary’ difference, because, as Adriana Cavarero wrote: ‘for women, being

engendered in a different sex (*essere sessuate nella differenza*) is non-negotiable (Cavarero 1987 180-1; emphasis added).⁵⁶ In this way, sexual difference feminism is fundamental to a female subject that wants to understand herself by *partire da sé*, rejecting universalistic phallogocentric habits of thought.

Thus, the deconstruction of the socio-symbolic dominance of the neutral, universal and yet male Subject of philosophy, science and political theory contributes to denouncing the absence of a philosophical elaboration on sexual difference on which western thought founded itself. Accordingly, as Cavarero explains:

[t]he task of thinking sexual difference is thus an arduous one because sexual difference lies precisely in the erasure on which western philosophy has been founded and developed. To think sexual difference starting from the male universal is to think it as already thought, that is, to think it through the categories of a thought that is supported by the non-thinking of difference itself (Cavarero 1987, 48; in de Lauretis 1990, 4).

To insert *sexual difference* into thinking (and being) not only questions a Subject at once neuter and male, also requires a radically different mode of thought. Thus, the feminist method of *partire da sé*, claiming the sexed-embodied location of one's subjectivity as an accountable source of experience and knowledge, brakes open the phallogocentric ontology and epistemology of the One (Irigaray 2004; Irigaray and Burke 1980). In this sense sexual difference theory, with its destabilizing and creative potentials, does mark an onto-epistemological rupture in the continuum of western thought (concerning the understanding of subjectivity and in relation to thinking itself).

As a critical/creative philosophy of subjectivity and difference (Braidotti 2017), Sexual Difference Thought asks every subject to recognize itself in its sexed-embodied partiality and 'to reconstitute him/herself, taking *him/herself* as a starting point (Cavarero, 1987: 181; emphasis in the original; translation mine). Therefore, going beyond the onto-epistemology centered on the male universal Subject, *sexual difference* diagnoses that 'in universalizing the finitude of his gendered being [*della sua sessuazione*], man exceeds it and poses himself as an essence that belongs to

⁵⁶ In relation to the question of bodily essentialism, Kemp and Bono clarify that, in Italian thought 'sexual difference is neither only biological 'sex' nor 'gender' as it has been culturally created; it is the inscription of both of these in the symbolic dimension. And it has to be reproduced and signified by woman as a subject; a subject who here and now experiences both sex and gender' (Kemp and Bono 1991, 16). Indeed, thinking by *a partire da sé* while addressing one's own corporeality the recognition of sexual difference requires being aware of one's own process of gendering (*sapersi sessuata/o*).

‘objectivity’ of discourse’ (Cavarero, 1989: 49 in de Lauretis, 1990: 4; emphasis in the original). Acknowledging *sexual difference* becomes the starting point for *engendering* an onto-epistemology different from the oppressive logic of the One; indeed, Lonzi describe this move as follows:

Difference means duality; it means men’s difference, not only women’s. It has to do with the full acceptance of the partiality of both the female and the male subjects. Man has always inhabited the world as the only subject, to whom woman was supposed to equate herself; reshaping the universe to accommodate duality (and therefore men’s partiality) is going to entail a deep and manifold modification of all structures, at all levels –symbolic, institutional, economic (Lonzi 1991 [1970], 42).⁵⁷

The new reformulation of thought and being according to sexual difference could entail for men the acknowledgement of a ‘narcissistic wound’: men are not the universal Subject because, as Lonzi clearly affirmed:

women today want to access the culture and history that take masculine transcendence for granted, and to judge that transcendence itself. As the result of countless traumas – both conscious and unconscious – even men have had slowly to realize the crisis of their role as protagonists (Lonzi 1991 [1970], 58).

According to Lonzi’s analysis and political proposal, men engaging in feminist practice should acknowledge their ‘situated differences’ and ‘partialities’ and elaborate more gender-aware male subjectivities. This onto-epistemological move is transformative as it would ‘entail a deep and manifold modification of all structures, at all levels – symbolic, institutional, economic’ (Lonzi 1991 [1970], 42). Thus, Sexual difference feminisms offer many concepts and proposals for anti-sexist men willing to make positive change. During the Graduate Seminar *Luce Irigaray and the Future of Sexual Difference*, a man in the audience asked Irigaray about the task assigned to men within the framework of sexual difference thought. Irigaray replied in the following direct

⁵⁷ Italian feminist thought of sexual difference puts the emphasis on ‘duality’; the latter has the power to disrupt the phallogocentric logic of the One (this understood ‘duality’ functions strategically). However, I am aware of the criticisms such a claim can encounter. Other formulations of sexual difference theories, especially these ones coming from Deleuzian Feminist philosophies of differences (Braidotti 2002; Colebrook 2000) Weinstein 2008) highlight the critical/creative potential of sexual difference and point towards the horizontal and multiple account of differences that a different onto-epistemology starting from this concept could lead to.

manner: 'be a man'.⁵⁸ Drawing upon the theorization of *sexual difference* within the Italian context, I would suggest that Irigaray's advice to 'be a man' is figuratively inviting men to question *Abstract Masculinity* and to dislocate their own positionings away from the centre of normative masculinity towards situating male-embodied, partial subjectivities.

3. Men practicing speaking by *partire da sé* beyond 'male silence'

Most men who take part in *Maschile Plurale* are between their 40s and 60s, identify themselves as heterosexual, come from an educated, middle-class background, have been directly or indirectly in contact with feminism (via friends, colleagues and/or partners), are usually left-oriented politically and are socio-politically involved. Sharing their disappointment and concern about established models of masculinity, MP's work is based on a 'practice of reflection on the masculine' (*pratica di riflessione sul maschile*). This phrase encompasses the public involvement of MP as a national association (since 2007), the local and small realities of men's reflection groups connected through MP (each one with its different history) and the individual men's commitment. These three levels often overlap and come to merge. In this way, next to a growing networking activity among men's groups, MP is addressed as a collective and plural (*plurale*) practice aimed at re-thinking and reformulating men's practices (*maschile*) by raising gender-awareness among men. The personal commitment to the group-sessions is what makes the core of MP's work and also what holds men accountable to be 'doing' MP. In some cases, individual men can take part at public (educational and political) events, invited to speak from their experience of rethinking masculinities within MP.

In November 2014, as a representative from the MP group in Bologna, Salvatore was invited to participate in the roundtable '*Da Uomo a Uomo. Esperienze maschili a confronto sulla violenza di genere: dalla comunicazione all'attivismo, dai servizi di*

⁵⁸ Personally, I have encountered this anecdote thanks to one of the participants at the seminar: Dr. Jami Weinstein, who told the story of this event in one of her classes held at Utrecht University (2009/2010). The event is: *Luce Irigaray and the Future of Sexual Difference - A Graduate Seminar* at Tema Genus, Linköping University, Sweden.

ascolto all'impegno personale' (Bologna, 15th November 2014), organized by the 'Noi No' anti-violence campaign.⁵⁹ At the roundtable, next to other men involved in promoting anti-violence campaigns in their professional fields (sports, education, online activism and research), Salvatore started presenting himself as:

I am part of the association *Maschile Plurale*, it is an association of men that try to reflect on masculinities starting from their partiality, their sexed partiality (*parzialità sessuata*), namely from their being men. Trying to reflect on how to see reality from a male standpoint, trying to create male knowledge and practice (*un sapere e una pratica maschile*) and a new way to relate between men and between men and women (Salvatore, intervention to the roundtable, November 2014).

In his intervention Salvatore went on recalling the different projects MP engages with in terms of education and violence prevention, himself working as an education practitioner and acting as the responsible person within MP for gender-sensitive training at the time of the event. I want to draw the attention to the way Salvatore introduced his anti-violence implication and work starting from MP positioning and practice of reflecting on 'male partiality.' As we will see in this chapter, these concepts are pivotal for MP's masculinity politics of generating men's gender-awareness and personal-collective changes.

The 'male knowledge and practice' Salvatore is referring to are related to the group reflection on the masculine in which men speak starting from their personal experiences (in Salvatore's words 'sexed experience'). Local groups of men gather on a two-week basis and, despite their differences in topics and histories, they all agree on one basic rule: sharing their personal experience and discussing problems with the feminist practice of speaking *a partire da sé* ('starting from oneself'). As I could observe from participating at MP yearly national meetings in Turin (2010), Rome

⁵⁹ 'Noi No' (Not Us) is a social communication project based in Bologna aimed at spreading awareness among men about violence against women. It started in 2012 from the collaboration between two communication agencies: *Studio Talpa* and *Comunicattive*. 'Noi No' engaged with popular male figures in Italian sports, music, and cinema scenes in order to disseminate anti-violence awareness with the slogan 'Us No.' Since 2015 'Noi No' also collaborates with the national network of associations working on gender-awareness education '*Attraverso lo specchio*,' a social education project in which MP is involved as well. By following the action of MP's members, during my fieldwork in Bologna I participated in two events related to 'Noi No': the roundtable it organized on November 15th 2015 'Da Uomo a Uomo' that I refer to in this chapter; and a conference on gender-sensitive education in which one of 'Noi No' facilitated a workshop with MP member responsible for educational projects. The conference was held in Bologna on December 12th and 13th 2014 with the title: '[Attraverso Lo Specchio. Posizionamenti e pratiche nell'educazione al genere](http://attraversolospecchio.it/2014/11/02/convegno-attraverso-lo-specchio-posizionamenti-e-pratiche-nelleducazione-al-genere) <http://attraversolospecchio.it/2014/11/02/convegno-attraverso-lo-specchio-posizionamenti-e-pratiche-nelleducazione-al-genere/> For more information on 'Noi No' visit its webpage: <http://www.noino.org/pagina.php?id=7754>, accessed on 15/04/2018.

(2013) and Milan (2014), as well as from engaging with their public texts and with ethnographic fieldwork in Bologna (2014/2015), this core practice is shared among all groups associated to MP. Among MP members, this practice is not just what they do it is recalled as the condition of possibility for engendering a gender-aware perspective among men and with this a critical and transformative approach ‘as men’ to gender relations. As I explained in Chapter 2, the anti-violence approach proposed by MP follows from this perspective and, in denouncing male violence against women as a men’s gendered problem, calls them into action ‘as men.’ The link between men’s self-reflectivity *a partire da sé* and mobilizing against VAW as men motivated MP’s first public anti-violence document and call to action: ‘*La violenza sulle donne ci riguarda, prendiamo parola come uomini*’ in 2006.⁶⁰

Salvatore himself started to be involved in MP when this document came out. He already had contacts with MP reflections; he had met one of the earliest members at public events at the University of Bologna as part of his professional training in education. When Salvatore joined the group of MP in Bologna, he was volunteering for the LGBT+ organization ‘Il Cassero’ and ‘Arcigay.’ At the moment of our interview Salvatore was one of the organizers and participants of the Bologna group, and he is among those who are responsible for educational projects within the network:

yes, the group of Bologna of *autocoscienza maschile* (male consciousness-raising) exists, we started again after a more quiet period and we meet every two weeks. We are very few, from three to five. The structure of the group is unstable, some people come every session and others come less regularly (interview with Salvatore, November 2014).

These groups create male separatist spaces where men can talk about personal issues among other men. As a woman, one clear limitation in fieldwork has been the impossibility of joining these groups. Therefore during fieldwork I put into action other strategies to access the information related to this practice: personal conversations, interviews, Skype phone calls and, most of all, a careful participant observation during the public events and meetings (local and national) I attended. During the meeting ‘*Quell’oscuro soggetto del desiderio*’ held in Turin (Ottobre 2010) I met Giovanni,

⁶⁰ MP 19 September 2006 ‘La violenza contro le donne ci riguarda: prendiamo la parola come uomini’ available at <https://www.maschileplurale.it/appello-ci-riguarda/> accessed 08/12/2018.

from the group ‘*Uomini in Cammino*’ from Pinerolo (Turin), one of the first groups of the MP network. He explained:

Telling about ourselves is our method. We have some rules and the first one is: *starting from oneself*...don’t go into theoretical and abstract discourses, avoid generalization such as ‘men....’ rather start from ‘this is what happened to me, I think this...’ so to get to the awareness of our individual and gendered partiality (Giovanni, interview Ottobre 2010).

My informants often addressed their belonging to MP and their anti-sexist commitment as ‘doing MP’ (*il fare maschile plurale*), referring to regularly taking part in the group sessions. What is important in order to be recognized as ‘doing’ or ‘practicing MP’ is the commitment towards the group-practice of sharing and discussing personal experiences as men. Telling one’s own experience starting from oneself ‘as men’ (*pratica del raccontarsi come uomini*) refers to the act of rethinking men’s practices with gender-awareness, and situating them into embodied and relational lived gendered experiences (*situarsi a partire da sé*). In this method, generalizations and abstract ways of speaking are not allowed as part of the sharing exercise, because the focus is moved upon feelings and personal issues of the participants, something that is recognized not to be easy:

We started talking about ourselves and our emotions, feelings and fears and we liked it...but we were afraid of...you know, it was really a new thing, we were used to talk about sports, politics and work [...] we told each other’s lives, about the relationships with our parents, our childhood...then we started organizing public meetings (Giovanni, interview October 2010).

The topics addressed and shared in the group are related to personal relationships with parents, children, partners or ex-partners, and with other men. Another of the first groups to join MP is *Uomini in gioco* in Bari as Nicola, one of its members recalls, the process of sharing experiences in such a personal way allowed men to express and connect with their feelings, and also with their most upsetting feelings, starting from oneself:

We started in two or three. For our pleasure, not for a need to be in favor of women or feminist, but to express a perspective on ourselves, to tell each other about our experiences, our being ... we were all married, some with working marriages others with failed marriages, then ... from there ... (*we talked about*) our being fathers, being sons ... telling our experiences with the method of convening: facing in turn an empty chair a person imagining a person (a son, father or mother, the partner)..in my case I had recently lost my father and it (*the group session*) was the first time I faced this void and I was moved, which I had not done before... with the group we were able to become familiar with the most devastating and most difficult emotions, always starting from ourselves yes, it's in this way that .. (Nicola, interview March 2013, emphasis added).

I met Nicola during the MP national meeting in Rome (March 2013) '*Mio fratello è figlio unico. Cosa cambia se cambiano i desideri degli uomini.*' Together with another member from Bari, Nicola explained to me how these gatherings are organized:

in our houses and generally with dinner, the landlord chooses the theme, generally it is never theoretical, but rather linked to an event or an emotion, we face our negative emotions: envy, avarice, and with sex-related sensitive themes, and also with everyday matters (Nicola, interview March 2013,).

Next to speaking by starting from oneself, Nicola reminds me of another important rule they have in the group: listening. While one of the men is speaking, the other men are expected to actively listen without interrupting nor judging or responding to what is being shared. Moreover, to avoid any hierarchies within the group they decided not to have a facilitator. Nicola tells me that he found this setting 'very liberating', considering the lack of spaces 'for men to be themselves:'

And these stories... it was very liberating, you hear the group that listens to you, none of us intervened to ask for advice or to move a critique (*agire una dialettica*) ... at the beginning we were very attentive to pure listening, perhaps to the point of exaggerating in the sense of kindness, and it becomes a comfortable space finally to be able to bring out ... and for us men there are not many spaces to be ourselves...even painful parts of ourselves we managed to express, it was a kind of self-therapy, without knowing how to do it...we rejected the presence of a psychologist in order not to have a leader ... over the years we have come to listening and to express conflict among ourselves too (Nicola, interview March 2013).

This practice of reflection attracted and is still attracting men due to the urgency to speak about themselves in a self-reflective and introspective manner, slowly combined with the desire to move this self-reflectivity in the direction of political/cultural critique. I came to the field asking myself: in which ways speaking ‘as men’ starting from oneself can be transformative? The answer to this question is manifold.

As Giovanni and Nicola shared, the act of speaking from the personal level of emotions and relationships is performed with difficulties, as it challenges men’s affective skills in relation to themselves and to other men. For this reason, Nicola calls it ‘a self-therapy, without knowing how to do it,’ an exercise that feels ‘liberating.’ In this way, this practice can change men’s personal practices beyond emotional illiteracy. Similarly, Simone told me in a previous interview:

for men it is a very difficult thing to speak about their personal life, it is even more difficult to share it within a group of other men. Being there, sitting down together and looking into each other’s faces while talking about oneself, is something that, really, provokes a change in your life. Primarily because it transforms the way men use to relate to one another (interview with Simone, October 2010).

The space of the group practice serves then to interrogate men’s silence, namely men’s difficulty to face personal issues among other men; at the same time it stimulates personal expressions and listening to others. Simone affirms that this practice can be performative in itself by asking men to do something they rarely do, and that they rarely do with other men. Interestingly, the homosocial gathering (what men commonly do in groups of only men) is affected by this practice, asking men to train their listening and relationship skills.

Moreover, the regularity of group-meetings with the same participants and with specific rules (starting from oneself, allowing everybody the same speaking time, listening without judging) offers a ritualized space that helps to create a safe environment. Returning to the interview with Giovanni, relevantly he draws attention to the act of ‘speaking among men’ as a transformative and learning act:

speaking among men (*parlare fra uomini*) provokes changes because it lets you face other personal stories (*racconti di sé*) and stimulates the act of listening. (...) *learning to listen* is a very difficult practice, you know for us, men...This means that while

someone else is speaking I am not supposed to think about the answer I will give, otherwise I don't hear what he is saying. On the contrary, if I hear what he says, this stays with me and I realize, after some time, that what I have listened to helps me changing, step by step, my point of view...unintentionally your viewpoint starts changing...change becomes constant and becomes a change also in practice, then *you learn the relationship (impari la relazione)*: with these men there is affection, friendship; you learn *the relationship of listening and respect*. This (*the group*) is almost a place of training (interview with Giovanni, October 2010, emphasis mine).

In this long account Giovanni clarifies how speaking starting from oneself among men offers a crucial learning process *because of* and *for* listening. Listening to other men's accounts helps understanding personal experiences, moving self-perceptions and viewpoints; at the same time, through 'learning how to listen and respect' Giovanni affirms that men are also training their relational skills (*impari la relazione*). Friendship and affection among men are outcomes of this practice, and the quality of men-to-men relations is at stake here.

In another long account on how the group can build alternative men-to-men relations, Nicola calls 'extremely relieving' and 'a breath of fresh air' this safe space because it is exempt from men's competitiveness and hierarchies:

As I mentioned, it was natural for us to protect and care about this safe space, because in traditional politics and in work-places we experience competition and competitiveness among men, that habit of extreme stepping on each other toes... in this space (*the group*), where nothing is at stake, for us has been extremely restful, we really took care of it, as I told you before there is not a leader among us, this was a breath of fresh air. The shadows, we try to be kind, now this desire for truth and confrontation is growing ... there is one of the group that often tends to lose the point and talks about 'society, the world' ... and we bring him back to 'starting from yourself' ... before I did it kindly now I joke about it (Nicola, interview March 2013).

What Nicola also notes is another dimension of men's homosocial relations: the possibilities of spending time together beyond what men are and are not supposed to do together.

The other dimension is the camaraderie, we practice the exchange (*of personal accounts*) then (*on other occasions*) we go together somewhere to spend time together and relax... (*we experience*) other relationships between males, who are not the usual ones, like the pat on the back or acting against each other...even corporeality (for example by sharing a room), this corporeality that I lost because I didn't do sports nor boys scouts, now I'm experiencing it ... 'it's nice to be among men' he says (*reference to Luca*), 'my male friends' he says being very straight (*eterissimo*), we experience these relationships between males, Tore (*another member*) calls it homosociality, it is liberating, everything is to be built, these are parts of us that we have not brought about yet.. (Nicola, interview March 2013, emphasis added).

The moments of spending time with other men are recalled by Nicola as 'liberating' and open, in the sense that 'everything yet is to be built' in terms of experimenting male homosociality beyond competition and more based on corporeality. The pleasure of being among men is expressed loudly, highlighting the heterosexual orientation of the friend saying it.

MP separatist group practice questions patriarchal homosociality based on assertiveness, competitiveness, emotional and corporeal distance and homophobic jokes. Moreover, the group practice can allow men to engender a new relationality among each other while sharing personal issues and establishing a different type of heterosexual male intimacy. The same point comes out in the interview with Stefano Ciccone, member of MP group in Rome, who says the following about a different quality of relations among men:

relationships among male friends are generally based on the not-said (*non detto*). The closest friend is often the person who we spend more time with, who we discuss politics or we simply go fishing or hunting with, who we play soccer with. I mean, in general we do something together. There is always a 'third element' that justifies our being together.⁶¹

On the contrary, when men are together for no other reason than sharing their experiences and enjoying this 'male intimacy,' new relationships among men are practiced. Nevertheless, the transformative potential of men's homosociality (Camoletto

⁶¹ Interview with Stefano Ciccone 'Il corpo dell'uomo', by Gianni Saporetti (also published in *Una città* n. 156- Maggio 2008), MP website: <https://www.maschileplurale.it/2008-qil-corpo-delluomoq-da-una-citta-intervista-a-sciccone-di-gsaporetti/>, accessed 4/11/2018.

and Bertone 2017) does not come without contradictions and particular efforts; male gatherings with the purpose of sharing private matters still provoke ridiculing critiques and reactions in most (malestream) environments in Italy, first of all because any kind of male-togetherness that is different from normative male homosociality is discouraged by homophobia.

As Giovanni noted, being confronted with other men's personal stories helps men change the way they used to relate (or not to relate) to questions of difference/alterity and relationships. The practice of engaging with other men in a relationship of active listening allows men to change, slowly, and to see the importance of caring about relationships (*prendersi cura delle relazioni*) also in other contexts outside the group. As Giovanni commented:

and then, when this (the importance of engaging with others, of living within relationships), becomes your conviction, you transfer it in all the other relationships: in the family, in the more intimate relationships, in the workplace, with friends...then people see that you are changing (Giovanni, interview October 2010, emphasis mine).

Accordingly, being stimulated to think in relational terms, men should start looking at all the other spheres of life in the same engaging manner. 'Starting from themselves' and from the relationships closer to them (with their families, parents, partners, children and friends), they are supposed to develop a relationship of care, respect and responsibility towards others (people, animals, nature, etc.). This attentive outlook towards others would affect not only men's practices within the relationships among men and women, but would also change the way men do politics or produce and transmit knowledge and culture. Creating relations and caring about them, according to Giovanni, is deeply intertwined with men's acknowledgement of their partiality as sexed-embodied subjectivities.

4. Moving gender-awareness: affects and words that matter in the group

With this practice men are invited to engage with their own lived experiences and share them among men, in a separatist way by sitting together and listening to each other. As

stated, this can be perceived as something new for many of them, as well as talking about how masculinity norms affect personal histories, discomfort and relationships. Salvatore agrees with that when he reflects on his assumptions on heterosexual men socializing in groups:

I felt a kind of mistrust against the heterosexual male gender. Before encountering *maschile plurale* I saw them (*heterosexual men*) as unable to question certain things, I do not say patriarchal but rather sexist, (*in my experience*) the group of only males always talked about the same things...meeting MP was like being able to see that a different kind of (*heterosexual*) masculinity existed, and that I had schemes and stereotypes I needed to deconstruct with respect to the representation of the sexes (Salvatore, interview November 2014, emphasis added).

Salvatore voices his need of ‘deconstructing schemes and stereotypes’ in relation to his self-perception. How does the process of deconstruction happen? Importantly, the group practice functions to make sense of men’s own lives as gendered and to give the voice to men’s **discomfort** in relation to dominant models of masculinity. The need to take distance from mainstream and normative social constructions of men’s practices is what motivates Luciano to engage with anti-sexist activism (reading, blogging, public speaking, participating in some MP initiatives):

The fact that I no longer want to be maneuvered by political and cultural forces that I have not chosen, both in my private life and in public life. Realizing how unfree my education has been, especially in the relations with the other sex and with the other genders, has been a shock. The cultural construct that currently goes by the name of man, virility, masculinity, is literally disgusting - as well as hurting someone. I want to change all of this as much as possible. I am also a father of two boys, I owe it to my children too: it makes me horrified to think of them subjected to the same conditionings (Luciano, interview March 2015).

Feelings of anger, disappointment and frustration against societal expectations as men and social representation of masculinities find within the group the possibility to come out. As Michele affirms: ‘this is a method that works, because it lets you face the male experiences in which you didn’t feel at ease with ...thus you ask yourself: why didn’t I

feel at ease?’ (Michele, interview October 2010). And Stefano Ciccone, reflecting on his involvement into the practice of MP and on the group reflection, writes:

The choice to speak-up *as men* has not meant the voluntary commitment toward the affirmation of a ‘gender-guilt’, but rather it represented the opportunity to open up a room for freedom within our *speaking-ourselves-as-men* as well as within our conflicting experiences with norms and modes of relationships no longer meaningful to us (Ciccone 2009, 17; emphasis mine).

The uncomfortable feeling of conflicting with dominant models of masculinities is the protagonist of the group reflection. Affectively, discomfort moves men to gather and share personal accounts in order to voice this feeling. It can be considered as one of the ‘negative emotions’ Nicola was talking about, and the group offers a space for expressing this discomfort, for finding the words to say it among other men.

Speaking a *partire da sé* in the group is itself described as an experiment, a practice to be proud of, a practice borrowed from women and rearranged on men’s experiences. As Nicola told me:

Yes, I see that it works, when I do it, I always do it with a sense of pride on this phrase, which we did not invent it, unfortunately, because it comes from women from the work of feminists, we borrowed it from them ... and I’m proud of this practice, even in its shadows, in the mistakes if you use your experience like me you can make mistakes ... it is a construction site, an experiment...(Nicola, interview March 2013).

The feeling of experimentation is recalled by other MP participants. When I asked him whether, in his opinion, the practice of speaking as men by starting from oneself can stimulate change, Andrea explained:

language holds a great potential to name things and our own relationships differently; because in language other things happen, the possibility of telling oneself (*raccontarsi*) differently opens up great spaces, great existential possibilities; without this it is very difficult (Andrea, interview March 2011).

Connecting ‘people and stories,’ Andrea suggests that the possibility of speaking about oneself differently, sharing the new words that ‘speak to/about you’ with other men, can

engender transformations not only in men's understanding of themselves but, gradually, it can also affect the context, becoming a collective change in men's lives:

Yes, yes. I think that the word...the word spoken in certain...spoken from the depth...the experiential word (*la parola esperienziale*), the listened word is a very strong and powerful vehicle of change. For this happened in this way. It is true that you have to be *in a certain situation of willingness*:...but when someone is already searching for...the best thing he really can find on the path towards change (*via del cambiamento*) are words that speak to him (*parole che dicono*), that try to speak to him (...) this tension of telling each other what we are experiencing...effectively this can move rocks (*sposta dei macigni*) and is able to challenge and reformulate (*rimettere in gioco*) people and stories. Become if we move one individual story and then another and another...then we can re-activate also a context (Andrea, interview March 2011).

As Andrea suggests, speaking among men about oneself is not enough to transform a context: what is needed is 'to be in a certain situation of willingness' and to find words able to speak to you, words that matter so to connect 'people and stories.' This is, according to Andrea, the challenge and the potentiality of this practice. Remembering his first group session Luca points at this difficulty and his feelings about it:

The first time we met in Nicola's house, we took turns gathering in our houses following an alphabetical order, Nicola as a host said some things to start and I thought: 'what will I say? He is saying everything...', the second participant intervenes and says some things that I agreed with, I thought I had to copy other people's things ... then it went fine... there is this common thread that unites people who not accidentally find themselves to make the choice, it is never a random fact like this, we see it here (*at the national meeting in Rome*) as well, when others intervene there is always this thread that unites us, even when we do not fully share what a friend of ours says, anyway there is a story that we feel partly ours. There is empathy, like when this morning he spoke about his mother with Alzheimer, this strong emotion, empathy, this empathetic listening among us, even if we see each other from time to time (Luca, interview March 2013, emphasis added).

As Luca points out, words that speak to men can come from other men too, and the power of the group session, with the act of empathic listening, also lays in this

possibility to recognise oneself in the experience of the other. First this possibility is lived by Luca as an embarrassing moment as he is afraid of ‘having to copy others or not knowing what to say.’ Reflecting on that moment, he affirms that he later understood that ‘the common thread’ among men (as in the meeting we were participating at in Rome), is the positive result of a common choice: with pride in his voice he tells me that other men’s accounts sound familiar for this reason, affirming that despite disagreements ‘there is a story that we feel partly ours.’ This sense of having in common, albeit partly, gendered-socialization practices is combined with the willingness to understand them and reformulate masculinities. The story ‘that we feel partly ours’ therefore points as well at the perception of participating in a collective movement. However, the anti-sexist engagement of MP encounters some difficulties to become a collective event.

One challenge is the distance that grows between each group affiliated to MP and other men external to their practice. The term *il silenzio maschile* ‘male silence’ is used to stress men’s lack of words when trying to communicate their desire for change to other men outside the movement and the difficulty they find to formulate a different reconfiguration of men’s practices understood as a search, as they write, that ‘has often remained solitary and silent.’⁶² The problem of ‘male silence’ thus arises also on a more general political level: how to explain (so to make it intelligible to other men and turn into a public concern), with the current political lexicon available, the body of thought and practices produced by men engaged in anti-sexism? During my first personal encounter with MP participants, in a meeting held in Rome, this problem was connected with questioning ‘universal masculinity’:

how to build up a critical reflection on *il maschile* that goes beyond the categories of ethical voluntarism and political correctness on one side (with the risk of assuming a regulatory attitude traditionally claimed by universal masculinity - which of course would not be subversive), and gender guilt on the other? (Stefano, contribution to the discussion, April 2010; emphasis mine).

If the question is, ‘how to express a male demand of freedom, responsibility and autonomy without falling in the mentioned categories’ (ibid.), we understand that the practice of ‘speaking by starting from oneself as a man’ can become a good method to

⁶² Maschile Plurale (2009), Lettera *Da uomo a uomo* [online], <https://www.maschileplurale.it/da-uomo-a-uomo-lettera-aperta-sulla-violenza-maschile/>, accessed on 4/11/2018.

engage men on the basis of their gender awareness and lived experience and to avoid prescriptive generalizations.

This practice can generate men's anti-sexist engagement and a public discourse that is grounded onto situated experiences. Nevertheless, the question 'how to make other men share publicly men's anti-sexism?' remains open, and became the focus of the national meeting '*Mio fratello è figlio unico. Cosa cambia se cambiano i desideri degli uomini*' in Rome, March 2013. With the telling title 'My brother is an only child. What changes if men's desires change' the meeting was dedicated to understanding MP's difficulty for publicly communicating its anti-sexist masculinity engagement, and for making it 'political' in collective-societal terms.

Firstly, one of the challenges is what MP members recognise as 'male silence,' namely men's resistances and lack of skills when it comes to connect and share their personal-affective experiences. While explaining this during the meeting, Luca told me that this difficulty to communicate with other men 'feels like a wall,' and that, nevertheless, 'other men are not a wall, they are not this at all, fragility is sometimes perceived':

The difficulty that has been ours too, we understand, the difficulty to get involved, to question ourselves, to talk about our emotions, not only about politics, economics, cars, women, etc... to talk about women but not in the sense of conquest, bragging on conquests, rather to talk about relationship, of care. This difficulty, we perceive it as a wall, a silence, the silence of men... men are not a wall, it is what they try to erect to defend themselves, because we do not think that other men are a wall, they are not this at all, fragility is sometimes perceived. It is the silence that they oppose, the letting go, the maximum you can hear is 'interesting what you do,' however we feels that something is changing (Luca, interview March 2013).

Secondly, what contributes to the distance between MP groups and other men is the dynamics according to which a group becomes rather closed to external participants once a safe space is created. When a group starts gathering regularly, members tend to secure this space for themselves as a *guscio protettivo*, a 'protective shell' (Luca, interview March 2013). During the interview, Luca goes on telling me that it took years of practice until the group (*Uomini in gioco* from Bari) could start 'opening itself to the public,' collaborating with other groups, women's collectives and organizations locally.

Finding the words and the critical practice to express this desire for change as men, while being able to speak to other men, is indeed one of the most important aims of (and the first transformation engendered by) the MP network; it is not easy. In one of the opening contributions to the national meeting in Rome, Stefano recalls

the practice of MP aimed to give words to male desire, to come out of invisibility (*of universal masculinity*) and to enter in relation with other men and with women. The question is how to let this journey become a political one and recognise its political dimension (...) the title of our meeting points at a different possibility to be men in the world, nevertheless we ask: why is this journey of change not shared among men? (Stefano, contribution to the meeting, March 2013).

In answering his question Stefano mentions the lack of a political tradition of men's gender-conscious critical engagement, and the inherent problem of questioning masculinity from heterosexual men's positions:

another problem is that I cannot trust myself, or my own desire, as it participates into norms and dominant models. How can I build a critique when the world conveys my position as the norm? I am the reference point, this gives me meaning and grants me authority, and it's rewarding. For this reason, it is important to understand how power traverses us (*ibid.*).

These questions highlight the primarily deconstructive efforts constitutive of anti-sexist men's mobilizations, and confirm the urgency of a self-reflective work in groups of men mobilizing for gender justice. In the case of the MP network this work is approached with the group practice of speaking as men and the feminist practice of starting from oneself. As we have seen, this helps men to express their critical stands by connecting them with 'negative emotions' and male gendered experiences. The male separatist group practices allow to express the discomforts that men feel, and to understand them in relation to normative men's practices (acknowledging how power traverses their experiences in negative and disciplining terms for themselves). MP members say that the space of the group provides men also with creative opportunities, starting with the quality of men's homosocial relations.

5. 'Male partiality' and the politics of 'male sexual difference'

In the terminology used among most men involved and affiliated with MP, achieving gender-awareness as men is phrased as 'partiality as men' and consists of engaging with themselves as 'sexed-subjects' (*soggetti sessuati*). In the presentation that Salvatore gave of himself and about MP, with 'male partiality and knowledge' he referred to this process of becoming gender-aware. This terminology expresses the influence of sexual difference feminist concepts. Very frequently the phrases 'interrogating male difference' or just 'male difference' are also used by some members to refer to men's gendered practices or to the 'history of *il maschile*.' These concepts are used to name and facilitate men's processes of understanding how material and symbolic practices have influenced their lives as men.⁶³ This process is addressed as political, because it serves to produce a critical reading of men's practices and to stimulate men to contribute personally to changes. Nevertheless, groups and individuals differ on how to make the process of becoming gender-aware more or less politically explicit, namely connecting the personal level of self-reflection with the socio-cultural reality of gendered relations of power. Some members and groups prefer maintaining a group practice that is internally-focused, others are willing to bring the reflection to a more collective and 'public' level, engaging with other men as well.

The '**silence** about oneself' is not only to be understood on an epistemological level, as a power/knowledge dynamic, but also and relevantly on a personal and psychological level. Silence is symptomatic of men's difficulty to express themselves emotionally (affective illiteracy), their difficulty to share personal issues with other men or to be in touch with themselves and find the words to tell their positive and negative experiences beyond normative masculinity. By reworking the feminist practice of speaking *a partire da sé*, members of MP seem to be simultaneously diagnosing masculine silence as a condition of determined power/knowledge relations, and turning it into a collective practice for change. This onto-epistemological issue was formulated by Stefano Ciccone and Claudio Vedovati – among the first members of MP - in the article *Un'altra maschilità, un'altra esperienza di se'* from 1997:

⁶³ History of masculinity, dominant models and cultural norms related to masculinity in Italy, relationships with mother/father, sexuality, sexual imagery etc.

Male-word exists and travels the world, but it is hidden behind apparent neutrality. Men do speak under the protection of social roles, of a knowledge that pretends to be neutral: science, politics, law, medicine. There is even an excess of male-word at the foundation of ethics, norms and techniques that function as instruments of control over bodies. This word and this presence are just the other side of a *profound silence*, a difficulty of being within relationships and depart from them in order to give meaning to the world. It is a silence about oneself (Ciccone and Vedovati 1997, 2; emphasis mine).

Connecting men's silence with the power/knowledge nexus, Ciccone formulates the problem as follows : 'a neutral (*subject of*) discourse about the world would not be possible without keeping *silence* about himself; that ostentation of word (*knowledge*) about everything is the condition for not-seeing and not-showing its own partiality' (Ciccone 2009, 11); emphasis mine). In accordance with him, Vedovati wrote: 'we can better define this *silence*: it is not an absence of male-knowledge on oneself, but rather a modality of its very knowledge' (Vedovati 2007, 129; emphasis mine). This peculiar kind of (male) silence, being at the foundation of traditionally-western phallogocentric power/knowledge postures, is recognized as part of a neutral, disembodied, a-historical Subject of knowledge that denies sexual difference in favour of a sexually-undifferentiated *Abstract Masculinity* from which universal truth-claims are made possible. In accordance with this analysis coming from feminist poststructuralist philosophies of sexual difference, Vedovati affirms 'men's silence does not contradict the dominance of male-word rooted in every field of knowledge – an excess of words – but, on the contrary, it lays its very foundations' (Vedovati 2007, 129).

When reading these positions, it is important to recognize that these are reflections that do not come 'from nowhere'. Indeed, their terminology and pauses, emphases and concepts, resonate with Italian sexual difference thought (Diotima 2003; Bono and Kemp 1991), and also with onto-epistemological encounters between some of the members of MP and the lives of women coming from the experience of feminist critical/creative political practice. As a member of MP, Vedovati recognizes:

Feminisms offered us the tools with which to explore our *partiality*, to measure ourselves with the dissymmetry of men's and women's personal and political paths, and to see in the moments of facing the *historicity* of our condition - marked by dominance - an occasion of liberation (Vedovati 2007, 138; emphasis mine).

Rooted in consciousness-raising politics and pointing at the personal dimension of one's embodied experience as the locus of power-relations, MP highlights the political significance of 'speaking *as men*'. While for women politics this practice served to give voice to unheard female experiences and to create women's different subjectivities and genealogies, among anti-sexist men group self-reflectivity is primarily deconstructive: it has to criticize the discursive habit of rationalist universalism claimed by *Abstract Masculinity*, and deal with 'men's silence on themselves.'

By rethinking masculinity using the notion of *il maschile*, the reflection of MP refers to multiple sites of critique and creativity in which, starting from men's experiences, processes of self-knowledge, deconstruction and reinvention of men's practices could be engendered. Similarly (but not in a symmetrical way) to how sexual difference theories address *the feminine*, for the MP members *il maschile* works as an umbrella term to critically engage with and creatively engender men's material-semiotic reformulations about several interconnected issues such as '*men*' as embodied-sexed subjects, *Man* as the subject of *Abstract Masculinity*, dominant cultural *models of masculinity* within Italian culture as well as within men's personal histories/educations, *men's oppressive practices* and their material/power differentials in contemporary Italian society and the need for a more open and plural account of *masculinities* towards care, sexual, friendships, love and political relations.

Elaborating a critical reflection on *il maschile* is for MP a task that does not oppose itself to past (and present) female/feminist theoretical/practical traditions, but rather reads them affirmatively. In this way it becomes possible, from men's perspectives, to deconstruct the power/knowledge postures, to situate men as embodied and gendered subjects, and to open up the possibility of practising '**male sexual difference**' (*differenza maschile*). For historical and cultural reasons (for the specificities and the impact of Italian sexual difference feminisms), in philosophy, political theory and social sciences, gender-sensitive Italian authors have addressed questions of men/masculinities using the notion of *male difference* (Ventimiglia 1987; Boccia 1989; Coppola and Vedovati 1989; Sebastiani and Vedovati, 1993; Vaudagna 2000; Deriu 2007; Ciccone 2009). This terminology traverses the academic and the social intervention field in Italy (in which gender education is often called 'education in differences'), and affects feminist grassroots mobilizations, MP included. Moreover, in the case of MP, many of its members established theoretical, activist and/or personal relations with feminists drawing upon sexual difference theories.

Within MP *differenza maschile* intends to conceptualize man's situated partiality (of masculinities) in opposition to the disembodied norm of the 'Man'/Subject of universal or *Abstract Masculinity*. The term *differenza maschile* is indeed used among MP members to mean men's gendered practices (what men do as men in their socio-cultural context of sex/gender system) against the habit of granting (white, heterosexual and middle class) men a universal speaking position and an unquestioned position in society. Embracing the project of rethinking male sexual difference can be a way of self-knowledge and a self-positioning exercise aimed at acknowledging 'male partiality.' As we have seen, the point of departure toward en-gendering partiality as men lays in the feminist practice of *partire da sé*, that is, starting from the location of one's sexed-embodied experience as a way to coming to terms with gender meanings and power-relations.

Many questions can arise with the concept of *male sexual difference*, and it is not difficult to imagine the horizon of feminist debates that this topic can stimulate and contribute to. The first problem to be addressed, I would say, is the risk to view 'sexual difference' as a neutral conceptual ground where masculinity and femininity could be understood symmetrically in relation to the project of situating one's own (male/female) embodied-embedded partiality. Nothing could be more distant than that from the critical-creative project of sexual difference feminisms (Braidotti 2017). The point is to show the non-neutral character of subjectivity and to denounce the onto-epistemological dissymmetry between the realms of 'the masculine' and 'the feminine,' since they do not share the same relationship to *Abstract Masculinity*. Indeed, it is important to locate concepts and practices within their contexts.

In the case of 1970s-80s feminism it was necessary to depart from women's standpoints of female-embodied subjects in order to blow up the fake-neutrality of the modern Subject of *Abstract Masculinity* and to inscribe sexual difference, as an ontological difference, within the symbolic order (Diotima 2003). In the case of MP what men see as necessary is the gesture of stepping outside the very centre of normative - universal and disembodied - *Abstract Masculinity* in order to situate themselves (and the history of *the masculine* as well) within their partial perspectives. Many important elements link Italian feminism with the reflection and praxis enacted by MP. Evidently, the practice of speaking *a partire da sé* has been pivotal in the process of giving *voice* to subjectivities and collectively elaborating the political dimension of personal experiences. In fact, with the emphasis on a self-reflective

understanding of one's own experience and sex-embodied subjectivity, this group-practice has been of central importance in both contexts, although in different, not symmetrical, ways. Relying on the Italian sexual difference feminisms, both strategies conflate into the political project of eradicating phallogocentric cultural and epistemological postures. For this reason, they do not share the same point of departure in relation to phallogocentrism and the sex/gender system.

In feminist consciousness-raising, women had to find new words to name their lives collectively and explore a different ethics of relations; their speaking practice *a partire da sé* aimed to break open the silence on female-embodied lives and this meant enacting a *standpoint* politics starting from their experiences *as women*, while exposing sexist power relations. In consciousness-raising groups, women not only shared their experiences and recognized themselves in each other female-embodied subjects, but also - and at the same time - they visualized differences among women. Men's involvement in consciousness-raising departs from questioning the silence on masculinity and on men's practices as results of onto-epistemological privileges. Men's involvement in consciousness-raising is meant as primarily deconstructive of *Abstract Masculinity* and male privileges, and it becomes a political emancipating practice by situating men's experiences. Ciccone elaborates this point as follows:

The acknowledgement of male partiality, of the sexed condition of men and the consequences that this has on their subjectivity, on their experience of the world, is *not a symmetrical gesture* in respect to the feminist expression of their own sexed-identity, because there is no symmetry in the relation these *two differences* have with the order that one side denied them, and on the other ordered them in a *hierarchical manner* (Ciccone 2009, 16; emphasis mine).

This practice is recalled by MP participants as 'a method' for generating men's partiality and gender-awareness, as a 'training' for relational and listening skills, and as 'an experiment' among men.

6. Conclusion

As I have described in this chapter, 'speaking as men starting from oneself' engages men affectively by facing those gendered experiences that cause(d) discomfort and

allows the space to elaborate on these experiences among other men. The collective support serves to gain confidence and express, in the separatist male group, how these practices are not felt as meaningful for most people, unpacking masculine socializations that negatively affect men's lives. Sharing personal stories and feelings among men is perceived as a difficult yet liberating practice, as a learning process in terms of emotional and listening skills, and as a performative moment for experiencing new ways of men-to-men relating. The group creates a dynamic support that allows participants speak about personal issues, vulnerabilities, and conflicting experiences with 'dominant' models of masculinity/ies.

With speaking 'as men' starting from oneself, MP members claim to address several questions on men/masculinities (with both deconstructive and creative aspects) trying to avoid masculinity as an abstract category and avoid generalizations on men. The self-situated practice of speaking from personal experience as men also involves coming to terms with men's embodiment as a relational and affective element of interpersonal experience. The male body is not claimed in order to provide the biological ground for identity politics, and neither is it claimed for a rediscovery of a new or lost masculinity; rather, it is understood as the body of men's lived experiences, recognized as a relational and affective element that men themselves find uncomfortable to express and engage with. The group provides homosocial activities in which men recall learning and experiencing positive corporeal expressions of affections among men. Men's partiality is understood as 'the sexual condition of men and the consequences that this has on their subjectivity, on their experience of the world' (Stefano, contribution to the discussion, 2010). In this sense, speaking as men from their 'gendered and sexed partiality' (Salvatore, intervention into roundtable, November 2014) could provide men with a self-situating exercise and with the (feminist) theoretical/practical tools to question the onto-epistemological dominance of *Abstract Masculinity*. Interestingly, engaging with a critical-creative reflection on *male sexual difference* brings with it other questions to be discussed such as changing men's oppressive practices, making a difference by questioning norms and allowing room for differences among men and differences within oneself. Read affirmatively, the potentiality of the concept of *male sexual difference* is grounded in the possibility of making room for men's opportunities of *differing*, as the critical-creative possibilities to transform discourses and practices.

As a feminist practice, speaking starting from oneself relies on the power of language and collective awareness to voice unheard corporeal experiences, perform changes in self-perception, understand power relations and create politically-aware subjectivities. This has been the aim of women's engagement with this practice in the case of consciousness-raising feminism in Italy, relying on standpoint epistemologies to unmask sexist power relations from the perspective of women. Epistemologically, men's practice of 'speaking as men,' by acknowledging the embodied-embedded nature of their located experiences, constitutes a great challenge to normative visions of knowledge. As we have seen, this practice gives the voice to men's 'profound silence' about themselves and opens critical routes into their gendered experiences. This practice is borrowed from Italian consciousness-raising feminism, and the terminology used by men testifies their acknowledgement of the theoretical debt and personal relations with feminism and feminist women. But, self-reflectivity practiced among men is different from that practiced by women: it departs from questioning the universal masculinity position by narrating personal accounts 'as men', locating meanings and questioning given for granted practices within power, cultural and geopolitical contexts. At the same time, men recall to gain awareness of their own partiality. By gaining visibility as gendered subjects, MP members can deconstruct normative aspects of masculinity (white-heterosexual and yet, universal), and become aware of its partial perspective. Therefore, through sharing and looking at their own experiences with critical-gendered eyes, the members of MP want to stress their own partiality as embodied-embedded subjects. They seem to support a vision of knowledge very close to *third wave situated epistemologies* (Van der Tuin 2009).

The group practice of 'speaking as men' encompasses both critical and creative approaches to men's practices: through sharing everyone's male experiences, men are willing to visualise and deconstruct the cultural dynamics influencing their own gendered identity, gender meanings and relations. Importantly, men's *voices* and *visibility* come to the fore in the same fashion as the practice of 'speaking *as men*': not rooted within an identitarian politics of recognition, but rather aimed at interrogating how-questions such as '*how* men live within the world and *how* they proceeded in rebuilding the past, *how* they transmitted memory and *how* they signified that very world' (Vedovati 2007, 142; emphasis in the original). MP practice does question the discursive habits of *Abstract Masculinity*, we can then think whether it can be seen as a *politics of location*, considering its deconstructing departing points (on men's silence

and other onto-epistemological privileges) and its situating efforts to locate men's embodied lives connecting people and stories.

Chapter 4. Anti-violence intervention and love politics in the work of anti-sexist groups of men in Barcelona

1. Introduction

Reglas de juego para hombres que quieran amar a mujeres

*El hombre que me ame
deberá saber descorrer las cortinas de la piel,
encontrar la profundidad de mis ojos*

*y conocer la que anida en mí,
la golondrina
transparente de la ternura.*

*El hombre que me ame
no querrá poseerme como una mercancía,
ni exhibirme como un trofeo de caza,
sabrás estar a mi lado
con el mismo amor
con que yo estaré al lado suyo.*

(...)

*El hombre que me ame
no dudará de mi sonrisa
ni temerá la abundancia de mi pelo
respetará la tristeza, el silencio
y con caricias tocará mi vientre como guitarra
para que brote música y alegría
desde el fondo de mi cuerpo.*

(...)

*El hombre que me ame
hará poesía con su vida,
construyendo cada día
con la mirada puesta en el futuro.*

(...)

*El amor de mi hombre
no le huirá a las cocinas
ni a los pañales del hijo,
será como un viento fresco
llevándose entre nubes de sueño y de pasado
las debilidades que, por siglos, nos mantuvieron
separados
como seres de distinta estatura*

*El amor de mi hombre
no querrá rotularme o etiquetarme,
me dará aire, espacio,
alimento para crecer y ser mejor,
como una Revolución
que hace de cada día
el comienzo de una nueva victoria.*

Gioconda Belli, *Escándalo de Miel* (2011)

Folded in four and printed on a white piece of paper, I found this poem while looking through my archived fieldwork data on anti-violence actions in Spain. With this poem, *Reglas del juego para los hombres que quieran amar a mujeres* ('Rules of the game for men who would like to love women') the members of the organization *Homes Igualitaris* (HI from now on) from Barcelona opened up their most important public action against gender-based violence, their *rueda de hombres*, in 2013. That day, celebrating their annual anti-violence commitment on October 21st, a small group of men was preparing the setting for their demonstration in front of the City Hall in Sant Jaume Square.⁶⁴ I arrived when Marc and Alvar were unfolding a huge white ribbon made of cloth, while Joan had just positioned the banner of the organization *AHIGE-Catalunya* next to the speakers and the microphone set. They had invited me not only to observe this demonstration but also to participate, letting me help out with the preparation. Thomas came closer to the group with his younger child, a toddler happy to be sitting on his shoulders, and everybody greeted them with enthusiasm. It was for me the third or fourth time I joined such a demonstration, with HI members inviting me as a researcher, ally and friend. When I arrived, my help was welcomed in setting the candles all around the white fabric, collaborating with other men and some women who were joining the demonstration.

⁶⁴As I explained in chapter 2, according to the document *Agenda Común de los Hombres por la Igualdad, Declaración de Barcelona*, October 21st is set as the official annual date in which the Spanish *Movimiento de hombres por la igualdad* decided to demonstrate their anti-violence efforts.

Meanwhile, it is Alfred's task, (a twenty-five years old law student and the youngest man in the group) to stand in the middle of Sant Jaume square and read selected poems on the microphone. This is one of the steps to follow during a *rueda de hombres*: reading poems and other relevant short texts before performing the act where the anti-violence manifesto is read. I find myself observing Alfred giving his voice to something that he himself had chosen for the occasion: Gioconda Belli's love poem. You could tell the mix of nervous emotions and pride coming through his voice. Joan, the president of the group at that time, looked at him with serene enjoyment as if it was his own son the one who was performing in front of the municipality. I asked about the text being read and I was handed a copy of the poem; I went through it, folded it and kept it in my bag.

I remember that some sense of surprise crossed my impressions, as I encountered love words and different affective flows mixed together among men in the ritualized act of men's anti-violence engagement. However, I didn't give it much attention as they told me that was the introductory part and I wanted to see how the rest of the demonstration was performed. We went on lighting up all the candles and calling out for passing-bye people to join us. One of the members at the microphone used to repeat the slogan 'silence makes us complicit, let's make us visible against masculinist violences!'; and then, following the practice of the *rueda de hombres*, we stood in a circle around the white ribbon positioned onto the ground, holding hands. Joan reminded publicly that, that same week, in other towns in Spain other groups of men were performing the same action, and some of us participated as well in their demonstrations. While in the circle, two of the members explained why we were there and repeated their activist slogans. Then, a minute of silence was dedicated to the victims and survivors of machoist violences: men and women were holding hands around a circle of candles making visible their stand against violence. The police were observing the act from the City Hall entrance, and some tourists walking across the square were curious about it. Then, somebody thanked the participants and the people who were holding hands started clapping and then hugging each other. That day, men protesting against machoist violences (*violències masclistes* in Catalan) were explicitly bringing love in the demonstration, and they were doing so through the words of a woman, the poet Gioconda Belli (2011).

Several months later I am holding the same paper sheet, while thinking about my field experiences. While I read the poem Alfred's voice comes back to me, that, with the

repetition of the first verse *el hombre que me ame* (the man who loves me) and later *el amor de mi hombre* (the love of my man) is asking for a redefinition of the terms of the (heterosexual) relationship between the author and her partner. I understand that Alfred had chosen this poem to express his intimate commitment to the redefinition of gender relations and to envision affectively the egalitarian man he wants to be(come). The poem touches different aspects of a relationship: care, eroticism, respect, intimacy, mutual freedom, shared childcare, companionship, and ends with envisioning this type of egalitarian relationship as a daily challenge towards a revolution. Beyond the epic-sounding tones, it is interesting to see how each paragraph is advocating for a reconfiguration of love relationships, and at the same time it is redrawing the contours of gender norms and proper acting like an egalitarian man in such romantic relationships.

This action at the most relevant anti-violence action of *Homes Igualitaris* in Barcelona, shows how difficult it is to separate anti-violence work from rethinking love practices. For HI, to take part in anti-violence actions stands on the premise of questioning sexism, and it means to change their relationships to women from sexist to egalitarian relations as friends, colleagues, relatives and also as romantic and life partners. This process springs from the personal urgency to rethink interpersonal relations and acquires political relevance once love practices are discussed collectively and turned into claims and interventions for socio-cultural transformation. It becomes personally-political when it is also incorporated into the personal level of relational experiences with others.

Rueda de Hombres is the major public mobilization of antisexist men against violence : given the fact that the majority of cases of violence against women (VAW) are committed by men who are personally close to the victim (partners, ex-partners, friends, family relatives), rethinking love practices is crucial to understand and reconfigure men's relationships with women beyond violence. Following what emerged from my field experience among antisexist men, this chapter is dedicated to explore the practices related to rethinking love in men's anti-violence activism and their implications. We are, therefore, discussing love politics and what I call the 'gender division of romantic labour'. Interrogating love practices, imaginaries and gendered norms is a relevant part of men's anti-violence work in Spain; it is connected with the possibility of reconfiguring men's relationship to women and preventing VAW within

relationships.⁶⁵ In this chapter, I provide an analysis of the ways in which love questions emerge and become political within the practices and narratives of men involved anti-violence activism in Barcelona. Indeed, during my fieldwork in this city between 2012 and 2014, not only romantic love became the content of many activities of men for gender justice: it also helped to materialise an interesting debate with apparently contrasting approaches between two groups of men based in the city.

2. Anti-violence and Love in Spain: ‘*el Amor Romántico Mata*’

Haz que estar a la espera del príncipe azul no sea el deseo más grande de sus vidas. Enséñales que no son unas princesas, demuéstrales que tú y ellas son guerreras. Sólo así tus hijas estarán preparadas para luchar en un mundo en el que nos matan por ser mujeres.

Chicas Malas⁶⁶

For the last few years, in Barcelona as well as in Spain in general, love does gather central attention in violence prevention and gender awareness initiatives when it comes to understand, question and change hetero-normative sexual-affective relations. The Feminist-inspired deconstruction of what is commonly framed as ‘myths of romantic love’ (*los mitos del amor romántico*) has been the most widely accepted approach aimed at revealing the socio-symbolic inequalities within normative heterosexual love relationships.⁶⁷ Professionals in policy, education, activism and academic anti-violence engagement agree that hegemonic discourses on romantic love

⁶⁵ The men’s groups associated to MP in Italy do not engage with romantic love matters publicly neither they make of them a topic for political initiatives. During group sessions they might share personal accounts of love relationships, and critically reflect on them. Individually, some MP members publish their written elaboration on love and desire in the form of book chapters and articles, an example of this is the book *Infiniti Amori* by Mapelli and Miceli (2013).

⁶⁶ ‘Make waiting for Prince Charming not the biggest wish of their lives. Teach them that they are not princesses; show them that you and they are warriors. Only then will your daughters be ready to fight in a world where they kill us because we are women,’ Chicas Malas, ‘Deja de criar a tus hijas como princesitas,’ March 25th 2016 LBog post, available at <https://soyunachicamala.wordpress.com/2016/03/25/deja-de-criar-a-tus-hijas-como-princesitas/> , accessed 09/05/2018.

⁶⁷ Insitut Catalá de les Dones (ICD), february 2013 ‘*Pla estratègic de polítiques de dones del Govern de la Generalitat de Catalunya 2012-2015*’ pdf available at http://dones.gencat.cat/web/.content/02_institut/docs/pla_estrategic.pdf accessed on 09/12/2018.

contribute to reaffirm gender norms and relational practices closely related to violence against girls and women.⁶⁸

This perspective became particularly clear to me during one of my first fieldwork trips to Barcelona in October 2012, when I used to spend much of my time in the small public library of the neighbourhood I lived in. As we were getting closer to the celebration of the international day against VAW on November 25th, in October the library space began to host the exhibition *Violència masclista en la parella: ¿desmuntem mites?* ('Machoist violence in the couple, let's deconstruct myths?'). The exhibition was part of an educational campaign aimed to show that 'our way of thinking is constructed on the basis of myths or beliefs that help to explain the world and give meaning to the things happening to us'.⁶⁹ Following from that, the exhibited posters were meant to 'provide a revision of some of the *myths associated with romantic love and with masculinist violence* and offer ideas for transforming them and moving forward towards free from violence relationships' (Ibid, emphasis added). Designed by the Catalan Women's Institute (*Institut Català de les Dones*, ICD), this campaign was inscribed in the 2012-2015 plan of intervention and prevention of violence against women of the *Generalitat de Catalunya*.⁷⁰ This campaign aimed to raise awareness on the social acceptance of romantic myths and their impact on romantic relationships when there is VAW within these relationships. The exhibition was made of large posters about romantic myths: each poster presented one image and a well-known motto (a socially accepted and commonly shared belief) on romantic love. Below every motto, a short sentence uncovered the problematic assumptions that the myth builds upon and explained its socio-cultural underpinnings. Finally, a new sentence highlighted in red offered the alternative way when moving beyond the myths of romantic love. Let's see here some examples.

⁶⁸ The analysis refers to violences against women occurring within hetero sexual-affective relationships, where the vast majority of violences occur, framed within Catalan activism and literature as '*violències masclistes en la parella*' (VMP) and in Anglophone literature as 'intimate partner violence' (IPV). International agencies such as UN and WHO use 'violence against women' (VAW) or 'gender-based violence' (GBV) interchangeably, so I do in this chapter with VAW and GBV, while I bring attention on the terms used by anti-violence organizations and members themselves (*violències machistas, violències masclistes, violencia de genero*) to politically situate their action.

⁶⁹ From the text of the campaign-exhibition: '*Violència masclista en la parella: desmuntem mites?*' project of the ICD, webpage http://dones.gencat.cat/ca/ambits/sensibilitzacio/exposicions/violencia_masclista/ accessed on 09/12/2018.

⁷⁰ Insitut Català de les Dones (ICD), february 2013 '*Pla estratègic de polítiques de dones del Govern de la Generalitat de Catalunya 2012-2015*' pdf available at http://dones.gencat.cat/web/.content/02_institut/docs/pla_estrategic.pdf accessed on 09/12/2018.

With the sentence *Sense tu no sóc res!* ('Without you I am nothing')⁷¹, this poster presents the first myth to be deconstructed, 'the accepted belief that we are incomplete beings and we need another person in order to find plenitude.' This is the myth of the *media naranja* (literally, 'half orange'): every person is just a half of him/herself and the other half is somewhere out there to complete him/her. Proposing an alternative fruit metaphor, the poster suggests that 'human beings are complete in themselves and we can find a way to be together like, for example, two cherries; if our stem breaks, we will still be cherries.'

A second poster dealt with the idea of jealousy: *Si sent gelosia és perquè t'estima!* (If he/she feels jealous it's because he/she loves you).⁷² In the original language, Catalan, the gendered pronoun (he or she) is not present in the sentence in order for it to be inclusive). This poster unpacks the common belief that associates jealousy with love. Jealousy, it says, 'makes you feel bad, it gives you nothing, and, depending on its intensity, it can lead to practices of control [...] jealousy is just a symptom of possession and of lack of trust in the partner.' The poster explains, instead, that 'jealousy is a common feeling. The question is rather how to manage this feeling in order not to make you or the other person suffer. Communication and trust can be good tools for facing jealousy.' A different poster deals with the pains associated of falling in love: *Quan t'enamores ho passes malament!* (When you fall in love you suffer from it).⁷³ This poster uncovers the accepted connection between love and suffering, that 'fuels romantic fantasies and, until today, contributes to the normalization of machoist violence in the couple. Often, suffering is thought to lead love to a more authentic and deep level.' Then it goes on questioning: 'Is it necessary to suffer in a relationship? Which limit should this suffering have?' and continues explaining: 'love relationships can have painful moments [...] but if these moments go hand in hand with violence, and violence is exercised repeatedly, we are facing an abusive relationship' (Ibid).

The idea sustaining this campaign is that romantic myths contribute to normalize imaginaries and practices about love relationships in which violences against girls and women are most likely to occur. The idea, *el amor romántico mata* (romantic love kills) summarises this well. Questioning the myths of romantic love is thus considered crucial

⁷¹ From the text of the campaign-exhibition: '*Violència masclista en la parella: desmuntem mites?*' project of the ICD, webpage http://dones.gencat.cat/ca/ambits/sensibilitzacio/exposicions/violencia_masclista/ accessed on 09/12/2018.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

among most anti-violence actors for understanding and preventing VAW in Barcelona and in Spain in general.

This approach springs from recent social research in Spain focusing on love imaginaries and gendered norms within relationships, as well as on the relation between romantic love myths (from now on: RLM), gender inequalities and VAW in heterosexual couples (Herrera Gómez 2011; Bosch and Ferrer 2002). These studies describe that romantic love feeds the normative model for love relationships as a broader naturalized myth that helps to give meaning to affective-sexual relationships (García Salomón, 2006). Social psychologists (Ferrer et al. 2010; Bosch et al. 2011) define romantic myths as the set of socially shared beliefs on the supposedly ‘true nature’ of love (Yela 2003). These ideas are internalized by the population to different extents. According to my fieldwork and bibliographical research the most popular myths are:

- *Media naranja* and *amor fusión*: lovers find emotional and ontological completeness in each other; the love couple constitutes a unity of two-halves and it is inseparable which implies the myth of *Sin ti soy nada* (without you I am nothing).
- *El amor lo puede todo*: true love can fight all kinds of obstacles.
- *Para siempre*: true love lasts forever.
- *El que te quiere te hará sufrir*: literally, ‘The one who loves you will make you suffer’; exemplifying the taken-for-granted association between love and pain (*sufrimiento*), between longing for the other, passion and suffering (*tormento, pathos*).
- *Los celos*: jealousy is a sign of love and a necessary characteristic of romantic love.
- *Emparejamiento*: the myth of the couple, namely being in a relationship as the ultimate goal in life for achieving happiness; and thus, the myth of *matrimonio por amor*: marriage based on love.

Scholarship on VAW and the impact of RLM on it in Spain shows that some myths are more commonly connected with intimate partner violence than others (Bosch et al. 2011); much literature speaks of the ‘costs’ of romantic love when pointing at its possible negative effects on relationships. The romantic myth of *media naranja*, together with the idea of the couple as a inseparable unity, for example, are thought to lead to limiting personal autonomy and to generate emotional dependence on the partner. Moreover, romanticizing ideas such as *el amor lo puede todo* and *para siempre*, as well as love metaphors of possession such as *you are mine* (*tu eres mía/o*), are linked

to the cultural acceptance of acts of jealousy as proofs of love (*celos*) and with perceiving the end of a relationship as failure (*fracaso*). All these myths are based on the mainstream cultural assumption of considering affective-sexual relationships between men and women as necessarily heterosexual, monogamous and projected towards reproduction (Ferrer et al. 2010).

The approach *el amor romantico mata* claims that socially constructed romantic love builds upon and reproduces power inequalities between women and men at the most intimate level, passing unrecognized and legitimating *microviolencias* (Bosch et al. 2011, 55) and *micromachismos* (García Campaña et al. 2018) and functioning as a tool to maintain the *status quo* of structural relations of power (Bosch and Ferrer 2002). Indeed, in their investigation, Bosch et al. conclude that ‘the concept of love negotiated around us continues to respond more to romantic myths than to egalitarian relationships: microviolences (including gender-based violence) still do not stimulate universal rejection in our context’ (Bosch et al. 2011: 55; translation mine). Feminist studies on love (Gunnarsson 2016) aim at unpacking power dynamics among love partners and inequalities affecting individuals at a very intimate level.

This leads us to consider the critique of romantic love and its myths coming from the context of feminist activism. Exemplarily, on February 13th 2012 the group *Feministes Indignades* from Barcelona published the manifesto *¡¡¡El Amor Romantico MATA!!!* in which they call for questioning the myths of romantic love so to ‘stimulate effective alternatives that won’t generate suffering and/or dependence and that will respect our individuality’.⁷⁴ From a feminist critical perspective, romantic practices are situated in relations of power: the ideology of romantic love is deconstructed and seen as a part of patriarchal institutions that intimately control and subordinate women ‘especially in those countries in which they are fully citizens and where they are legally property of nobody.’⁷⁵

Ethnographies of romantic love increasingly acquire academic attention thanks to their contribution to the understanding of love narratives and interactions in contemporary societies. Contemporary sociological scholarship on love (Giddens and Polity Press 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2015; Illouz 2008) agrees that romantic love is mainly a western (post)modern utopia, a collective imaginary built upon and

⁷⁴ *Feministes Indignades*, 13th February 2012, *¡¡¡El Amor Romantico MATA!!!* Blog post available at <http://feministesindignades.blogspot.com/2012/02/el-amor-romantico-mata.html> accessed on 09/12/2018.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

fuelling individualist discourses, functioning like a secular religion and inscribed within capitalism and patriarchal gender relations. Ethnographies of romantic love that deal with socio-symbolic forms of romances and emotions within (non)western contexts, can sometimes challenge this (Lipset 2004; Enguix and Roca 2015) Lindholm 2006). In the analyses coming from sociology and Gender Studies (Esteban 2011; Esteban and Tavora 2008; Riviere 2009), the intersection of myths of romantic love and gender meanings are critically unpacked. The ways in which love is experienced and performed, especially within heterosexual couples, stems from a microsociology of power which recreates inequalities at the most intimate level (Gunnarsson 2013, 29). Romantic myths are embraced to a different extent by men and women, boys and girls, and they do contribute to gendered practices and expectations when it comes to experience love, sex and romance or friendship. Understanding these social norms in the light of what has been more widely termed ‘emotional labour’ (Hochschild 2012; Hernando Gonzalo 2018) and as part of the gendered division of emotions within love relationships (Duncombe and Marsden 1993; Esteban 2011), I would like to point at a *gendered division of romantic labour* characterizing hetero-normative intimate love interactions as well. Accordingly, normative models of relationships prescribe different socialization patterns for women and men when it comes to learning, negotiating and expressing emotions.

As Herrera and Gunnarsson explain (Herrera Gómez 2011, 2018; Gunnarsson 2016), women, on the contrary to men, are socialized to consider love (and love relationships) as a life priority. Since they are young, girls are socially and intimately trained to acquire emotional skills in order to feel, express and discern their own and others’ emotions in a deeper and more complex manner than boys. According to the current gendered division of emotional labour, women are expected to be the ones in charge of performing care and affective work in society, in fact carrying out much of the emotional labour within romantic relationships and families as well (despite this passing unrecognized as ‘work’ or otherwise seen as a ‘private’ matter). In seeing love as a self-actualization practice while gaining *habitus* in caring about relationships, a gendered division of romantic labour is taking place. For men, the construction of a gendered identity relies less on the centrality of a love relationship (Riviere 2009) than on myths of detached autonomy and self-control, attained by silencing emotions and tabooing vulnerability (Hernando Gonzalo 2018). Normative masculinity is characterized by myths of control and power that require taking distance from any kind of emotional

literacy associated with femininity; rather, boys face the obligation of ‘not showing emotional vulnerability, drawing on the idea that this vulnerability diminishes masculinity, virility, strength and independence’ (Riviere 2009, 13). Men’s roles in romantic scripts are associated with heroic figures and conquering gestures; however, the difficulty of meeting these expectations, coupled with the myth of emotional invulnerability, can generate quite a dose of frustration when it comes to managing one’s own affective states and relationships.

Within feminist activism and socio-anthropological research, love practices are studied in relation to different contexts of economic and political organization in which cultural imaginaries of passionate love, romantic love, and couple love may change contextually. Contemporary understandings of mainstream romantic love are unpacked in relation to capitalist and patriarchal constructions of productive and reproductive organizations, like the heteronormative monogamous couple. In this view, romantic myths, when internalized, can reinforce norms and socio-economic practices by operating at the level of gendered emotional labour within love relationships. As we have seen with the case of the exhibition in Barcelona, romantic scripts for women may include endurance, sacrifice and complete dedication to the other (*sin ti soy nada*); men, being socialized in myths of control, power and assertiveness, are expected to defend the unity of the couple by performing acts of jealousy as a proof of love (*celos*). As a result, women’s emotional dependence and men’s aggressive reactions can become an integral part of the imaginary of romantic interactions, leading towards the cultural legitimization of *micromachismos* and VAW.

That is how the Spanish context of social and psychological research, Gender Studies and feminist activism agree on the relation between the myths of romantic love and VAW. In their argument, romantic love *mata* (literally, it ‘kills’). They highlight the social urgency of deconstructing romantic myths in order to question gender stereotypes and offer more egalitarian love relationships. This perspective has become widely accepted also by institutional and governmental actors when designing anti-violence educational projects (e.g., *Fundación Mujeres*)⁷⁶ and social communication campaigns (e.g., ICD)⁷⁷ as part of ‘gender equality’ policy programmes. For instance, the 2012-

⁷⁶ *Fundación mujeres* Monográfico info 93: ‘Coeducación y mitos del amor romántico’ digital version available at <http://www.fundacionmujeres.es/files/attachments/Documento/46001/image/BOLETIN%20FM%2093.pdf> accessed 09/12/2018.

⁷⁷ From the text of the campaign-exhibition: ‘*Violència masclista en la parella: desmuntem mites?*’ project of the ICD, webpage http://dones.gencat.cat/ca/ambits/sensibilitzacio/exposicions/violencia_masclista/ accessed on 09/12/2018.

2015 plan of violence-prevention for young people launched by the ICD included the programme *Estimar NO fa MAL! – Viu l'amor lliure de violència* ('Loving does NOT HURT! Live love free of violence'): with this affirmative message it advocated for the disconnection of love from suffering (to prevent abusive relations) and promoted a different model of love relationships.⁷⁸

3. Men's VAW prevention: 'lo romàntico es político'

How does romantic love enter the activism of antisexist men and *vice versa*? Inscribed as anti-violence actors, the organizations of men engaging in the prevention of VAW follow and sometimes work with the scholarly, institutional and academic debates for politicizing love practices. Establishing a dialogue with current feminist debates can be considered as a strategy used by antisexist groups of men to make their efforts heard, make them more visible, and sometimes to become more accountable to feminist groups.

Questions about love can be approached through personal readings or emerge in men's only group sessions, or within particular public educational initiatives (*charla* or *taller*). They can be touched upon in educational interventions for VAW prevention programmes for young people. Moreover, love-related questions allow the groups of men to join the existing conversations on such matters and to gain access to local mainstream policy debates on violence prevention. Here, I analyze the cases of two organizations that consider that rethinking romantic love is relevant when it comes to their anti-violence commitment. Apparently, these two groups hold opposite stands.

As I observed in Barcelona during my fieldwork, the idea of rethinking romantic love in the prevention of VAW is particularly visible during the major anti-violence public initiatives of the *Fòrum contra les violències de gènere* (Forum against gender-based violences). This event is organized every year in November by *Plataforma Unitària contra les Violències de Gènere* with more than a hundred organizations called and is hosted at the Francesca Bonnemaison Centre. The *Fòrum* is a fully scheduled three-day event that, next to debates and roundtables, also offers many educational

⁷⁸ Institut Català de les Dones, Programme 'Estimar no fa mal': more information and toolkit for organizations are available at: http://dones.gencat.cat/ca/ambits/violencia_masclista/prevenio_sensibilitzacio/estimar_no_fa_mal/ accessed on 09/12/2018.

workshops for teenagers and adults, most of which focus on raising gender-awareness, unpacking stereotypes and gender norms, and discussing current models of love and affective-sexual relations. During the *Fòrum*, questions related to romantic love were directly or indirectly the subject of many workshops delivered by the participant associations. Joining the *Plataforma Unitària* and collaborating at the *Fòrum*, next to *Homes Igualitaris* (HI), we can find the group *Homes en Diàleg* (HeD) and the NGO *Connexus*. The first two focus primarily on raising awareness, and contribute to violence prevention with an educational intention (socio-cultural level), and research on masculinities. The third one works with perpetrators and victims of VAW (social and therapeutic level). Every year, one of the initiatives of the *Fòrum* is dedicated to the role of men in eradicating gender-based violence; this is precisely when these three organizations can join a conversation on this topic, each one speaking from its own perspective and area of intervention.

All the organizations agree on the relevance of addressing mainstream romantic myths and love narratives in violence prevention among teenagers and adults. Among anti-violence groups, a shared point of departure is considering romantic love myths, hegemonic love narratives and gendered norms as a political ground of critical analysis and social intervention. In the case of *Homes Igualitaris*, rethinking mainstream love narratives is necessary when doing VAW prevention. As Marc, member of *Homes Igualitaris*, explained during our interview after having attended the *Fòrum*:

In the pyramid of machoist violence, killing is at the top. However, at the base there is machoist culture and micro-violent actions, for example the fact of being *vey caballeroso* (acting chivalry), believing that a man should behave in different ways with women than with men (interview with Marc, November 2012).

By making reference to a relevant schema (pyramid o iceberg of GBV) which illustrates the pervasiveness of VAW and its different manifestations,⁷⁹ Marc is connecting the most visible form of violence (femicide) with socio-symbolic micro-practices, giving the example of male gendered performance of ‘acting as a gentleman with women’ which is requested within the culture of romantic love myths. Therefore, when I ask him to tell me more about the ways in which men are expected to act according to romantic

⁷⁹ The different manifestations (visible and less visible) of GBV as part of sexist culture are illustrated with the ‘iceberg or piramide of violence’. Image available here: <https://mamatambienopina.wordpress.com/2014/11/27/dia-3-la-piramide-de-la-violencia/>, accessed on 09/05/2018.

myths, he is a bit surprised about me not knowing such an evident thing, and keeps going on:

The masculine role within romantic love is that of the prince charming, the conqueror, of the one who has domination, and she depends on him. And he has to behave like the knight in rusty armour. He has to be strong and protect her, and, at the same time, on the other hand, when it comes to emotional issues, he has to behave like a small child, because it is she who has to take care of him, like a mother. And if you talk to fifteen-year-old girls in workshops, they realize that. Boys not so much (interview with Marc, November 2012).

Mentioning Robert Fischer's fantasy novel *The Knight in Rusty Armour* (Fisher 2000), the apparent contradiction in the male romantic role is explained by Marc as follows: he has to show conquering and protecting skills in heterosexual relationship but, when it comes to emotional matters, he is neither knowledgeable nor aware of the emotional and care labour to be performed. This fictional character, the knight in rusty armour, as Marc explains to me is used among antisexist men to illustrate how romantic myths about male behaviour (*ser caballero*) can go hand in hand with the emotional costs of acting according to dominant masculine norms. *The Knight in Rusty Armour* is the story of a successful and courageous knight who rescues women in dangerous situations and fights against dragons. He is convinced that wearing the armour is the key to his success, as it makes him feel safe, and never takes it off. Until the day his wife and child, tired of being left alone while he is fighting and of hearing about his victories, ask him to take his armour off. The knight cannot take it off as it is totally rusted: in the journey to find out how to free himself from the rusty armour, the knight also learns more meaningful ways to be a good knight and practice love. Here, it comes clear how gender norms inscribed in romantic imaginations are associated with a specific gendered division of emotional and particularly romantic labour.

Talking with Marc I understand that assuming protective roles towards women is associated with having to prove compulsory toughness on the outside (the golden armour) and with the idea that showing emotions is a sign of weakness to be avoided. Thus, this behaviour – despite the apparent flattering image and confidence that wearing a golden armour can give - can slowly become an embodied practice (the knight never takes off his armour) very difficult to change (the knight encaged in his own rusty armour). It can result in the emotional impoverishment of adult men who equate

emotions with vulnerability. This affects in a negative way the emotional wellbeing of men and their relationships with others as partners, fathers, friends and colleagues. Among anti-violence actors, men's lack of emotional literacy is connected with the emergence of VAW, as I could hear from HI member Joan: 'Why do men exercise violence? Because they are afraid, because they are angry and do not know how to show their anger and fear' (interview with Joan, October 2012). Here lies the importance of HI's engagement with emotional and corporeal awareness. They organize educational workshops for members and workshops with teenagers because it is fundamental 'to work with men and prevent men's emotional illiteracy (*analfabetismo emocional*) (Joan).' HI's gender-sensitive socio-pedagogical commitment goes under the term of *co-educación* (Compaire et al. 2011). This last element brought Marc and me to talk about the relevance of emotional education among teen boys as part of violence prevention activities.

It is interesting to note that romantic love also appeared in events not specifically organized under the 'questioning romantic myths' umbrella during my fieldwork. For example, this was the case of the autobiography course that *Homes Igualitaris* launched and experimented in the winter 2013 in Barcelona, where some of the participants opened up about love and relationships through their written works (poems, short stories, diaries). During these sessions (I attended the first three), it was clear that love was a primary issue for their reflection on their personal experiences as men in their relationships with women but also with their parents, children and friends. Beyond heterosexual and couple love, sometimes parental love and love for parents also came up. However, narratives were quite superficial: the effort of writing autobiographically and sharing their personal work was hard enough.

Moreover, rethinking romantic love comes up as a discussion theme during HI educational interventions in high schools (when members are invited to explain HI work and facilitate a workshop on VAW prevention). It is one of the topics of the course HI delivers to young male educators for gender justice ('methodologies for working with young people and alternative masculinities'). This course was offered in 2016 and 2017. In these cases, the feminist critique of romantic myths reappears. Again while talking with Marc, when I asked him to tell me more about the ways in which romantic love can have a negative impact on relations and can contribute to violence, he straightaway mentioned the organization's work with teenagers and other educational programmes meant to deconstruct the assumed relation between romantic love and suffering:

The myth of romantic love goes through those beliefs and conceptions ... because it does not exist, but they make you believe in stories that you will achieve happiness but it is a trap, because then you suffer. Boys and girls, for example, if you go to a high school, continue to dream of prince charming and romantic myths, and thus they have an attitude towards relationships that is very romantic, very suffering (Marc, interview November 2012, emphasis mine).

According to Marc, it is important to speak up about mainstream romantic beliefs and dislocate them from the idea that suffering is part of romantic love.

In another interview, Alfred (HI member) commented on the shared take on romantic love among anti-sexist men:

Romantic love is an important theme for us as men for gender equality, and the demystification of love is important as well, most of all in order to deconstruct certain roles and ideas associated with love that are not necessary. For example, believing that if you do not suffer is because there is no love or the idea that if there is no jealousy there is no love (Alfred, interview May 2014).

Deconstructing the association between love and suffering is highly relevant. This seems to be grounded within culturally located imaginaries of what it means to be in love. Interestingly, the theme of questioning romantic love is very seldom voiced during conversations or interviews, unless I asked explicitly about it. When I asked Alfred about the ways in which he personally related to love and romantic myths, he told me:

For me, personally it is important to demystify love. I firmly believe in the love of mutual trust, and not in the one of jealousy. I believe in the love of respect, not in the one of ruling over each other. I believe in the love of discussion, not the one of conflict. I believe in the love of freedom⁸⁰ and not of imposition. I believe in the love of a man that can take care of a woman or of a man who is sad, and the one of a woman who can take care of a man or another woman who is sad. I believe in the love of complicity and not the one of competition (Alfred, interview May 2014).

⁸⁰ We believe in a healthy relationship between people in which freedom and equality rule above all. When I speak about freedom, I do not refer to exclusive or open relationships, I refer to the freedom that each partner has to contribute in an egalitarian manner with the other, the manner in which a relationship is created. The freedom of each member to be him/herself (Alfred, interview May 2014).

In what he terms ‘demystification of love,’ Alfred is exposing the romantic myth that he does not want to comply with (jealousy, dominance, conflict, imposition, competition) while offering alternatives based on his ideas of love in a romantic relationship (mutual trust, respect, discussion, freedom, complicity). Moreover, he mentions the importance of man (and women) taking up caring roles independently from the gender of the person who is taken care of, disengaging gender from caring responsibilities (‘I believe in the love of a man that can take care of a woman or of a man who is sad, and the one of a woman who can take care of a man or another woman who is sad’). Men’s emotional literacy and a reconfiguration of the gendered division of care and emotional labour is here advocated for as part of creating alternative and more egalitarian forms of romantic love in heterosexual relationships.

In June 2014 HI organized in Barcelona two events dedicated to the deconstruction of romantic love and its perils. The intention, following the line of thought that traverses local feminist criticisms, was to introduce the reflection on romance and its micropowers under the motto *lo romántico es político*, borrowing this expression from feminist scholar Coral Herrera. Indeed, the initiatives organized by the group (a book presentation with a public talk, and a workshop) were activated by inviting Herrera to Barcelona so to learn more and establish a genealogical relation with her work.

Firstly, HI organized and participated in Herrera’s public talk on the passions and dangers of capitalist and patriarchal romance, hosted by a famous feminist bookstore in the city. Many people took part and one of the organizers and participants, Gabriel (HI member), wrote a contribution to the online magazine *Hombres Igualitarios*. He paraphrased Herrera as follows: ‘In this way, Coral affirms, our way of loving and relating lovingly is not an individual or intimate matter, but has a political, economic and social dimension that is always invisibilized by the magic of the stories that they tell us.’⁸¹ Then, commenting on the e/effects of Herrera’s talk on his experience, Gabriel goes on writing about the ways in which the myths of romantic love can be easily deconstructed and dismantled thanks to ‘the female voice and her sweet manner’:

⁸¹ Alcaraz, 2014 in AHIGE website ‘El amor romántico es político’, online accessed 20/04/2018 http://www.antiguahombresigualitarios.ahige.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2024:el-amor-romantico-es-politico&catid=45:nuestras-actividades&Itemid=55 (currently unavailable).

That magic of the tales we were told when we were children gave us chainmail and sword so that we could identify with the knight we would be. All this magic is suddenly undone by the voice of a woman who sweetly affirms that our way of loving is patriarchal and capitalist, because we live in a system based on labels that define us and discriminate us; in hierarchies that make most of our human relationships crossed by power struggles and personal interests. It is comforting that a call is made not to perpetuate this struggle: not by maintaining its privileges, nor by inverting roles, rather by inviting us to create and build new relationships from a horizontal plane, from the same equality (Ibid.).

The discourse ‘romantic love kills’ seems sometimes to be used by HI in a non-critical fashion, without a collective reflection on the personal lived experience as a partner, lover, man. Some of the group members, with a higher intellectual capital because of their profession and/or time spent in gender justice engagement, establish personal-

activist connections with feminist theorists to bring their knowledge to the group of men. The attempt to adjust the organization’s work to current feminist institutional standpoints seems a strategy motivated by the willingness to learn from feminist theories, to update the group’s anti-violence

approach and to take part in local anti-violence interventions, so as

<<Señoras y Señores que creen que lo romántico es político>>

Ponente: CORAL HERRERA

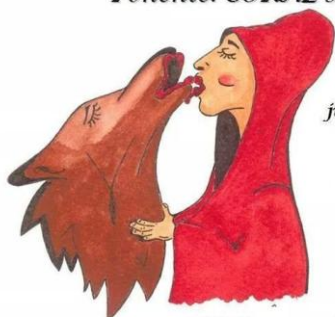
CHARLA ABIERTA

junio 27, 19:30hs

Llibreria Pròleg
Carrer de Sant Pere Més Alt, 46, Barri del Born, Barcelona.



Entrada Libre



Organizado por HOMES IGUALITARIS
ANNO CALZADILLA
www.homesigualitaris.com

TALLER MIXT@

junio 28, 11:00hs

Centre Cívic Barceloneta
Carrer de la Conxetra, 1-9, Barri de la Barceloneta, Barcelona.

Precio: 30€

ATORO LIMITADO
Inscripción: 639 346 119

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to acquire more credibility from others feminist actors and policy institutions.

There was a second workshop with Herrera. It was mixed and only three HI members took part, of a total of seven people (myself included). The price might have discouraged some people to attend. Despite the enthusiasm transmitted by Coral when sharing her insights and personal narratives on love, relationships and toxic romance, HI members were there with a mix of curiosity, willingness to open up about new topics, sense of discomfort and a sort of obligation to be present. For some of them, born in a pre-digital generation, deconstructing romantic love seemed to go against the chivalry that helps them to express their love and respect for women. For some of them love and

respect for women are what it means to be antisexist. The heterogeneity of men's educational, class and generational backgrounds can also affect their view on romantic love, according to which 'romantic' might mean different things, as well as stimulate different affective reactions other than what is expressed in contemporary feminist theories. As Joan commented to me in one of our earlier conversations when I asked about romantic love in men's antisexist work:

Yes, I can agree with this take on romantic love...although I think that love in the style of *usar y tirar* (disposable) seems more worrying to me than what we say romantic (Joan, conversation October 2012).

For Joan, as for many other members of men's antisexist groups, speaking about 'romantic love' is a way to speak about how men relate to women in a personal level (most of them identify as heterosexual), and an opportunity to rethink ethically at the same time gender relations in general and romantic relationships in particular. In my fieldwork, the topic of love among men enters the conversation when they express how much they appreciate one another. Expressing friendship, love and affection among men is considered a transformative and crucial matter to question homophobic practices embedded within normative men-to-men socializations. Eradicating LGBT-phobia is indeed part of the political programme of HI and AHIGE as I analyse in a recent article (Nardini 2018).

As we have seen, on an organizational level the strategy seems to use current feminist critical discourses (*el amor romántico mata*) whereas on a personal level differences and tensions can emerge. There is a gap between feminist theory and men's personal practice of gender justice engagement; sometimes it cannot be filled in a linear or fast-forward mood. It is also relevant to note that men's critical awareness on gender injustices can come from current mainstream feminist concepts and practices but men's personal engagement with these questions might also need situated and embodied self-reflective efforts with their own times and spaces: men's separatist groups could offer this occasion (I haven't had granted access to them) and AHIGE mixed meetings on love could be part of this effort.⁸²

⁸² AHIGE organizes yearly meetings on different topics related to gender issues of two-days in which men and women are welcomed to participate, with workshops and self-reflection. In [2007](#) and in [2017](#) AHIGE meetings were dedicated to love.

4. Homes en Diàleg claim: ‘el Amor Romántico NO MATA’

The organization *Homes en Diàleg* was founded in 2007 in Barcelona by a group of young men who work in the fields of education, social-psychology and social research. Since almost all the members of the group are involved professionally in secondary education, in academia and in pedagogical work and research, the main area of intervention of *Homes en Diàleg* is gender-sensitive education (*co-educación*). Willing to contribute to the eradication of gender-based violence, their main concern is urgently ‘promote and potentiate models of masculinity alternative to the hegemonic one, models that are based on (gender) equality and dialogue’ (HeD web; emphasis and translation mine). HeD and HI members know one another, they get in contact during public events dedicated to masculinities and VAW prevention (as the *Fòrum’s* roundtables). During my fieldwork, I observed that they work for the same goal (gender justice), with different approaches (as explained in this chapter) and no explicit interest in collaborating with each other.

In the *Fòrum’s* roundtable in 2012, *Homes en Diàleg* (HeD) argued that mainstream anti-violence commitment presents relevant gaps that they try to fill:

a specific focus on boys and masculinities; a reflection on models of masculinity that are socially valued and considered attractive; and, in relation to these two elements, working on the socio-cultural construction of affective-sexual relationships (HeD contribution to the roundtable, November 2012).

HeD aims at filling these gaps questions mainstream love narratives connected with the attractiveness of hegemonic masculinities, and discusses alternative (more egalitarian) masculinities. From a social constructivist perspective, HeD considers that socialization never stops affecting our personal experience during one’s lifetime. They argue for social change in affective-sexual relations through a methodology based on group dialogical practice (that is why they’re called *Homes en Diàleg*—Men in Dialogue). Indeed, the organization focuses its work on violence prevention through critical discussions on dominant models of machoist masculinity, as well as by questioning its current popularity and attractiveness with the goal of empowering alternative

masculinities and more egalitarian models of affective-sexual relationships (Flecha et al., 2013).

As recalled during their public event in 2014 *Noves Masculinitats Alternatives, desmuntem mites: L'amor romàntic NO MATA* (New Alternative Masculinities, let's deconstruct myths: Romantic love DOESN'T KILL), the foundational reading for the members of *Homes en Diàleg* is *El Amor en la Sociedad del Riesgo: una Tentativa Educativa* (Gómez 2008). This text provides HeD with a theoretical framework and a conceptual ground. As one member explained (Sergi, interview June 2014), this book is the result of a pedagogical empirical research on love and patterns of attraction among teenagers in secondary education in Barcelona. It investigates how socio-cultural constructions of attractiveness influence teenagers' love experiences, expectations, disillusion and disappointments, including the possible encounter of abusive relationships. Giving voice to teenagers' own narratives about love, desire, relationships and happiness, this book raises relevant questions like how can we achieve a point where teenagers won't be attracted to those who can hurt them? And how can we move beyond the language of double standards that separates sexual desire from love? *Homes en Diàleg's* theoretical approach to prevent gender-based violence is drawn from Gomez's work on love, but their practical approach stems from the questions I have just mentioned.

They use discussion and focus groups as methodologies in the workshops with teenagers (each semester) when they are invited to secondary schools. With the help of audio-visual material from popular culture and cinema, participants are engaged in a discussion about the different models of love relationships, with a special focus on dominant machoist masculinity, the features that make it attractive, the links between *machismo* and abusive relationships, and the possible alternatives to it.

At the Barcelona *Fòrum* 2013, for example, I participated in the workshop the group delivered with the title 'New Masculinities. Alternatives against gender-based violence'. On this occasion, as one of the coordinators explained, two different movie-clips were used in order to create a debate on current dominant narratives about the way in which people speak about egalitarian and about violent masculinities, whether they use the language of ethics or the language of desire (Sergi, introducer to the workshop, November 2013). Selected films for the workshop were *Tres Metros Sobre el Cielo* (2010) and *Coyote Ugly* (2000), both telling heterosexual love relationships among young people, but in very different ways.

The romantic drama *Tres Metros Sobre el Cielo* explains the conflicting and passionate story between Babi, a middle-class posh girl, and the macho and attractive Hache. Their story is characterized by the constant alternation of sweet and violent moments of interaction between the two. The boy owns the power of defining the situation, attracting the girl with a mixture of cocky aggressiveness and romantic sweetness. As a result, despite the anger, the fights, the time spent crying and the humiliation on her side, the girl falls in love with him and he for her. This first story is used to show a perfect case of what *Homes en Diàleg*, following Gomez (2008), calls *Masculinidad Tradicional Dominante* (Traditional Dominant Masculinity, i.e. TDM). Namely, the type of machoist masculinity that, while attracting popularity and being the object of desire for many women, is indirectly/directly responsible for performing acts of VAW within the relationship. As they argue:

not all men embodying a traditional dominant masculinity do practice acts of violence or microviolence against women; however, it is proven that all those who commit violence against women do share features with a traditional dominant masculinity (Isaac, contributor to the workshop, November 2013).

Accordingly, the aim of the debate about this first movie is to problematise the attractiveness of TDM, and its importance for girls' fantasies of (romantic) love. As one member from HeD clarifies:

this movie is totally a trap. You see, they call it 'romantic drama'...but the guy in the story is a typical *machote*: he will actually never be romantic and sweet as the story wants us to believe! This type of guy seduces you and then walks away (Isaac, contributor to the workshop's discussion, November 2013).

Members of *Homes en Diàleg* seem to agree with the words of their fellow member Marcos:

well, the problem is that this story has nothing to do with romantic love, since in the relationship there is violence and no respect, no mutual emotional support, no love between the two: *para mi esta no es una historia romántica* (for me this is not a romantic story) (Marcos, contributor to the discussion, November 2013, emphasis mine).

It becomes clear that HeD are criticizing the way romantic love is currently represented in mainstream media, including its dependence on machoist practices expected from boys/men. This critical moment is taken as a point of departure to redefine what romance is (or should be, according to them) simultaneously redefining alternative masculinities.

For these purposes a second film is shown: the romantic comedy/drama *Coyote Ugly*. This film tells the story of Violet, who lives and works in New York City to pursue her dream of becoming a songwriter. During her stay in New York and while she works at the club Coyote Ugly, she starts dating Kevin, a friendly Australian guy doing night shifts in the city's fish market. This second movie is selected to represent a positive alternative to Traditional Dominant Masculinity *vis a vis* a positive alternative to the type of affective-sexual relationships TDM can lead to. In *Coyote Ugly*, the relationship between the two characters is described by HeD member Sergi as follows:

the story is playful, romantic, passionate, based on respect and free from violence. And Kevin is not a *chico malo* (bad boy). He shows respect and support for Violet's dreams...he encourages her to pursue them. And we see that Violet, in turns, finds him very attractive! They have sweet as well as passionate love moments (Sergi, contributor to the discussion, November 2013).

The transformative effort aims to combine romantic, respectful behavior, love and passion. This case is thus selected as the ideal example of a relationship to wish for, which goes hand in hand with the project of moving beyond the double standards approach in love relations. Thinking in double standards, in their perspective, involves the distinction between the 'logic of ethics' and the 'logic of desire' (Sergi, contributor to the roundtable, June 2014). This distinction is criticized because it reproduces the opposition between either engaging in a loving yet unpassionate relationship (*amor sin pasión*) with a good guy (*chico bueno*) or having a passionate relationship without love (*pasión sin amor*) with a bad guy (*chico malo*). In other words, it refers to the dichotomy between love and sex, or between commitment and casual sex. As one interviewee made clear, 'thinking and loving in double standards does not help to move beyond gender-based violence; on the contrary, it reaffirms it' (Ramón, interview November 2012). The reason of the latter, according to *Homes en Diàleg*, has to be found in the fact that desire and attractiveness remain culturally and socially linked to Traditional Dominant Masculinity, to the type of non-egalitarian machoist practices

potentially responsible for abusive relationships (HeD roundtable intervention at *Forùm* 2012, 2013; HeD *Forùm* workshop 2013; HeD public roundtable June 2014).

Coyote Ugly's love story is chosen to illustrate that, as they affirmatively argue, in an egalitarian affective-sexual relationship love and passion can and should co-exist in what they call *pasión amorosa* ('passionate love'). On the other side, the type of masculinity embodied by Kevin is for HeD exemplary of *Nuevas Masculinidades Alternativas* (New Alternative Masculinities, NAM), that is, non-machoist, egalitarian and attractive: the type of masculinities in which Violet could find both *amor y pasión* (*love and passion*). Making this kind of alternative masculinities more popular and attractive is very important for the overall goal of the organization of VAW prevention. In fact, with the two movies, the aim of the workshop is:

to create dialogue interrogating the reasons why girls are attracted to TDM, to that type of *chico malo*...with the workshop we want to break the association between attractiveness and violence...and instead try to link attractiveness to egalitarian relationships (Ramón, interview November 2012).

Despite expressing it more frequently in the negative form as 'for me this is not a romantic story' (ibid.), HeD members are rethinking the contours of romantic love towards an egalitarian ideal of relationship. Their critical-creative approach to romantic love is limited to the a/effects it has on a personal level (to prevent VAW): a critique on the social and economic context of romantic discourses and practices seems to be left out. The urgency to transform what romantic love means and matters personally and relationally to prevent VAW contributes to their on-ground intervention and affirmative approach to romantic love. In their imaginary, romantic love is characterized by respect, mutual emotional support, attraction, sweet and passionate love and sexual consent; for them, romantic love is and should be egalitarian by definition.

Accordingly, for the members of HeD it is not the fact of relying on romantic love narratives what, *per se*, contributes to violence against women, but rather the social acceptance and attractiveness of certain types of masculinities combined with the double standards. This way, they elaborate their own stand on the politics of romantic love while taking distance from and in confrontation with what Marcos called (Marcos, conversation June 2014) 'mainstream feminist discourse' on romantic myths in Spain.

This distance was made explicit by HeD in June 2014, when the group organized its second public symposium (*jornada*) with the title: *Noves Masculinitats*

Alternatives, desmuntem mites: L'amor romàntic NO MATA ('New Alternative Masculinities, let's deconstruct myths: Romantic love DOESN'T KILL'). As the title



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clarifies, the myth that is intended for deconstruction is not romantic love but rather the idea that 'romantic love kills,' as in the motto most frequently used by feminist interventions (and by the organization *Homes Igualitaris* as well) to critically address romantic love myths and dominant narratives in Barcelona.

The event was held on the 10th anniversary of the publication of *El Amor en la Sociedad del Riesgo* by Gómez, reopening the conversation on love and violence prevention, the symposium's main objective, was:

to deconstruct one of the myths that has been recently accepted more and more in the framework of combating gender-based violence and that is not supported by scientific evidence. We refer to the myth according to which romantic love causes gender-based violence or, as it's summarized, that *el amor romántico mata* (HeD flyer 2014).

The day started with a presentation of the most recent academic works in which some of the members of the group are involved (Flecha et al. 2013). They stressed the importance of gender education among teenagers, following the social and pedagogical line of Gomez (2008) and merging together his formulation of the 'logic of ethics' and the 'logic of desire' (Gomez's terms incorporated into HeD work). This education involves watching romantic scenes of movie-clips to identify and question models and attitudes of dominant machoist masculinities (critical part) and, at the same time, to show examples of 'new alternative masculinities' (non-machoist, respectful of girls' subjectivity and desires, egalitarian and attractive (creative part). With this workshops and strategy HeD wants to provide teenagers with alternative love socializations, based on seeking more fulfilling and free of violence romantic relationships.

In this educational work, urgency is seen in understanding romantic love in positive terms. Clearly addressing their distance from the current approach to violence

prevention in Spanish feminist sociology, activism and institutional programmes (see above in the chapter), according to *Homes en Diàleg*, the position arguing that *el amor romántico* MATA and the majority of the discursive strategies stemming from it can lead to very serious consequences. They believe in fact that:

questioning ideal love and romantic love and, in many cases, suggesting to go for relationships that oblige us to choose between love or passion, are moves that do not lead us forward; on the contrary, it can push us backwards in relation to the eradication of this violence (HeD 2014).

Members of the group argue that violence prevention among teenagers cannot be solely based on a critical deconstruction of romantic love as other feminist policy approaches in Barcelona that claim and only focus on disseminating the message that ‘romantic love kills’ do. In the feminist approaches I described above in this chapter, one point seems problematic for HeD: drawing only on an ethical discourse (egalitarian masculinities are good, gender relationships should be egalitarian, romantic love should be deconstructed), this feminist perspective risks reproducing the double-standards that oppose TDM (traditional dominant masculinity) to NAM (new alternative masculinity) and do not challenge the popularity of TDM. The double-standard that obliges us to choose between love or passion, makes many girls say ‘I will follow my parents advice to marry a good guy. Until then, I will keep having fun with the bad ones’ (Marcos referring to a conversation with one of his students, contribution to the symposium, June 2014).

According to *Homes en Diàleg*, feminist deconstructive approaches offer an ethical discourse (Gomez’s ‘logic of ethics’) that, despite encouraging alternative egalitarian masculinities, is not enough for the transformation of love socialization of teenagers, because it does not question the culture of the double-standards. What HeD proposes instead is to elaborate a pedagogy based on desire rather than on ethics. As Sergi commented during the discussion,: ‘the logic of desire, namely *showing that egalitarian masculinities are not only ethically good but also attractive*, should be incorporated into violence prevention campaigns’ (Sergi, contributor to the symposium, June 2014). Making egalitarian masculinities attractive to teenagers (boys and girls) serves to construct, as the booklet of HeD symposium says, ‘relationships free of violence yet full of romanticism and passion!’ (HeD 2014). In this proposal and process, romantic love is claimed as a crucial transformative force for teenagers and as a very

powerful mobilizing energy at a personal level with the positive examples provided in the workshops. For these reasons HeD affirms that romantic love not only ‘doesn’t kill’ but should not be dismissed in VAW prevention because, as Ramón explained to me:

if you are telling teenagers that they cannot fall in love, that romantic love is something bad, what can we offer them in terms of better affective-sexual relationships? It is clear that romantic love, as it has been constructed, is sometimes based on gender inequalities...but this does not mean it cannot change. *Romantic love is something ideal*, it means believing in the person you have fallen in love with, it is wishing for the best for her, and this is good, there is nothing negative in that, *el amor puede ser chulo* (Ramón, interview November 2012, emphasis added).

When I asked him to comment on romantic myths such as the linkages between love and suffering and love and jealousy, he agreed with local feminist perspectives and with *Homes Igualitaris*: ‘...I see, normally jealous reactions are associated with passion and with love but this is not true...if a man is very jealous it doesn’t mean he is very much in love or that he is very passionate...this association must be demystified as well’ (Ibid). Keeping in mind HeD’s work on promoting what they call ‘New Alternative Masculinities,’ there is also an effort in affirming that romantic love goes hand in hand with a reconfiguration in gender meanings and in the practices boys and men *as men* are expected to perform in this heteronormative and sexist context. The social urgency to intervene in dominant cultures of affective-sexual relationships and prevent VAW among young people leads HeD to primarily discuss what I have called the ‘gender division of romantic labour’ in relation to heteronormative relations. Their proposal seems to lay in a different love culture altogether and consists of questioning the double standards that oppose machoist men’s practices (desire) to egalitarian masculinities (ethics), offering the affirmative possibility of creating desirable *and* ethical masculinities and sexual-affective relationships free of violences.

5. Conclusion: gender division of romantic labour

In the context of feminist-informed policy, social communication campaigns and anti-violence institutional programmes in Spain and in Barcelona, the deconstruction of

myths and practices related to *amor romántico* is considered a necessary socio-pedagogical strategy for enabling men and women to acknowledge the socio-cultural norms that affect gender identities and love interactions, and to shift gender relations towards more egalitarian ones for the prevention of VAW.⁸³ Feminist-inspired activists, as well as policy programmes, share a common approach in the prevention of VAW focusing on ‘deconstructing myths of romantic love’ when designing anti-violence campaigns and educational projects, as in the exhibition I described in the beginning of the chapter. Interestingly, romantic love becomes a subject of discussion collectively scrutinized through the interrogation of its imaginaries and myths, its practices and experiences in relation to violence and abusive patterns in relationships. Observing a relation between the collective imaginary of romantic myths (*media naranja, sin ti soy nada, celos* etc.) and VAW, this common approach to violence prevention is summarized with the straightforward motto: *el amor romántico MATA*.

This chapter has focused on the following question: How is love dealt with in men’s activism for gender justice? My fieldwork in Barcelona shows that love participates in men’s engagements for gender justice as a fundamental topic in VAW prevention education, as a mobilizing question for its crucial implications in transforming sexual-affective relations, and as an engagement factor at the personal level for anti-sexist men, whose processes of becoming more egalitarian men are intimately connected to changing the ways they relate to women, including their personal romantic relationships. Like feminist institutional, political and activist settings, men’s anti-violence organizations in Barcelona agree on the relation between myths of romantic love and VAW, and their members create critical and creative approaches to love practices by claiming that ‘*lo romántico es político*’ (the romantic is political).

In the initiatives and interviews with *Homes Igualitaris*, it becomes clear that following current ‘mainstream’ feminist approaches to romantic love (*el amor romántico mata*) is an anti-violence educational strategy and a way to establish genealogical relations with feminist scholarship. Interestingly, when asked about the question directly, differences in personal and generational motivations and standpoints of the members coexist with a willingness to adhere politically to current

⁸³ Institut Català de les Dones project ‘*Violència masclista en la parella: desmuntem mites?*’, webpage http://dones.gencat.cat/ca/ambits/sensibilitzacio/exposicions/violencia_masclista/ accessed on 09/12/2018; and the programme ‘Estimar no fa mal’: more information and toolkit for organizations are available at: http://dones.gencat.cat/ca/ambits/violencia_masclista/prevencio_sensibilitzacio/estimar_no_fa_mal/ accessed on 09/12/2018.

institutionalized feminist approaches. Indeed, there is a tension between what the institutionalized discourse expects activists to claim and support, and men's differing individual trajectories of love experiences and self-reflection on romantic love. Interestingly, from the perspective of some members, love serves as a mobilizing affect towards egalitarian relationships with women. We could consider that their love relationship with their female-partner, supported by the willingness to build with her an egalitarian partnership, is what keeps men committed to gender justice in their everyday life.

Homes en Diàleg offers a different take on romantic love and preventing VAW. Romantic love is part of HeD members' critical reflection on masculinity and gender relations, and critical narratives of masculinities. In other words, discussing romantic love seems to go hand in hand with questioning current models of masculinity, heteronormative ideals of gendered practices, and relationships complicit with machismo. For them, it is not a follow-up of feminist approaches. The approach proposed by HeD differs from the common perspective on 'questioning romantic myths in order to prevent violence' among anti-violence actors in Barcelona and Spain. Rejecting the solely deconstructive approach on romantic love and the idea that romantic love is responsible for VAW, HeD problematizes those men's practices and masculinities involved in perpetrating this violence (Traditional Dominant Masculinity, TDM). In questioning its social popularity and its attractiveness, HeD calls for alternative patterns of socialization when it comes to men's gender norms (*New Alternative Masculinities*) and affective-sexual relationships beyond the double standards that oppose passion to love. On a practical level, romantic love is called upon as a motivating force offered to teenagers for desiring relationships free of violence based on love, mutual respect and support, in which romance and passion can co-exist. Theoretically, this take on romantic love wants to move beyond the dichotomy created by the double standards between the logics of ethics and the logic of desire.

It is interesting to see that in HeD approach, and in their motto *el amor romántico NO MATA*, their anti-violence stand works within a multilayered redefinition of what counts as romantic love. Firstly, romantic love is disassociated from suffering, machoist practices and abusive relations; there is a shared willingness to reaffirm 'romantic' as a synonym of 'egalitarian' relationships (involving mutual respect, consent, support, and also idealization). Secondly, a romantic relationship is configured as the type of relation in which love and passion coexist (overcoming the cultural

dominance of the double standards). Thirdly, in line with the sociological analysis that considers romantic love as the secular yet salvational postmodern utopia, in the rhetoric of HeD, romantic love is reclaimed as a positive force in people's lives: 'romantic love is what makes you imagine the relationship you would like to have, because it makes you wish and search for the ideal relationship; in this sense, it could be considered revolutionary' (Arnau, contributor to the symposium, June 2014). Interestingly, taking distance from the broader feminist approach based in the need to deconstruct romantic norms and ideals in order to create gender awareness and promote more equal relations, for HeD romantic love holds a motivating potential in moving towards change that should not be overlooked in anti-violence work and prevention, especially among teenagers. The extent to which this potential could become transformative is yet to be seen; only future empirical research can tell.

From what I have called in this text 'gendered division of romantic labour', it follows that tasks and costs of romantic love are not distributed equally among the members of (heteronormative) relationships; romantic myths are interwoven with gendered norms and expectations. The association between VAW and romantic love myths, not only appears in anti-violence campaigns as the one I explained; it is also present in Spanish critical cultural analysis (Herrera Gómez 2011, 2018), feminist theory and activism (Esteban 2011, *Fundación Mujeres*⁸⁴; *Feministes indignades*⁸⁵), socio-anthropological research, (Esteban M.L and Tavora A 2008; Enguix and Roca 2015) and psycho-social investigation on love and violence (Bosch and Ferrer 2002; Ferrer et al. 2009; Bosh et al 2011) as well. In many settings, the emergence of VAW in heterosexual relationships is seen as strictly connected with the socio-cultural acceptance and naturalization of heteronormative myths of romantic love. Some romantic myths, like the ones presented in the exhibition by HI, are considered to potentially stand at the origin of unequal affective-sexual relationships in which VAW can appear, and also be unnoticed or pass unrecognized as violence and be tolerated by both members of the couple. The persistence of myths that associate affective relationships with control, jealousy, extreme self-sacrifice and the denial of one's self in favour of the other, are very often at the origin of one's inability to recognise the signals

⁸⁴ *Fundación mujeres* Monográfico info 93: 'Coeducación y mitos del amor romántico' digital version available at <http://www.fundacionmujeres.es/files/attachments/Documento/46001/image/BOLETIN%20FM%2093.pdf> accessed 09/12/2018.

⁸⁵ *Feministes Indignades*, 13th February 2012, *¡¡¡El Amor Romántico MATA!!!* Blog post available at <http://feministesindignades.blogspot.com/2012/02/el-amor-romantico-mata.html> accessed on 09/12/2018.

of a relationship that can become violent.⁸⁶ In this case romantic love, or cultural imaginaries of it, is seen as sustaining discursive and material practices in which men and women hold different positions and are expected to experience, feel and act differently in relation to love. This becomes particularly clear as well as problematic when observing links between romantic myths, gendered norms and VAW.

For many social actors involved in anti-violence work, opening up a discussion on the ‘gendered division of romantic labour’ is considered a necessary step towards the eradication of gender-based violence, starting from the assumption that ‘*lo romantico es politico*.’ Both cases analysed in the chapter question the gender roles and the dynamics involved in normative romantic imaginaries, albeit to different degrees and with different methodologies. As a matter of fact, though, in both cases the act of interrogating love imaginaries and practices - in its deconstructions and in its reformulations - is claimed as an unavoidable moment in the activist project of intervention for reimagining, desiring and calling for more egalitarian and more fulfilling relationships, while stimulating social change towards gender justice.

⁸⁶ *Fundación mujeres* Monografico info 93: ‘*Coeducación y mitos del amor romántico*’ digital version available at <http://www.fundacionmujeres.es/files/attachments/Documento/46001/image/BOLETIN%20FM%2093.pdf> accessed 09/12/2018.

Chapter 5. Men rethinking heterosexual imaginaries and practices in Italy: anti-sexist masculinity politics as sexual politics

For where pleasure is concerned, the *master is not necessarily well served*.
Luce Irigaray **This Sex which is Not One** (Irigaray 1985, 32)

1. My personal-political introduction to feminist sexual politics

'Un café con leche por favor,' and the waiter already sees I am not a native here in the neighbourhood. Noticing my broken Spanish and my lack of Catalan, *'¿Pero entiendes el castellano?'* he asks me, and the conversation ends up with me ordering the deal of the day for breakfast. It's one of my earliest fieldwork visits in Spain, I don't speak Spanish yet and I am sitting in this bar just outside of the bustling centre of Barcelona, enjoying the late-October sun, looking at my fieldnotes. The waiter smiles at me, he seems happy to talk to a foreign customer, aged under-30 and female. I feel his gaze on me, the blurred lines between chivalry and unwanted flirting are sticky. Actually, it doesn't surprise me, 'as usual' says the sixteen years-old me grown up in central Italy. But now, in the beginning of my first five-week fieldwork in Barcelona, I find myself navigating through these daily events to understand more how things work here, how languages work here. And I am thinking *'preciosa,'* here girls are called 'precious,' meaning beautiful. *'Preciosa'* I keep thinking, and my memory brings me back the voice of a stranger calling me a few days earlier. *'Preciosa'* I find myself thinking, when something is precious it is expensive, important, something 'to be treasured.' 'Women are precious when they are attractive, when young and pretty and available on the market' I am thinking, while I write down:

Precious. Funny linguistic synchrony between female beauty and the traffic in women. Preciosa, my body – young and female – catalyses the gazes of many men, on the streets, in the shops: how much do I cost? How much do I have to trade the space of my feelings for? Will the buyer acknowledge my will to power? I treasure my-self, my body, my desires. Nobody – but myself – knows how to treasure and nurture my desires. They make me feel: ‘I have to keep them secret. I have to protect them. I have to protect myself against the too-much or too-less offerings of the men screaming at the market.’ These premises are WRONG. These premises are SICK, make me sick (author’s field notes, October 2012).

I leave my notes for a moment and I start reading one of the papers I have on the table: handouts from the anti-violence demonstration I had attended the previous week, a copy of *Nomadic Subjects* and articles on masculinities and power. The waiter is back with the coffee, and addresses me in English this time: ‘Where are you from?’ And then, as I answer, his smile betrays a slight disappointment. Italy is just it, my answer, and he has to go back to the bar. Just another Italian girl, travelling in a same-Mediterranean country: no, definitely not offering something exotic enough for him in the Barcelona district of Nou Barris.

I grew up in a provincial town in central Italy: my native background has knitted my sensitivity for gender issues together with the embodied awareness of my sexed-gendered experience. Gender politics entered my daily life firstly as social norms to comply with, then as a questioning inquiry about inequalities and differences, and then as a claim for justice. The linearity of this process showed itself inadequate many times, including when - with a PhD project and two dissertations written on feminist theory and sexual politics – daily interactions stir up my affective memory and bring me back to the stickiness of male gazes. Sipping the coffee with milk in Barcelona I put down:

How can I interact with somebody, for real...When this person only sees our interaction as one-directional trade? ...When he wants to take something that, as I see it, it’s not part of a trade? Will he be able to really intra-act with my-self, to see me as equal and as part of the embrace of the conversation of the inter-course? In the meantime, what I do is keeping on loving myself and treasuring the inner-course of my desires. Happily. Not easily. Strongly. Passionately (fieldnotes, October 2012).

Recalling my encounter with *When Our Lips Speak Together* (Irigaray and Burke 1980), in that moment I think *when he loves me – will he give me back to myself?* A question that voices the fear of losing oneself when relating to another person, and, at the same time, exposes the ‘exchange logics’ that underpin the heterosexist gender relations in which women are the objects of the exchange (Tabet 2004b).

Reading sexual politics from the 70s and 80s is what gave me the words and the tools to understand what was going on in terms of genders, bodies, sex and stigma. Feminist genealogies in Italy have roots in self-consciousness practice, radical corporeal feminisms, and sexual difference theories: a feminist politics that questions the monism of patriarchal phallogentric imaginary based on the exclusion of women’s subjectivity and desire(s), sexual as well as ontological (Lonzi 1970). Feminist analyses traced the relocation(s) of female subjectivity and desire (as I said, sexual as well as ontological) beyond women’s material and symbolic function as objects of exchange among men, as in the compulsory heteronormative sexual contract (Pateman 1997; H eritier 2010, 2004). This process gave me an opportunity to reflect on those questions close to my daily life as a white heterosexual woman growing up in central Italy: they gave me the opportunity to think about female agency/ies – in their intersectional differences; female sexualities beyond phallogentricism that, in Irigaray’s words, ‘are not One’ (Irigaray 1985); women’s absence from the symbolic – alongside masculinity’s unmarked dominance and the sexual culture of the double standards, that constructs male sexuality as predatory and female sexuality as inexistent yet always under judgmental observation for women’s reputation (Tabet 2004b). The personal-political questions rooted within my background thus required me to search for answers in sexual politics and feminist practices. The cartography of my feminist subjectivity cannot do away with asking for a reformulation of gender and sexual relations in Italian culture. If we understand patriarchy as the power system that discursively exercises itself through phallogentric imaginary, we can envision feminism as the space for questioning this very system *and* for elaborating different possibilities for being and becoming subjects. Taking as a starting point the statement that ‘feminist practice is the expression of women’s *ontological desire*’ (Braidotti 1996, 166), with the latter I understand women’s desire to exist (as subject) as well as women’s desire to become – in the world – in relation to others.

The discursive dis-connections between (female) sexual desire and subjectivity had been, in fact, at the heart of my previous study on the Italian public/political debate

on prostitution at Siena University (*Sex)Work in Progress: Gender Relationships and Debate on Prostitution from the 'Merlin' Law to the 'Carfagna' Bill*). Exploring the discursive dynamics around the phenomenon of sexual-economic exchange in gender relations (Tabet 2004b; Pheterson 1996; Danna 2004a), allowed me to enter the discursive configurations that characterise the previous fifty years of the Italian prostitution-debate (1958-2008). I could track the material-symbolic implications of what has been termed 'the political economy of sex' and (hetero) sexuality (Rubin 1975) on gender relations within the Italian context (Tatafiore 1994; Corso and Landi 1998; Danna 2004b; Bellassai 2006). I observed the problematic *absence* of a critical take on men's practices and masculinity the discourse. That is why I find interesting to look at men's gender-conscious organizing around questions of sex, sexual imaginary, relationships and subjectivity. This interest is politically grounded in the feminist transformative potential of men taking a personal stand in questioning current political economies of sex.

My analysis draws upon what anthropologist Paola Tabet defined as 'sexual-economic exchange' (Tabet 2004a). Accordingly, the debate on sex work opens up fundamental questions at the heart of feminist intervention on embodied power relations (O'Connell Davidson 2001). In this debate are at stake: gender meanings and the economy of reproductive and sexual labour, female subjectivity, desire, work, double standards, the social construction of male and female sexuality, (hetero)sexuality, sex workers' rights, women's self-affirmation (*autoderterminazione*), intersectional discriminations, and neoliberal global forces configuring commercial sex (Abbatecola 2006).

Historically, public discourse on sex work in Italy involved a huge amount of words and attention to details, including a patronizing gaze and a lack of gender-awareness or critical approach. Within this proliferation of discourse, men's role as buyers and their contribution to commercial sex has been kept out of the picture. This absence occurred during the political discussion in the Parliament with the introduction of the Merlin Law (Bellassai 2006) that, after ten years of debate, approved to close state-legal brothels. As documented by the film *Comizi d'amore* by Pasolini in 1964, the preoccupation about the future of men's desire has been the protagonist of the public discourse on prostitution, supported by the lack of critical awareness on men's practices as men (Pasolini 2016). The same discursive mechanism occurred in Carfagna Law

proposal in 2008, when a more prohibitionist approach wanted to punish buyers on the streets, while leaving high-class commercial sex legally untouched.

This silence on men's practice is transversal to institutional, media and daily public conversations on gender relations and contributes to reinforcing men's privileges and to keeping norms unquestioned. As we have seen, this silence comes from the historical convergence of white masculinity with modern subjectivity (*Abstract Masculinity*). The public discourse on prostitution reproduces the silence on men's practices of the medical, political and religious institutions. Their work has focused on regulating (men's access to) women's bodies and disciplining women's sexuality instead (Bellassai 2006). A recent body of research in Gender Studies in Italy investigates the role of sex buyers and its implications for the social construction of masculinity and gender relations. Maria Rosa Cutrufelli conducted in 1981 a first research on sex buyers in Italy questioning 'the norm and the natural law' according to which 'everybody wonders why women sell sex, nobody asks why men buy it' (Cutrufelli 1981 in (Serughetti 2013). An intersectional and situated approach to what men do 'as men' is therefore necessary to problematize men's practices. Gender Studies approaches opened the room for this research to be produced in Italy (Selmi 2016; Serughetti 2013) (Abbatecola and Benasso 2016; Selmi 2016). Studies on buying sex, male heterosexuality and masculinities face a threefold unproblematized issues: men's gendered practices, normalized heterosexuality (hetero-normativity) and men's sexual practices (Bertone 2009; Bertone and Ferrero Camoletto 2011).

Given the importance of sexual politics for gender justice and for the Italian culture of gender relations, this chapter is dedicated to explore how sex becomes politically relevant for the action of anti-sexist men in Italy. My writing follows the questions they elaborate politically in activism, mostly in relation to sex, sexuality, desire, self-determination, subjectivity, ethics and gender justice. The network *Maschile Plurale* (MP)'s anti-violence masculinity politics is rooted in the urgency of interrogating (and changing) men's heterosexual imaginary in order to rethink men's relationship with women. This is done by entering the debate on prostitution with a focus on all men as potential buyers and offering an interesting critical-creative approach, hopefully transformative for men's practices. By stressing the continuity between buyers and non-buyers, MP's sexual politics critically engages with men's shared and dominant erotic imaginaries, so to shift their (hetero)sexual culture towards more gender just relations with women. This chapter thus analyses MP anti-sexist

masculinity politics in which male heterosexuality, power and masculinity acquire a significant personal-political relevance to contribute to gender justice in contemporary Italian society.

2. Sexual politics in men's anti-violence engagement

As I walk through the square outside the train station, I find myself in Ferrara, 44 km from Bologna, on a cold morning in February 2015. I cross the park to reach the other side of the street towards the centre, and in front of me a huge poster gets my attention: the chocolate fair 'Art&Ciocc' is occurring those days in the city. This event is being advertised with the map of Italy covered with heart-shaped chocolates, celebrating the commodification of romantic love and Valentine's Day. I am equipped with my fieldwork tools and prepared to meet MP member Marco, who invited me to join the protest he co-organized for that day in front of the Dom of Ferrara. The protest calls for a 'Sit in of men who don't desire to have power and control over women through prostitution' and is supported and organized by the staff of the centre for perpetrators of violence against women, namely the *Centro di Ascolto Uomini Maltrattanti (CAM)*⁸⁷ in



Il·lustració 3

Ferrara, where Marco works as consultant (picture 3).⁸⁸ CAM is a centre for perpetrators of domestic violence and provides psychological support and therapy to men who fear their own violent attitude and/or have exercised violence against women (VAW) or against other family members. CAM is a non-profit organization that supports the White Ribbon Campaign⁸⁹ and participates in MP network of men taking a

public stand against VAW in Italy.⁹⁰ With another base in Florence, the one in Ferrara is the first centre opened in Italy since 2009.

⁸⁷ Centre for perpetrators of domestic violence.

⁸⁸ All pictures in this chapter are taken by the researcher during fieldwork in Ferrara, and are part of the researcher's fieldwork archive. Subjects gave their consent to taking the pictures and using them in this thesis.

⁸⁹ The White Ribbon is a campaign founded in Canada in 1991 to involve men in working against violence against women. From its beginnings this campaign became globally famous as it has been launched in many other countries as well. More details about the Canada-based campaign and its projects are available online at <https://www.whiteribbon.ca/>, accessed on 04/11/2018.

Marco has been involved in MP since 2003, when he started a men's consciousness-raising group in Bologna. At the moment of our meeting, Marco lives and works in Ferrara, where he started another group affiliated to the CAM.⁹¹ I came in contact with Marco's anti-violence involvement thanks to another MP member I spoke to in Bologna during my fieldwork there. When I wrote Marco to know more about the public action in Ferrara, he welcomed me to join the action and accepted to be interviewed. While preparing my field-trip, I am excited to participate in this Sit-in against sex trafficking and prostitution, I am curious to see how the action is organized and to know more about the men's political purpose for supporting it. From previous fieldwork, and particularly since I attended the first MP national meeting in Turin, 2010, I know that talking about prostitution is a strong mobilizer for men in Italy, and



Il·lustració 4

that it constitutes a crucial theme for MP to address critically men's sexuality, desire and heterosexual imaginaries.⁹²

As I walk in the city centre to reach our meeting point, I realise that the centre of Ferrara that day hosts more than one event. It celebrates one of the most important festivals that make the city UNESCO world heritage: the historical

carnival. Art & history make Ferrara attractive for tourists all year round; as in many other Italian locations, the rich gastronomic tradition adds taste to the already flattering charm of the city. The cultural event *Carnevale Rinascimentale*, re-enacts the wedding between Francesco Gonzaga and Isabella d'Este (on February 12th 1490), a marriage that was particularly fruitful: eight children, and a secured economic and political power. History recalls Isabella being an acclaimed and strong figure of her times: with her wedding at fifteen, she became the Marchesa of Mantua and few years later she gave birth to her first son. The re-enactment of her wedding with Francesco Gonzaga, during the renaissance carnival's programme in the 2015 edition (Picture 4), occupied

⁹⁰ CAM is also part of the EU project ENGAGE and of the European Network for the Work with Perpetrators of Domestic Violence (WWP) <https://www.work-with-perpetrators.eu/> accessed 20/05/2018.

⁹¹ The photograph in this page shows the location where the group gathers every two weeks. All photographs are taken by me during this fieldwork visit.

⁹² Maschile Plurale (2010), *Quell'oscuro soggetto del desiderio. Immaginario sessuale maschile e domanda di prostituzione* [online], viewed 06/03/2018, available at <https://www.maschileplurale.it/incontro-nazionale-maschile-plurale-torino-2010/>.

the city centre together with two street demonstrations: the ‘Trascriviamo’ campaign, collecting signatures for same-sex marriages celebrated abroad to be officially recognized within the municipality of Ferrara (Picture 5),⁹³ and the anti-trafficking sit-in of men organized by the CAM of Ferrara.

Meanwhile, in Bologna, feminist and LGBT+ groups joined the transnational celebration of the ‘V-Day,’ turning Valentine’s

Day into an anti-violence demonstration around a dance against VAW in public squares.⁹⁴ I am impressed by the combination of all these demonstrations on the same day, and I think that they are rather telling about Italian gender politics. On the one side, the power and



Il·lustració 5

institution of the Renaissance heterosexual marriage is celebrated as a local heritage, and

revised in the light of modern views on romantic love (Illouz 2008); and on the other, love-based marriage is at the centre of political claims for civil rights while women are protesting globally in favour of gender relations free of violence. How does CAM’s anti-trafficking protest relate to this context?



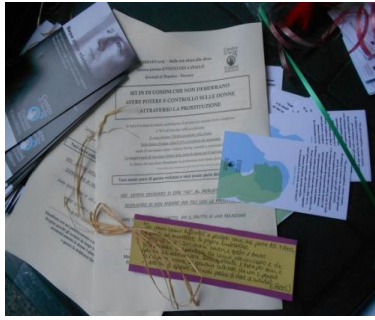
Il·lustració 6



Il·lustració 7

⁹³ Initiative promoted by LGBT+ organizations: *Circomassimo Arcigay* and *Arcilesbica, Agedo, Famiglie Arcobaleno* <http://www.ferraraitalia.it/trascriviamo-conferenza-stampa-per-la-presentazione-della-campagna-di-raccolta-firme-perche-siano-trascritti-nel-registro-comunale-di-ferrara-tutti-i-matrimoni-contratti-allestero-34499.html> accessed 20/05/2018.

⁹⁴ V-day, from Eve Ensler ‘Vagina Monologue’ from 1996, is a global activist movement to end violence against all women and girls (cisgender, transgender, and gender non-conforming).



Il-lustració 8

In the midst of this festive and busy atmosphere, Marco and his CAM colleagues set up the Sit-in and the table with information (Picture 7 and 8) next to the table of ‘TransciviAMO’ (Picture 6).

Next to the flyers about the Sit-in, the material

includes: handouts about CAM and its work; posters of the organization and handmade bookmarks with critical and inspirational quotations by Italian authors on men, masculinity, love, men-women relations, etc. ready to be given as gifts for people. Only three men (Marco included)



Il-lustració 9

actively participate: Stefano gives out flyers to spread awareness on sex-trafficking and men’s responsibility, while Marco and Simone wear on their bodies the signs of the protest. The messages say: ‘men and not prostitutes are responsible of prostitution’, ‘those who buy sex are probably abusing a slave.’ And,

moreover: ‘sex is a relation, not a right that I can buy,’ making a clear statement for

questioning men’s right to sex and advocating in favour of a different sexual practice and ethics (Picture 9 and 10). We can better understand these messages if we read the flyer with the statements that support the protest:

In Italy 9 million men use sexual services in exchange of economic compensation, a 70% of them two times per week. There are almost 120.000 prostitutes on the streets, of the total of women exploited a 15% is underage; many of them have suffered physical, sexual or psychological abuse. Most of them are victims of trafficking for the sex market. The women who work freely have no rights neither legal protection (flyer of the demonstration, February 2015).

Similarly to many other campaigns engaging men in anti-sexism by leveraging men’s sense of social justice, these messages want to make men aware that their role as sex buyers supports sex-trafficking and slavery. In relation to the seriousness of this social

problem, the flyer addresses men with the question: ‘Do you want to be part of this violence or to be part of change?’ followed by the proposal:

We men decide to say ‘NO’ to the sex market, choosing not to buy sex any more. *Having sex is not a right, but the result of a relation.* Less clients = less slaves, less criminality and more dignity for men and women. Demonstrate publicly with us and give yourself *another type of love!* Exactly because men have been for a long time exploiting women sexually and economically it is time to end this, and it’s *us men* who ought to do it (flyer of the demonstration, February 2015; emphasis mine).



Il·lustració 10

Speaking openly and publicly about prostitution is a taboo in Italy, and the messages worn by Marco and Simone attract people’s gazes and curiosity. Nevertheless, because men as sex buyers are the invisible subject of the matter and for them is a greater taboo speaking about prostitution, almost no one stops to ask them what they stand there for. It’s when they (and Stefano) approach people with the flyer that a conversation can start. I take part and observe the action until the evening. Despite the little attention received and not discouraged by it, participants are determined to remain all day active in the centre of Ferrara. More than a sit-in the action functions as an outreach initiative to stimulate men’s awareness on the consequences of their actions in relation to women, in relation to what they consider ‘power’ and ‘sex’.

Immersed in the turistification of cultural heritage and taking advantage of the capitalist commodification of romantic love -historic carnival-, LGBT+ organizations advocate for same-sex marriage (not legal in Italy) and anti-violence men protest against sex-trafficking as a way to engage men in change and more gender-justice oriented love and sexual relations. Men covered with messages about their roles as sex buyers and in sexual relations break the silence with their actions and re-direct the attention to men’s doings (Abbatecola and Benasso 2016). In this sense, they provoke some disturbance, as they do not fit in the picture of the day celebrating marriage and love as happy objects (Ahmed 2010). At the same time, the messages conveyed could be perceived in line with moralistic and Catholic positions on prostitution and sex, by mobilizing ‘against prostitution’ and in favour of sex ‘as relation.’

When I ask Marco about the background of this initiative, he tells me the origins of his personal take on prostitution, and his anti-trafficking social justice motivation cannot be separated from his critical stand on male heterosexual sexuality:

Considering men's point of view there is no doubt, prostitution is negative because it legitimises men's right to affection and sex from women. Buying sex for men is bad because it tends to go towards the ab-use of the other, and it (*this action*) occupies your life, it deprives you of your energies for others. To me it's unacceptable to have slaves next to me. Knowing that there are men who buy sex it's like posing men over women (Marco, interview February 2015).

Marco recalls his long process of reflection on his relation with sex, women and relationships. He opens up with me about many interconnected issues, and I understand that the question of buying sex is so important because it speaks about the (poor) quality of his affective-sexual experience:

indeed *il maschile* (*read: men*) gains with power .. this is a simple way to pursue a little joy ... and this happens only because we never speak of the masculine ... in the sense that I have pursued this masculine joy of power, I have had relations like those, but I was never happy, but nobody ever told me that happiness is not found there! Now what I try to do is to tell men ... I go to students and I say to men: if you want to end up like me, 40 years old and I was a worn-out man, I had everything I wanted, I had sexual relations as I wanted, I had women, etc etc and *I was not happy at all*. If you want to continue on that road, best wishes, but there is this one, as I say, I try to create a path, we are few, and the path is not a path ...(Marco, interview February 2015; emphasis mine)

By talking about prostitution, Marco's most urgent concern is to debunk the myth that measures successful masculinity in the sexual realm, associating men's happiness with a high number of sexual partners (a high number of women's bodies at men's disposal). The problem with this myth, according to Marco, is that men's sexual relations with women are dictated by the unfair terms of consumption and power; moreover, he says, these are not paths to happiness nor pleasure. This way, he is challenging a pillar of the social construction of masculinity in Italian culture (Bertone and Ferrero Camoletto 2011). With his accounts and reflections, I understand that the statement 'sex is not a

right, sex is a relation' refers to the willingness to practice sex beyond the compulsive consumption of women's bodies and the confirmation of one's power *as a man*. This is evident in the title of the protest 'sit-in of men that don't want to have power and control over women through prostitution.' Marco is arguing in favour of a sexual ethics based on questioning the myths of dominant masculinity and improving men's personal experiences. He says: 'I criticize masculinity because I feel good, I am happier, the relationships with my partner get more and more beautiful.' Emphasizing personal gains in terms of affective and relational wellbeing, what Marco advocates for is a sexual politics oriented to the transformation of men's practices. This sexual politics is anti-sexist as it supports women's freedom and gender equity, and criticizes the patriarchal construction of the gender division of sexual labour and morals. According to this construction, sex is perceived as a service that women owe to men, because male sexual desire is uncontrollable whereas women's is silenced, women ought to be sexy (for men) but not sexual (Tabet 2004a; Millett et al. 2016).

With 'sex is not a right, sex is a relation' the protest is critical about the implicit gender inequalities underpinning the imaginary of buying sex. The idea that men have the right to receive affection and sex from women is a culturally accepted idea rooted in the conception that male sexuality, differently from female one, is an uncontrollable impulse, an uncontrollable desire that 'needs' to be satisfied. In Marco's words, 'it's a weapon that justifies violence.' Indeed, this political and ethical take on heterosexual relations and male sexuality comes from Marco and his colleagues' commitment to eradicate the socio-cultural roots of VAW.

The Sit-in was meant to disseminate information about CAM's anti-violence intervention. On the back of the flyer we can read more information about the work of CAM and about the men's reflection group that meets every two weeks: 'Do you want to be part of change? Join the reflection group on the masculine!' (*gruppo di riflessione sul maschile*). The peer group is open to all men, and it's called '*Fatti non siamo a viver come bruti*' (We are not made to live as ignorant/morally brute).⁹⁵ On the flyer, the group is described as 'the ideal place to share that part of your life that, *as a man*, you *hide* to yourself, you are *ashamed of*, which you *can't talk about*. Here you can do it.

⁹⁵ Rephrasing the famous XXVI verse from Dante's *Inferno* '*Considerate la vostra semenza/fatti non foste a viver come bruti/ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza* (*Inf.* 26.118-20). This verse belongs to the collective cultural heritage for people educated in Italy. In English translated as: 'Consider well the seed that gave you birth:/you were not made to live your lives as brutes,/but to be followers of worth and knowledge.' From 'Digital Dante', Columbia University: <https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/dante/divine-comedy/inferno/inferno-26/> accessed 20/05/2018.

With other men like you who already do it' (MP 2015; emphasis mine).⁹⁶ Written as an invitation for men, we can hear the space of the group described as an opportunity to speak up 'as men' on important, yet silenced matters that men find difficult and shameful to share. The group is the place where men can give voice to negative and uncomfortable affective states and experiences in a homosocial space where 'other men like you who already do it' what encourages participation. Within CAM's and MP anti-violence approach it appears fundamental to elaborate a sexual ethics and politics *as men*. Transforming men's sexual imaginaries and practices beyond the myth of predatory and uncontrollable male desire is perceived as a crucial tool to engage men in a sexual ethics based on recognizing women as equals and disengaging desire from domination.

3. 'Né moralista nè virilista': MP's sexual politics in political context



Il·lustració 11

In this photograph (Picture 11), similar to the one I took in Ferrara during the demonstration organized by CAM and the men's group, we see Lorenzo, a high school teacher who lives in Florence and is member of MP, standing in a rather crowded public square with his neck holding the sign: 'a real man is the one who knows how to love: a free woman cannot be bought'. Lorenzo and I are Facebook friends and this picture appeared on my Facebook homepage when Lorenzo re-posted it in 2017.

The message he shows triggered my curiosity so I asked him more details about it.⁹⁷

This photograph was taken on February 13th 2011 in Florence, on occasion of the first demonstration organized by the national women's movement *Se non ora quando?* ('If not now when?') in all Italian cities. It was the first public demonstration against Berlusconi's sexist political culture and sex scandals.

⁹⁶ Sit in a Ferrara, announced on MP webpage: <https://www.maschileplurale.it/sit-in-a-ferrara/> accessed 20/05/2018.

⁹⁷ This picture is a property of Lorenzo's and Facebook.

At that time, I did not know Lorenzo yet, as I met him at the national meeting of MP in 2013 ‘*Mio fratello è figlio unico. Cosa cambia se cambiano i desideri degli uomini?*’ (March 16-17, Rome). This photograph brings us back to the time when I discovered MP’s work, and when MP’s masculinity politics grew as sexual politics. The movement ‘*Se non ora quando?*’ (Snoq) gained participation and strength as a reaction to Berlusconi’s explicit machoist politics and media interventions, after his involvement in legitimizing sexual-economic exchanges between underage girls and male politicians (the judicial procedure ‘*Ruby-gate*’ was established against him because of his involvement in facilitating underage prostitution, and later he was acquitted of the case). Initiated by a small group of publicly known women (writers, journalists, politicians), the Snoq movement spoke about mass outrage and argued for change because ‘prime minister is disseminating a model for gender relations that deeply affects lifestyles and national culture, legitimating practices that are damaging for women’s dignity and institutions’ (translation mine).⁹⁸ In this context, Lorenzo’s message advocates for women’s freedom to be achieved by going beyond the erotic culture in which women are objects of exchange for men and serve to measure their power and status, and he does so by using the appeal of the phrase ‘a real man.’ The demonstration received public attention and the call for vindicating women’s dignity against Berlusconi’s public display of sexism gathered women’s participation across political parties, feminist positionings, religious groups and women’s generations. It stirred up an important debate on how to claim women’s self-affirmation (*autodeterminazione*) and body politics beyond patronizing positions centred on ‘women’s dignity’ (Montalbano 2015) among feminist groups.

The public visibility of the Snoq mobilizations put women’s political demands on public media and gave voice to a shared societal outrage against Berlusconi’s conduct and politics. The period prior to this demonstration had witnessed the gradual yet deep transformation of Italian socio-cultural scenario, greatly affected by Berlusconi’s media and political influence so to be called *L’Italia di Berlusconi* (e.g., (Shin and Agnew 2008). Indeed, the last three years of his government offered many opportunities to discuss on gender roles and relations, power and sexuality, and dominant models of masculinity in contemporary Italy (Dominijanni 2014). Questions related to women’s representation on public media were popularized by the

⁹⁸ La Stampa online newspaper ‘*Se non ora quando qual è la storia del movimento?*’ available at: <http://www.lastampa.it/2011/12/12/cultura/domande-e-risposte/se-non-ora-quando-qual-e-la-storia-del-movimento-hG9nZnSS26MhzETsQge8AP/pagina.html>, accessed 19/05/2018

documentary film *Il corpo delle donne* (Zanardo 2010) that denounced the overly common and given for granted sexualization of women's bodies on public TV (especially on the channels owned by Berlusconi), and voiced the urgency of media education for gender justice. During this period, Italian feminist activists continued to be very productive, on an academic level and on a grassroots level (Ross and Scarparo 2010; Bussoni, Perna, and Agosti 2014; Bonomi Romagnoli 2014; Contarini and Marras 2015); Montalbano 2015), and the Snoq mobilizations stated the need for a feminist reformulation of gender politics publicly heard.

The discourse on masculinity that traverses the work of MP **appears in this political context**, and springs from the urgency of critically looking and understanding men's social roles, cultural norms, and practices in relation to it. In the public letter *Da uomo a uomo* that MP wrote in 2009 to denounce male violence against women and calling men into action, we can read:

When I witness the showing off of those who use money and power to use women, I feel that the bragging is miserable, squalid and even sad. For centuries, men have been buying, imposing, blackmailing and exchanging sex for a job or for money. The novelty lies in *bragging about it, winking at other men in search of complicity*. We don't accept it, not out of envy or moralism. We do not care about choosing *between* the consumption of women's body *or* the moralist (*perbenista*) self-control (MP, 2009; emphasis mine).

The participants in MP are interested in mobilizing a critical discourse on dominant masculinities and gender politics, by listening to men's desire for change. In order to keep it *political* in a feminist manner, as we saw in Chapter 3, the practice remains that one of 'starting from oneself' speaking as men, that is, focused on personal experiences shared in small groups of men, used to unpack how dominant male sexual-imaginaries affect their lives and their sexual desires as (heterosexual) men. This (mainly) deconstructive effort is performed through men's commitment to the self-reflective group practice, which is recalled as a 'new thing,' a 'difficult' task and a 'training.' Turning men's experiences into political issues, rather than the starting point for MP anti-sexism, seems to be more a point of arrival and an ongoing process of self-reflectivity and gender-awareness.

As I have analysed in Chapter 3, the major effort of the groups of men in MP has been related to questioning *Abstract Masculinity* in onto-epistemological terms,

opening a gender-conscious and critical conversation on men's practices in a context in which dominant masculinities pass unnoticed and unproblematized. This process involves interrogating this cultural silence on masculinity and men's silence on themselves, through the practice of 'speaking as men' so as to situate men's perspectives and stimulate gender-awareness. 'Speaking as men' highlights the topics to work 'as men' to prevent VAW in the Italian cultural and political context: those topics include affective and family relationships, heterosexuality, power, men-to-men relations beyond patriarchal homosociality, care labour and relational corporeality.

According to Luciano, an anti-sexist activist from Rome, the most pressing issues to be addressed in masculinity politics in Italy include 'the cultural dismantling of the stereotypical male figure of the 'Mediterranean man,' that here is dominant, the latin lover, the real man, and the macho' (Luciano, interview March 2015). Similarly, in a previous interview, Andrea, from Milan, also made clear that the most important issues to work on for transforming masculinities are power and sexuality (Andrea, interview March 2011). My fieldwork with MP conducted between 2010 and 2015, showed that these issues indeed appeared to function as the most fertile and richest grounds in which the reflection and practice of the network digs into, albeit not without difficulty. Both richness and difficulty come from the fact that the knot of power-sexuality, standing at the centre of heteronormative and phallogentric masculinity, remains unquestioned and silenced. Giving the voice to men themselves to dig into their own discomforts and dissonances with dominant masculinity is MP's strategy to open up room for understanding and discussing the male power-sexuality knot.

During my fieldwork with MP the 'parabola Berlusconi' came to its end while giving rise to significant debates and demands of socio-cultural reformulations against sexism. In this period, the activity of MP engaged in critical discussions on these questions. 'The political period of Silvio Berlusconi has highlighted how deep the nexus between power, authority and male sexuality is in a time in which the dominant symbolic structure of patriarchy is more and more under question.'⁹⁹ This declaration appeared in the document of presentation-at MP meeting '*Il Cav. Che resta in noi*' (The Cav. [read, Berlusconi] that stays within us' Bologna, December 2011) organized around the sex-power-money knot in dominant masculinity. At the end of Berlusconi's government (and especially in reaction to the prime minister's sex scandals), the

⁹⁹ MP 4/12/2011 Bologna 4 Dic 2011 'Il Cav. che resta in noi' text available at <http://www.maschileplurale.it/bologna-4-dic-2011-gil-cav-che-resta-in-noiq/> accessed on 09/12/2018.

questions of sex, power and men's use of women's bodies gained popularity in public media, although without offering a critical gender-sensitive perspective. The public media discourse summarized the debate in two positions: one (supported by the majority of the population, left-wing and feminist groups), that politically and morally condemned Berlusconi for his misconduct; and another, that prioritized the entertainment factor in a sexist and fetishist fashion, emphasizing details about the women involved and/or accepting (and legitimizing) Berlusconi's deeds as part of his public character as a powerful man. However, , the public discourse neither tackles critically the issue of male heterosexual desire nor takes into consideration a gender perspective on masculinities.

The approach proposed by MP, however, wants to go beyond a moralist or virilist positions. MP's text and meeting 'Il Cav. that remains within us' is based on the following gender-aware premise: 'the point of view we would like to discuss is that there is no real solution to the crisis if we do not see the dimension determined by sexual difference.'¹⁰⁰ As the title indicates, the content of the meeting is set on exploring the common traits between men's experiences and the dominant imaginary of masculinity exemplified by Berlusconi's performances and media culture.

For MP, addressing the issue 'in the light of sexual difference' (i.e., gender perspective) means to rethink gender relations as political matters, and to question dominant masculinity in the 'Berlusconi context' by addressing the extent to which most Italian men can share this norm. Once again, MP proposes the approach of reflection 'starting from oneself:' discussing Italian culture and politics not by criticizing a distant model, 'outside of me,' but rather by questioning precisely what every man and that dominant model share (The Cav. that remains in us). An example of this approach can be clearly found in the following statement by MP member Alessio Miceli:

The caricatures of our politicians depict us behind that mask of power, our social face, not the only one but still the most widespread. The use of power and money by many men in sexual relations with women, speak of our culture of relationships. This is not about Berlusconi resigning but, much more, about male sexuality (Miceli 2009).¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ MP 4/12/2011 Bologna 4 Dic 2011 'Il Cav. che resta in noi' text available at <http://www.maschileplurale.it/bologna-4-dic-2011-qil-cav-che-resta-in-noiq/> accessed on 09/12/2018.

¹⁰¹ Alessio Miceli, MP 2009 'Sesso e potere, a partire da me. 10 domande a noi uomini italiani, a partire da me, sul desiderio sessuale maschile verso le donne,' online available at <http://www.labottegadelbarbieri.org/alessio-miceli-sesso-e-potere-a-partire-da-me/> , accessed on 10/12/2018.

Again, referring to Berlusconi, he says: ‘He is nothing else than the sexual autobiography of the male nation (...) speaking about Him, *as men*, is difficult because it would imply that maybe we should speak about ourselves as well (Bellassai 2011; emphasis mine).¹⁰² This self-critical movement is directed towards men’s heteronormative sexuality and the material-discursive practices that it shares with the culture of violence and that MP wants to change. Ciccone in *‘Il sesso del Cav. è una questione politica’* (The sex of the Cav. is a political question’) explains the reasons for this consideration when he comments about the need to collectively rethink male desire in order to call into question the asymmetries between women and men:

Asymmetry in desire, asymmetry in the recognition of subjectivity and therefore in power. Because power, money and desire are at the centre not only of the relationships of prostitution that are consumed in the streets but also mark the relationships between the sexes and gender institutions that regulate our daily lives. A single desire, a single subject, the masculine one that exercises power over the world and the female body, as women are reduced to a silenced body, devoid of a desire and an autonomous sexuality.¹⁰³

The modes of representation and relationship of male heterosexual desire, especially in relation to ‘autonomous feminine desire’ are at stake. This (re)configuration also involves the freedom to experience and express forms of relations that differ from the dominant heterosexual model. In other words, the debate is about the politics of relationships, that is, the exercise of power and freedom between subjectivities that differ (in gender, class, sexual orientation, ethnicity, etc.).

¹⁰² Bellassai 2011 ‘il nocciolo politico del desiderio maschile’ available at <http://www.libriadelledonne.it/oldsite/news/articoli/Manif080211.htm> accessed on 10/12/2018.

¹⁰³ Ciccone, 2011 *‘Gen 2011 – Il sesso del Cav è una questione politica’*, di S.Ciccone, online available on MP webpage <https://www.maschileplurale.it/il-sesso-del-cav-e-una-questione-politica/>, accessed on 5/11/2018.

4. *'That (Obscure) Subject of desire,'* men's (hetero)sexual imaginaries and prostitution

The innovative proposal coming from MP's approach is the self-reflective and critical focus on 'male desire' and the interrogation of men's personal dissonances with dominant models and practices of heterosexist masculinities. This focus is what characterises their work in its anti-violence approach. As we read from MP's anti-violence foundational document, the letter '*Da uomo a uomo*' (From man to man) from 2009, the recurring theme of men's desire is mentioned as a positive mobilizing force for men:

I am a man and I see the male violence against men. I see as well, though, the desire for change of many men. I choose to face that violence and to listen to that desire for change. I know that desire is a resource to dismantle that violence (MP 2009).¹⁰⁴

Beginning with the title, men are called into question by homosocial communication: MP members are making public this statement using their gendered speaking position 'as men' and willing to reach other men 'as men' as well. As a 'collectively elaborated text, as a result of an individual and group process, these texts, as many others of MP, are experiential texts (Andrea, interview March 2011). The underpinning connection between MP anti-violence commitment and its sexual politics is made clear in this document, where a different culture of relationships is advocated for:

It is not enough for us to claim that we are against male violence against women. We desire and believe in another culture of relationships among people, a different quality of life, free from fear and domination. *We want to live a sexuality that is other than the confirmation of one's own virility and power* (MP 2009).¹⁰⁵

Accordingly, in order to mobilise men against violence, it seems necessary to transform the culture of relations that men are socialized in, because men's heterosexuality is associated with 'the confirmation of one's own virility and power.'

¹⁰⁴ MP 2009: '*Da uomo a uomo – lettera aperta sulla violenza maschile*' online available at: <https://www.maschileplurale.it/da-uomo-a-uomo/>, accessed on 5/09/2018.

¹⁰⁵ MP 2009: '*Da uomo a uomo – lettera aperta sulla violenza maschile*' online available at: <https://www.maschileplurale.it/da-uomo-a-uomo/>, accessed on 5/09/2018.

In order to rethink the relation between masculinity, power and sexuality, MP held the national meeting *Quell'Oscuro Soggetto del Desiderio. Immaginario Sessuale Maschile e Domanda di Prostituzione* (That Obscure Subject of Desire: Male Sexual Imaginary and Demand of Prostitution). The event took place over two days in Turin in October 2010 : the first day offered a space for the members to practice, in small groups, a self-reflective activity among men only, practicing 'speaking as men starting from oneself'. During the second day, MP members presented in a plenary session a summary of their work with the main points of their reflection, and this presentation served as an introductory report to start working with.¹⁰⁶ Personally, as a woman and a non-member, I could only join the open/public day with other associations and professionals working with street prostitution, human trafficking, clients and ex-clients of prostitution. That day MP presented the report¹⁰⁷ in order to share their standpoints and experiences on male desire with gender awareness; these days were meaningful for the collective reflection of MP on the male heterosexual imaginaries in relation to male demands of paid sex and to men's responsibility in supporting the sex trade and human trafficking. For many of the members, this meeting was an arrival point as well as a departure point, building on the group work conducted by local groups of men. The event was meant to open a collective space to share local engagement and to make visible the social urgency of rethinking male desire beyond sexism. As described in the report of the meeting (MP 2010), the discussion groups were given these guiding questions to work with:

What does male demand of prostitution contain? What is culturally constructed (and therefore supported by the *public discourse*) in the demand for prostitution that somehow we can find, as men in this society, at the level of one's own fantasies and images? (MP 2010, emphasis mine).¹⁰⁸

Indeed, the meeting was meant to talk about the male *subject* of desire and about the culture of commercial sex, shared by buyers and non-buyers. As Andrea reported during the public session, the men's group reflection was opened with the questions:

¹⁰⁶ MP 2010, *Quell'oscuro soggetto del desiderio. Immaginario sessuale maschile e domanda di prostituzione (Relazione Introduttiva di Alessio Miceli)*, online available at <https://www.maschileplurale.it/torino-10-ottobre-2010-presentazione-dei-lavori-di-mp-alle-associazioni-di-alessio-miceli/>, accessed on 6/03/2018.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ MP 2010, *Quell'oscuro soggetto del desiderio. Immaginario sessuale maschile e domanda di prostituzione*, online available at: <https://www.maschileplurale.it/incontro-nazionale-maschile-plurale-torino-2010/>, accessed on 6/03/2018.

Firstly, is there a common ground between who acts as a client (of prostitution) and who does not? Is there an imaginary of male sexuality as a form of dominance? This one could be a common ground between clients and non-clients, or a culture in which the male demand of prostitution is rooted (Andrea, contribution to the discussion, 2010).¹⁰⁹

Embedded in the personal/collective MP work, this question could not be formulated without the individual and collective engagement of men in the group practice. When I interviewed him, Andrea explained: ‘the documents produced in MP are very rich texts, because they result from a multi-layered effort and thus they have to be considered experiential texts (*testi esperienziali*)’ (Andrea, interview March 2011).

In this national event, men were invited to think about themselves *in relation to* the dominant models of masculinity and male (hetero)sexuality,

to illuminate the *continuity* of a certain imaginary between who decides to go with prostitutes and who does not,’ an imaginary which is to different degrees shared by all men (as buyers or potentials buyers), legitimating demands for paid sex and a ‘culture of male sexuality’ (MP, 2010)¹¹⁰.

This culture is the ground to work on, and MP starting question from is: ‘Can we recognise a different culture of male sexuality that *within us* coexists and enters in conflict with dominant masculinity?’ (ibid.; emphasis mine). By interrogating themselves as subjects of sexual desire, the interesting part of this approach lies in avoiding the otherizing gesture implicit in the common critique of the client. This critique usually produces a monolithic figure of the ‘buyer’ or the ‘abuser’ as a pathological exception, as ‘the other’ separated from non-buyers. Here the focus is set on the erotic culture that all men share by participating in it *as men*, and in how - materially and discursively- they personally support it even if they have never bought sex because all men are potential buyers. **Instead of drawing boundaries between ‘us, the good men’ and ‘them, the violent ones’, men are stimulated to look at what**

¹⁰⁹ Maschile Plurale (2010), *Quell’oscuro soggetto del desiderio. Immaginario sessuale maschile e domanda di prostituzione*, online available at <https://www.maschileplurale.it/torino-10-ottobre-2010-presentazione-dei-lavori-di-mp-alle-associazioni-di-alessio-miceli/>, accessed 06/03/2018.

¹¹⁰ Maschile Plurale (2010), *Quell’oscuro soggetto del desiderio. Immaginario sessuale maschile e domanda di prostituzione*, online available at <https://www.maschileplurale.it/incontro-nazionale-maschile-plurale-torino-2010/>, accessed 06/03/2018.

they have in common (culturally, historically...) with the material and symbolic background sustaining the acts and imaginaries of buying sex.

Elaborating on the questions debated during the meeting in Turin, in their online text ‘What we talk about when we talk about prostitution,’ MP members Stefano Ciccone and Andrea Caruso (2010) claim:

While talking about prostitution we ended up looking inside the daily routine of our relationships, marked by an asymmetry of power between men and women and by different concepts of sexual needs; we have looked at human difficulties that clients and prostitutes encounter in a society that is incapable of hosting those who suffer; we talked about the morals influenced by a certain conservative and pro-family (*famalista*) Catholicism that is against the free choice of relationships (...) Talking about prostitution means *talking about us*. And about the social representation of male and female sexuality, about our idea of freedom, about the possibility of reconstructing a collective practice of transforming deep cultural orientations and dominant forms of relationships between people.¹¹¹

From the politics of the personal, the sexual and erotic level, this critical self-reflectivity also invites to reconsider collectively what Ciccone and Caruso call ‘dominant forms of relationships,’ namely social relations in general. In fact, as another MP member, Michele Poli, comments in his post-event text ‘The subject of desire,’ thinking about sex as a political question has broad potentially emancipatory outcomes: ‘the men who took part in the meeting believe that by shedding light on male sexuality and masculinity, one can find an opportunity to liberate new forms of action, capable of breaking with current forms of doing politics.’¹¹²

As I said, I was not granted access to the groups dedicated to consciousness-raising on the first day of meeting in Turin. However, during the plenary session I one of the members summarized the points that had been discussed among the only men groups keeping confidentiality on personal and sensitive topics.

¹¹¹ Nov 2010 ‘Di cosa parliamo quando parliamo di prostituzione?’ by S.Ciccone and A.Caruso, online text accessed 3/09/2018 available on MP website at <https://www.maschileplurale.it/2010-qdi-cosa-parliamo-quando-parliamo-di-prostituzioneq-di-sciccone-e-acaruso/>.

¹¹² Dic 2010 ‘Il soggetto del desiderio. Un resoconto dell’incontro di Torino’ by M.Poli, online text accessed 3/09/2018 available on MP website at <https://www.maschileplurale.it/2010-un-resoconto-dellincontro-di-torino-qil-sogetto-del-desicerioq-di-mpoli/>

MP texts are the result of a collective and reflective process. The texts are circulated before the meetings and then used as to encourage men to share their experiences during group-work. Even though some of the questions they pose appear as questions without answers, they matter as starting points for men's reflections, and in some cases as arrival and navigational points in the journey of some MP members. The questions are connected to the 'experiential work' conducted in the group sessions. In this sense, questions are critical tools, as they are produced by *and* contribute to MP collective anti-sexist masculinity political approach to male heteronormative sexual imaginaries and men's demand of prostitution.

The topic of discussion is men's consumerist habit of sexual desire. MP advocates for going beyond the homosocial and virilist performance of bragging about men's availability of women's bodies by using money and power (perfectly in line with a neoliberal consumption logic). Interestingly, this political stand is rooted in the opportunity MP offers to tackle the quality of men's erotic experience:

Without judging or wanting to repress those who prostitute themselves, we propose men this idea of the demand of prostitution as an *impoverishment of sexual relations*, reduced to consumption, to the mediation of money and to indifference (MP 2010; emphasis mine).¹¹³

Put simply, the discussion of commercial sex is used as an occasion to address the ways (and their problems) in which men establish sexual and romantic relations with women. This reflective work is done exemplarily by the peer groups associated to the 'Network of clients, ex-clients and false-clients' that engages men against sex-trafficking with self- and mutual help peer groups. The network grew as part of the anti-trafficking project '*La Ragazza di Benin City*', born out of the initiative of Isoke Aikpitanyi (activist and trafficking survivor) and her partner Carlo, who started a men's group. With his long-term experience in the group, Carlo does not hesitate to detect problems and discomforts in men's sexual lives, issues that men themselves are resistant to talk about:

¹¹³ Maschile Plurale (2010), *Quell'oscuro soggetto del desiderio. Immaginario sessuale maschile e domanda di prostituzione*, online available at <https://www.maschileplurale.it/torino-10-ottobre-2010-presentazione-dei-lavori-di-mp-alle-associazioni-di-alessio-miceli/>, accessed 06/03/2018.

There are problems in male sexuality that are very banal... this shows you how little ahead we, man, are. There are some men who, for some physical flaws, are not able to get through a sexual intercourse, and maybe they do not even know how to talk about it ... many and many sufferings come up that show you how the male is not ready to manage his sexuality and the problems that sexuality entails, like those men who orgasm too soon... all convinced that these are shameful things. And about this we discuss in the groups ... (Carlo, interview November 2014).

After the meeting in Turin where the ‘Network of clients, ex-clients and false-clients’ participated as well, I met Carlo in November 2015 during an anti-violence roundtable organized by the ‘*Circolo delle Donne*’ in Certaldo (Florence). There, I was invited to present my work and I could invite other activists to join the conversation with me. Carlo was in the public and listened to my presentation. That evening he explained to me how he started group sessions among sex buyers, after reaching out onto them directly on the streets:

The fifty percent (of men) told us to fuck off and the other fifty spoke with us. He accepted to speak, to see himself outside of that particular moment and then the group made sense because *we had discovered a huge amount of men who were not happy to be buyers, and that was a way out for their emotional, sentimental, sexual, and relational problems... I do not know what else*. We approached them with a flyer, from client to client, with non-judgmental words: ‘Me, like you, I have been here, but I understood one thing, that you think that girls are free here and you too have the freedom to stay there ... if by chance you want to speak about this with other men... and we have spread this message by all the possible means (Carlo, interview November 2014; emphasis mine).

For Carlo is important to underline that, in his experience and out-reach work with (potential) clients, the act of buying sex is symptomatic of the general emotional and relational issues of many men. For him, participating in the peer discussion groups serves to make men aware of their general dysfunctional and at times violent relational patterns:

This (*the group*), for us, was a big school of change, it has put us in front of a violence that many of us, quiet men and even romantic men, we did not know what we were doing. The violence was: I helped you, I wanted to marry you and you do not want me,

situations of rejection that the man is not able to manage even in a more normal relationship. Many of us, including myself, if we were coming from negative experiences with other women, relatives, with our children, *that was because we had not been able to act adequately ourselves*. So, you improve, you change, but with all the others (women) you carry a baggage of mistakes and you also seeded suffering, and at that point what do you do? (Carlo, interview November 2014; emphasis mine).

Through the topics of commercial sex and sexual relations, what these groups address and try to solve are men's relational patterns: erotically impoverished, affectively dysfunctional, causing suffering and difficult to change. What, then, does MP propose to improve men's relational patterns starting from sexual relations? The affirmative side of the critical work done by MP during the National Meeting on male desire and male demand of prostitution is expressed by a question:

can we, however, recognize various forms of male sexuality that maybe coexist and are in conflict with its dominant form, also within ourselves speaking about it? We think about other possibilities of our being men (*essere maschi*). These are images and experiences of freedom and non-violence among men and women, of recognition and respect of affective and sexual orientations of every person.¹¹⁴

The topic of buying sex allows MP to deconstruct the 'the myths of consumption, the mediation of money and indifference' that permeates the fantasy of commercial sex and that affects men's sexual relations with women in general. This is called by MP 'male imaginary' and is connected to violence against women. During our interview, Marco shared with me his opinion on buying sex:

I have broken with the male imaginary, like MP, I work against violence. But also my imaginary questioned the fantasies linked to porn and prostitution, erotic dreams, thoughts... I feel I have broken with this imaginary and it is not something that dominates me anymore. Since 2001 I feel free, also to say no to prostitution and violence. It's a good thing in terms of my own lived experience (Marco, interview February 2015).

¹¹⁴ MP 2010, *Quell'oscuro soggetto del desiderio. Immaginario sessuale maschile e domanda di prostituzione*, online available at <https://www.maschileplurale.it/torino-10-ottobre-2010-presentazione-dei-lavori-di-mp-alle-associazioni-di-alessio-miceli/>, accessed 06/03/2018.

It took him over ten years of self-reflective work in collaboration with his partner and with his group of men for Marco to feel like this. His ethical position is rooted in the mutual process of establishing a more satisfactory and just sexual-affective relation with his partner (and with himself).

MP members agree with Marco that the personal benefits in men's sexual and affective health are associated to living desire in relational terms, rather than in consumerist ones. This involves *relating to* and *engaging with* women's subjectivities, freedom and desires. That is why, in 'Man to Man' foundational document, MP states: 'to power *we prefer freedom, the freedom to meet the free desire of women, including, possibly, their rejection*':

Their freedom, their autonomy, in work, in life choices, in sexuality, are not a threat to us men and not even a concession we should give them as duty. *They are opportunities to live a freer and richer life together* (MP 2009; emphasis mine).¹¹⁵

The role of the buyer '*prostitutore*' ('prostitutor', proposed during the debate by one of the associations) is placed at the centre of the conversation to understand the why and the how of men's demands of paid (see Serughetti 2013; Abbatecola and Benasso 2016); and, more interestingly, to observe, on a personal level, how this affects all heterosexual relations. During our conversation on the sit-in against trafficking he organized in Ferrara, Marco puts it clearly: 'Buying sex is bad for men because it tends to go towards the ab-use of the other. By occupying your life, this action deprives you of your energies for others' (Marco, interview February 2015). It is interesting how he supports his anti-prostitution and anti-violence stands: he justifies both positions with the ethical argument 'it's bad for men,' referring to his personal life choice to search and advocate for (men's) happiness in positions different from those associated to dominant masculinity (i.e., buying sex, ab-using the other).

The discussion on buying sex is articulated around men's interest to find the opportunity to question the constitutive relation between normative masculinity and normative sexist heterosexuality. Making sex a political matter offers men the chance to re-define what it means to live with women *as men* in the affective and relational realm. This is considered fundamental for their gender justice and anti-violence commitment.

¹¹⁵ MP 2009: '*Da uomo a uomo – lettera aperta sulla violenza maschile*' online available at: <https://www.maschileplurale.it/da-uomo-a-uomo/>, accessed on 5/09/2018.

As a result, a more fulfilling *and* ethical sexual experience – in relation to the other (not in domination of the other), is advocated for:

If sexuality is not shared happiness, it can only be various forms of masturbation and violence, it cannot be anything else. The work on men should be done on these things here, like this. It means that nobody has done it, neither in the family nor in churches, nobody (Carlo, interview November 2014).

While he explained to me how he started the group of clients and ex-clients, Carlo reflects on the pivotal shift of direction he and his colleagues had to do to make change happen:

and so the group was born like that, with the intention of being useful to girls, but being useful to girls is one of the first things we discovered that it was not conceivable in the same way than thinking of changing institutions or towards media. And it was clear that we could not say we were changing institutions, but that *it was towards ourselves that we had to produce change*. This is because we, including myself, started having feelings for the girls, relationships that risked to be wrecked because of the same reason they were born (Carlo, interview November 2014; emphasis mine).

Engaging with male power-sexuality becomes central to MP's critical reflection, especially because it cuts transversely across issues of male violence against women, male homophobic and transphobic practices, intersections of sexism and racism, 'male misery' and men's demand of prostitution.

5. Outcomes and challenges in desiring *as men* in transition

In '*10 domande a noi uomini italiani, a partire da me, sul desiderio sessuale maschile verso le donne*' (10 questions for us Italian men, starting from myself, on male sexual desire towards women), MP member Alessio Miceli asked: 'Can we speak about our

sexual desire?’¹¹⁶ If the work of MP provides men with the space for interrogating themselves on how they think (epistemology) and experience (ontology) male sexual desire, one of the **challenges** is indeed finding (new) words for a personal and collective critical/creative voice beyond ‘male silence.’ As Miceli says in his text for the network:

this requires a change in our current male language. A way of speaking that is obviously different from the great *male silence* on his own feelings. It is also a different way of speaking than the one of the ego that says: ‘Me, myself and I...’ Finally, it is also different from that *male neutral position that hides himself in his own discourse, which speaks in every field of knowledge, without speaking about himself in relation to his object*. In my case, the way I came to verbalise my desire, in order to feel my own words vibrating inside of me, was through *telling about myself within a relation (raccontarmi nella relazione)*, as part of something (Miceli 2009; emphasis mine).¹¹⁷

On an onto-epistemological level, the neutral position of *Abstract Masculinity* does not allow men to critically/creatively approach *male desire* because the latter is perceived as given for granted as the Man’s gaze ‘from nowhere’ does. What Miceli suggests in the abovementioned quote is also that, in order to engage with male desire (*critically and creatively*), it is necessary to move beyond ‘male neutral position (that) does not speak about himself *in relation to* his object.’ Following this line of thought, Miceli seems to address the need for men to overcome the Subject/Object separation associated s, onto-epistemologically, to *Abstract Masculinity*; Miceli stresses that men should *relate to* their sexual desire by engaging with the shared sexual culture and imaginaries.

‘Speaking *as men*’ starting from oneself has proved to be(come) transformative, allowing men to give voice to their experiences and to approach themselves critically. Moreover, as Alessio recalls, speaking about his sexual desire means to acknowledge the relation and context in which this desire is lived ‘in order to feel my own words vibrating inside of me, was that of telling about myself within a relation (*raccontarmi nella relazione*), as part of something.’ This gesture of understating one’s experience *in relation to* others appears as the result of ‘speaking *as men*’ starting from oneself (see Chapter 3) for overcoming men’s silence on their feelings, and not hiding behind

¹¹⁶ Alessio Miceli, MP 2009 ‘Sesso e potere, a partire da me. 10 domande a noi uomini italiani, a partire da me, sul desiderio sessuale maschile verso le donne,’ online available at <http://www.labottegadelbarbieri.org/alessio-miceli-sesso-e-potere-a-partire-da-me/> , accessed on 10/12/2018.

¹¹⁷ Alessio Miceli, MP 2009 ‘Sesso e potere, a partire da me. 10 domande a noi uomini italiani, a partire da me, sul desiderio sessuale maschile verso le donne,’ online available at <http://www.labottegadelbarbieri.org/alessio-miceli-sesso-e-potere-a-partire-da-me/> , accessed on 10/12/2018.

abstractions detached from experience (something supported by the cultural western fantasy of male individuality and universalism, as Hernando carefully noted (Hernando Gonzalo 2018).

The day after the national meeting '*Il Cav. Che resta in noi*' (Bologna, December 2011), in his text *Il desiderio maschile e il patriarcato* (Men's desire and patriarchy) Gabriele Lenzi (MP member from Livorno) wrote: 'the rigid patterns of patriarchy can only lead the heterosexual men to the contradiction of perceiving woman as an object of desire and, therefore, this is a dangerous warning of his own relational ignorance' (Lenzi 2012).¹¹⁸ Lenzi describes what is shared among men participating in anti-sexist engagement in MP: the denounce of the relational 'illiteracy' and 'misery' affecting men's lives, as a crucial problem that leads men to 'acting inadequately' (Carlo, interview November, 2015) and to unsatisfactory relationships; the affective and sexual impoverished experiences, and the lack of relational skills or even exercising violence against women. When it comes to sexual desire, another problem is: 'the power to affirm one's own desire as the sole force of the relations between the sexes reveals itself a poisoned gift that condemns men to build power or to accumulate money in order to access the female body and conquer the female gaze' (Mapelli and Ciccone 2012, 59). By engaging with the debate on prostitution the members of MP indeed wanted to understand and critically engage with the imaginary and real implication of their sexual desire constructed in patriarchal terms as predatory, consumerist, egocentric, compulsory active, uncontrollable, impulsive and worst of all, unquestionable. What is foundational for the construction and maintenance of the identity of the 'heterosexual male' is described here by Ciccone as a trap which sets the desire as 'the only force' of relations between men and women, whose rhythm must be marked by what Tabet described as the sexual-economic continuum (Tabet 2004b).

The sexual politics formulated by MP seem to go beyond the erotic culture that sees male desire as impulsive and predatory while disavowing female one (Irigaray 1985; Lonzi 1970; Millett et al. 2016). In interviews and online texts, sexual desire becomes politically relevant in order to transform relations towards more ethical and more pleasurable, enriching experiences. In the work of MP male desire seems to be rethought, almost necessarily, in relation to 'autonomous female desire' coming from

¹¹⁸ Lenzi, MP 2012 '*Il desiderio maschile e il patriarcato*': <https://www.maschileplurale.it/gen-2012-qdesiderio-maschile-e-patriarcatoq-di-glenzi/> accessed 30/10/2018

women's freedom and a feminist-inspired gender-awareness to re-imagine a different relationship with women *tout court*.

For the men in MP, this process of reformulation appears to rely on the Italian tradition of corporeal feminisms according to which the political project of creating female subjectivity (women as subjects) is inseparable from giving voice to women's sexual desire and subjectivity (Lonzi 1970; Bussoni, Perna, and Agosti 2014). By acknowledging 'women's free and autonomous desire' existing on its own terms and independently from men's dominant sexualizing/objectifying gaze, MP members also recognise women's subjectivity as such. Willing to engage with women's 'free desire' is part of the challenging dominant erotic cultural imaginary in which there is no space for women as (sexual) subjects. The historical roots of the double standards want women either sexually silent and thus respectable, or sexually knowledgeable and marked with the slut stigma (Pheterson 1996): in both ways the female body exists as a sexualized object of male erotic gaze and female desire is a 'magic mirror' used to magnify male desire (Abbatecola and Benasso 2016). In this sense, relating to women's independent desire and considering women as free subjects is seen by MP members as 'an opportunity to live together a freer and richer life.'¹¹⁹ This opens the possibility of rethinking oneself 'as a man' (as genders and sexualities are constructed relationally) and offers, as MP member Marco Deriu affirms, the opportunity to 'get through imaginaries and forms of sexuality and pleasure that could be different from what we are used to' (Deriu 2010).¹²⁰

Despite the transformative potential we can see in this personally-political work, to what extent is it possible for men to put their erotic and relational experience into question? To what extent is it possible to dismantle that erotic *habitus*, culturally incorporated, erected and venerated socio-symbolically and publicly? These questions obey to sceptical positions from feminist groups of women in Italy, as activist Flavia comments during another MP national meeting in Rome:

I have been working in a political conversation with men for two years, and it is difficult to trust them. Their desires are always the same and there is a blindness

¹¹⁹ MP 4/12/2011 Bologna 4 Dic 2011 'Il Cav. che resta in noi' text available at <http://www.maschileplurale.it/bologna-4-dic-2011-qil-cav-che-resta-in-noi/> accessed on 09/12/2018.

¹²⁰ Marco Deriu, 2010 'Il desiderio maschile tra patriarcato e mercato' available at <https://www.maschileplurale.it/2010-qil-desiderio-maschile-tra-patriarcato-e-mercatoq-di-deriu/> accessed on 10/12/2018.

referred to women's freedom and how this can change the world (Flavia, contribution to the discussion, March 2013).

One great challenge is to face the cultural context in which this erotic model is embedded, legitimated socially, intersected with gender meanings and gendered divisions of labour and patriarchal culture: also a great challenge is the complicit silence on male sexual desire as the unquestionable pillar for the social construction of masculinity and men's power in Italian society (Ciccone 2009; Bellassai 2012; Gasparrini 2018).

Through their own gendered histories as embodied-embedded subjects, MP members agree that, in order to rethink men's relation with corporeality, it is necessary to address and understand what they call 'male misery' (*miseria maschile*). The notion of 'male misery' expresses men's poor relations in terms of emotionality, care, affectivity, quality of relationships and sexual experience. A similar critique to men's socialization and emotional impoverishment is shared by the majority of antisexist groups and in antisexist scholarship on men (Seidler 1989). In relation to especially sexuality in the collective work of MP, Ciccone states: 'we have denounced this dimension of misery, not for blaming *il maschile*, but because this impoverishes men's erotic experience.'¹²¹ Then, when he is asked to explain what he personally means with *miseria maschile*, Ciccone's emphasis shifts to men's sexuality and how it is affected by a monolithic idea of male desire and pleasure:

misery is due to a body intended and lived as a bearer of low instincts, of a bestial desire, not in an extreme sense but, I mean, in the idea of male sexuality as discharge (*sfogo e scarico*)...all our reflection on prostitution relates to this idea of (*men's*) consumerist sexuality that has nothing to do with the category of relationship. On the other hand, misery is also connected to the idea that male pleasure is simple and doesn't need much effort to be satisfied, differently to the female one.¹²²

Thus, one of the aims of the group-practice is to unpack the cultural and embodied coordinates underpinning the condition of *miseria maschile*. With a narrative self-reflective approach, men are stimulated to share their own experiences (see Ch. 3), in

¹²¹ Interview with Stefano Ciccone 'Il corpo dell'uomo,' by Gianni Saporetti published on the webpage *Una città*, available at <http://www.unacitta.it/newsite/intervista.asp?id=1816> accessed on 09/12/2018.

¹²² Interview with Stefano Ciccone 'Il corpo dell'uomo,' by Gianni Saporetti published on the webpage *Una città*, available at <http://www.unacitta.it/newsite/intervista.asp?id=1816> accessed on 09/12/2018.

order to express and explore to what extent these are impoverished by a dominant and monolithic idea of male desire/sexuality, and how this cultural model interferes with the affective dissonances and dissatisfactions of their living body.

The texts published by MP reveal the myths related to men's heterosexuality. They de-naturalise male desire 'thought as an impulse, an unrestrained and uncontrollable physiological need, this *natural power* that would push men to act from below.'¹²³ Precisely for this reason, the main objective of this sexual politics is to make men aware of their socio-culturally constructed practices.

Nevertheless, because of the huge amount of deconstructive work to be done, men engaged in anti-sexism risk getting caught in a circle of self-reflective self-criticism, with little chances of giving concrete proposals for creative action. The self-reflective work described in this chapter is mostly critical, dedicated to stimulate awareness on how men should not-be, not-do, not-desire, etc. We can explain this deconstructive emphasis by looking at the negative and unjust implications these practices have on men's and women's lives. It should be reminded, however, that questioning the current politics of sexual and gender relations in Italy, as a political collective act performed by men gathering 'as men', could also be considered a disruptive act.

Another great challenge is to break the homosocial complicity of men supporting this culture, as denounced in the national meeting in Rome '*Mio fratello è figlio unico, cosa cambia se cambiano i desideri degli uomini?*' (My brother is an only child, what does change if men's desires change?; MP, 2013).¹²⁴ In the comments to 'A letter to the single groups before the national meeting promoted by MP' we can read Salvatore Deiana's comment on the name of the event:

with quantities of all the interpretations possible, saying that 'my brother is an only child puts into evidence in my opinion a distance, a gap from the common belonging, an extreme difficulty to participate, to let ourselves be recognized in our difference from the hegemonic models of the masculine, to speak up in the debate, especially the public

¹²³ MP 2010, '*Quell'oscuro soggetto del desiderio. Immaginario sessuale maschile e domanda di prostituzione*,' available at <https://www.maschileplurale.it/incontro-nazionale-maschile-plurale-torino-2010/> accessed on 06/03/2018.

¹²⁴ MP website '*Febbraio 2013 'Mio fratello è figlio unico'* online available at: <https://www.maschileplurale.it/febbraio-2013-gmio-fratello-e-figlio-unicoq/>, accessed on 5/11/2018.

one, and to act with transformative political efficacy' (Deiana, online comment to the MP introductory document 2013).¹²⁵

In this meeting, I recall hearing Gianni commenting on the difficulties of naming positive practices for men, unless in negative terms: 'our desires are in transition: what we know is what we *are not* and what *we don't want* (Gianni, contribution to the discussion, March 2013). Alberto agrees with this difficulty to find affirmative proposals, and talks, again, about transition:

We should go beyond our NOs, this is not enough for us. What do we want to be? In politics, in society, in personal life. We should find some YESs, risking new ones. We are in a transition from say NO and affirming YES. (Alberto, contribution to the discussion, March 2013).¹²⁶

Gianluca answers: 'To say yes corresponds to give positive examples, and this can be done situating ourselves, as men, as women, as nurses, as teachers, as barmen etc...and saying yes in our personal lives' (Gianluca, contribution to the discussion, March 2013). Here Gianluca summarises MP's affirmative proposals for action, clearly rooted in the personal life of the members. With this positioning, MP's political choice is to maintain a plurality of men's situated voices (*a partire da sè*), while trying to avoid the formulation of new norms for men who want to change.

In a national meeting I attended in Milan the year after -'*Gli uomini nel cambiamento. I desideri, la politica, la vita*' (Men in transformation. Desires, politics, life, 2014), this strategy was largely debated. With some sense of frustration and disappointment, members agreed that this strategy allowed the network to be highly focused on the personal level (critically-creatively) and on relations; however, on the other hand, it led the network to be rarely capable of offering a coherent and unified anti-sexist message on a public or broader level (fieldnotes, MP meeting in Milan, April 2014). In reference to prostitution, exemplarily, the network engaged significantly on a personal deconstructive level with the themes of men's desires and imaginaries; however, despite the explicit anti-trafficking shared positioning within MP, the network could not provide a firm abolitionist political stand (as some network actors would have

¹²⁵ MP website '*Febbraio 2013 'Mio fratello è figlio unico'* online available at: <https://www.maschileplurale.it/febbraio-2013-qmio-fratello-e-figlio-unico/>, accessed on 5/11/2018.

¹²⁶ An effort in this direction is the anti-violence campaign '*Riconoscersi uomini, liberarsi dalla violenza*' presented by MP during the meeting in Milan in 2014.

liked). This lack of unified public voice was due to the disagreement occurred between MP actors who recognise women's freedom to exercise sex work - in line with the Italian committee of sex workers' rights - and those other groups of men (like the network of clients and ex-clients) who base their mobilization on anti-prostitution and anti-trafficking politics.

In the attempt to reconfigure their practices as men engaged with anti-sexism, MP members often turned to women's feminist traditions to borrow practices and tools to understand, deconstruct and possibly change masculinities and gender relations. The collaborations with feminist groups in anti-violence and the intellectual political conversations with women helped some of the men to create their critical and transformative path in relation to female-feminists. The meeting in Rome (2013) was the first open conversation between the national network MP, feminist groups and individual women. During that meeting, many women shared the position expressed by Antonella:

Could men copy feminism? No, just in some practices...rather than talking about how to speak between women and men, the conflict should be open *among men*. The question is not *how women want you*, rather *how do you want you?* (Antonella, contribution to the discussion, March 2013)

Engaging in anti-sexism *as men* questions power from a social position of privilege: 'how can we mobilise critically against the system that builds us as the norm? we cannot learn from previous activist movements (feminist and LGBT+) as their subject has a different relation to that system' (Sandro, contribution to the discussion, March 2013). Discussions in meetings and interviews stress the challenge posed by not having references or models. The work to be done as anti-sexist men is constitutively and primarily deconstructive, and it seems that major efforts need to be oriented towards deconstructing dominant positions and existing taken-for-granted practices:

Individually, *you are alone*. It seems obvious, but it means you do not have models, you have to learn from yourself, you have a desert in front of you and almost no other experience to learn from. The strong point is this: you can literally do what you want, you have a huge space to build a new masculinity that does not yet exist. However precious, what I derive from feminism is not immediately usable on my part, especially in political practice. In addition to the different sensitivity due to my body of man -

which is not a little difference already - it must also be considered that as a straight man born in the patriarchy, I don't have to resist or liberate myself from male domination, because I'm part of it. *My gesture is more a desertion from the patriarchy*, and for this gesture a whole vocabulary and practice are still to be invented (Luciano, interview March 2015; emphasis mine).

To overcome the challenges implied in joining a process of transformation, and especially in questioning their own sexual imaginaries, Marco believes that men would need a 'positive path':

We need a movement ... Feminism, however criticized, is a path for a woman to become a more aware woman, which is positive stuff... so you need a *maschismo* ('*male-ism*', *laughs*), that is, a journey that other have gone through where you can find certainties, that you know that is a positive path, that you can start walking on that road and something positive can grow, you gain with it ...(Marco, interview February 2015).

Marco expresses the same problem mentioned by Luciano, i.e., the lack of positive and secure transformative paths for men. From his position as an anti-violence consultant at the CAM in Ferrara, Marco justifies his own personal strategy:

I try to create a path, we are a few, and the path is not a path...there should be a moment 'father' and that's why I'm trying to create a separation of the good from the bad ones...(Marco, interview February 2015).

Additionally, Marco also voices the need for a journey that could ensure the positive results of this critical engagement *and* also a journey that would involve positive gains for men. In this sense, we can understand the emphasis of many members to express their well being, happiness and improved personal lives by engaging with *self-reflectivity* as men in the group practice. This improved affective and relational life is what is recalled as the motivating force for men to keep involved in anti-sexist action, and to engage other men as well. Apart from the everyday individual benefits that each men can find, the emphasis on personal improvement is presented as rewarding in many strategies: in Spain, for example, AHIGE circulates the very popular sentence '*ganamos con el cambio*' (with transformation we gain), in order to persuade men to join their critical anti-machoist movement.

Commenting on his participation in group sessions among men who bought sex, Carlo stressed the importance of the group for creating possibilities of change:

You get there especially if you're not alone, the strength of the network or the self-mutual-help help is exactly that you relate with others and slowly building the sincerity of the relations (*with other men*), this is what is missing among men, you arrive to a friendship in which you do not have to prove yourself sexually, you can also say that maybe you also have problems. And on this we can build on...(Carlo, interview November 2014).

The group helps men not to feel alone in this process. Moreover, the homosocial space encourages the sharing of personal experiences *as men*, opening up about each other's (sexual) problems. In this safe space nobody has to prove himself on sexual grounds. Outside the group, in the current gender and sexual culture in Italy, admitting to having sexual problems is perceived by men as a personal failure as a man; admitting this in front of other men could make men feeling vulnerable; and this fact evidences the precarious foundations of 'acting like a man'. The act of sharing vulnerabilities in a safe space of respect and understanding allows men to establish deeper friendship among each other.

When I ask Luciano about the positive force of men's feminist-oriented politics, his answer reminds me of other challenges that groups of men face:

The strong points lie in the possibility of not feeling lost or not feeling far from a common struggle, from a common feeling - gathering in group in order to go against patriarchy is very pleasant and exciting. The weak point is about learning how to manage differences and conflicts in a non-hierarchical manner, which is a very hard wall for men involved in politics, because they are not used to do so (Luciano, interview March 2015).

The creative part, as expressed in Ch. 3 and as described in this chapter as well, is embedded in the performative practice of speaking *as men* starting from oneself. Interestingly, we notice that the ritualized act of gender-conscious self-reflectivity in a separatist group allows members to share personal problems, discomforts, negative emotions, shameful considerations and, feelings (performing *as men* differently than usual). Groups allow the training in relational and affective skills, generating gender-

awareness and uncovering myths about masculinity that men feel uncomfortable with and are damaging for men's experiences; groups also allow the establishment of friendships and trust among men and this helps the discussion about gender meanings and shared imaginaries.

The reconfiguration of men's practices is envisioned through a more gender-just, feminist-inspired and personally enriching sexual politics, in which men call each other into action as more relationally-aware subjects. Sexual politics hits the myths and foundations of masculinity. From a change in their erotic practice, a transformation in all other relations is meant to follow for their own wellbeing, for preventing VAW, and for living more just gender relations. Breaking male complicity with patriarchal practices is possible by establishing another type of homosocial complicity among men, politically and affectively stemming from dissatisfaction and discomfort with dominant masculinities and oriented towards gender justice.

6. Conclusion

In this chapter, the cultural legitimization of male violence against women is rooted in men's embodiment of sexism, namely in their personal implication in and support of the dominant erotic imaginary underpinning gender inequalities. The demand of prostitution, the act of buying sex from men, becomes the protagonist of political demonstrations and national meetings as it allows to mobilise men around their ethical commitment to social justice against sex trafficking, thus spreading awareness on their responsibility in supporting sexual slavery. Moreover, the question of prostitution allows for interrogating the sexual and erotic culture shared by all men as potential buyers. This culture has historical roots and it is legitimized socially and, during Berlusconi's government, it has been reproduced by his media empire. In the last years of his political power, Berlusconi's sexist performances and his involvement in supporting underage prostitution contributed to showing the social urgency of addressing masculinity and men's practices as political issues. That is why Italian anti-sexist masculinity politics consider so important the sexual-economic exchange for the social construction of masculinity and the shaping of gender relations.

With much of its effort posed in deconstructing and unpacking unchallenged norms and gender meanings related to men, the anti-sexist engagement of MP aims at

interrogating this erotic culture by questioning a series of taken-for-granted dominant practices inherent to what it means/matters to be a man in contemporary Italian culture (Pieroni 2002; Ciccone 2009; Gasparri 2018; Bellassai 2012). The aim of this anti-sexist masculinity politics of sexuality is to disengage manhood from power/sex/money patriarchal heteronormative terms, thus intervening into patriarchal sexual culture. Dominant masculinity is criticized as inherently heterosexist, possessive and predatory in relation to femininity, women and female desire and bodies; measuring men's success and power upon this, understanding sexual performance as men's use of women's bodies, or supporting this practice in the homosocial space of male camaraderie are also criticized (Camoletto and Bertone 2017). Implicitly, by making sexual politics so important in order to transform masculinities in anti-sexist terms, the work done by MP confirms that the social construction of men's gendered identity in Italy is deeply connected with how men live and perceive their (hetero)sexual performance.

This consideration is reproduced in gender-conscious contexts as well. Lorenzo's initial photograph with the sign 'a real man knows how to love, a free woman cannot be bought.' is a good example. The self-reflective and mainly deconstructive effort of MP, as anti-sexist masculinity sexual politics, aims to radically change men's heterosexual desire from consumerist to relational (towards gender justice). Nevertheless this shift it appears not to challenge the culturally embedded association between being a 'real' man and performing as a knowledgeable heterosexual subject. The message is indeed leveraging on a socially accepted and rather stereotypical notion of normative masculinity in Italy (Reich 2004), according to which a man ought to know 'how to love', being sexually 'active', sexually knowledgeable and in charge of initiating the intercourse.

Lorenzo's message advocates for women's freedom from an erotic culture in which women are objects of exchange among men and a measure of their power and status. The message on the sign Lorenzo is holding claims that a real man is the one who knows how to love, which also entails that a free woman cannot be bought. As many of the messages addressed to men about masculinity, this too appeals to a real-manhood statement without questioning the material-discursive ontological priority assigned to it in transforming men. In Lorenzo's sign the message expresses another claim that tells us about unquestioned normative masculinity in Italian culture: a real man knows how to love (and how to have sex). The expertise required to be part of the

real manhood club is not challenged, rather what is proposed is a shift in the content of this expertise.

This photograph allows us to enter and to address the multilayered discussion of MP sexual politics. Implicitly, Lorenzo's statement argues for a sexual politics based on the recognition of women's freedom as subjects and as sexual subjects, a position shared unanimously within MP. It is the same message supporting the demonstration against prostitution in Ferrara, where Marco and other members were holding similar signs. Moreover, Lorenzo's message makes explicit the assumption according to which buying sexual services is an act of dominance over a non-free person, assumption that also emerges in the critical reflection proposed by MP when discussing among men the relations between power, sex and money, for the reasons I have analysed in this chapter. Moreover, the link between real manhood and heterosexuality, to be proved and reaffirmed in the peer-group of men as a discursive performance of 'bragging about with other men' (MP 2009)¹²⁷ is also implicit. Given the context and the strategic message, Lorenzo's sign also argues against the socially accepted belief that male sexuality is uncontrollable and men's 'sexual needs' cannot be left unsatisfied. This belief is problematic because it legitimises the idea that men have the right to sex, intended as having women's bodies available in exchange for economic capital.

Approaching male sexual desire critically and with the transformative curiosity for reconfiguring heterosexual erotic culture is not easy because challenging the power of male desire is seen as threatening for many men, as it stands at the centre of their cultural construction and self-perception of manhood. It is connected, with men's power, success, wealth, status, heterosexual desire, all reproduced through homosocial complicity among men. Breaking with this model requires much effort, and the ability to see an opportunity where others may perceive a threat or a crisis is the innovative proposal of MP sexual politics.

For MP, sexual desire is tackled also because of the socio-symbolic political value that desire has in feminist politics. MP sexual politics is close to Italian feminism in theory and in practice (The Women's Library of Milan, the Identity and Difference group, and, citing some names, with the feminists Melandri and Cigarini). In fact, desire as a (ontological) force of transformation has been central in the feminist activist theoretical field, especially for those authors who move away from a Lacanian vision of

¹²⁷ MP November 2009 'Da Uomo a Uomo' available at <http://www.maschileplurale.it/da-uomo-a-uomo-appello/>, accessed 25/06/2018.

desire as a lack (Cigarini 1995; Braidotti 1994; Sánchez and Sevillano 2006). In general, and especially in the context of Italian second wave feminism that practiced consciousness-raising and sexual difference thinking, it has been crucial to affirmatively create the space and forms of the 'autonomous' female, independent and *differing* from the phallogocentric logic of the hetero socio-symbolic patriarchal order. Female desire, beyond functioning as a mirror for male desire or figured as not existing at all, becomes crucial for elaborating (sexual and ontological, politically-aware) subjectivity as women: it becomes the impulse for personal and social transformation (Lonzi 1970; Irigaray 1985; Lorde 1982).

Engaging with the questions of male desire (e.g., dominant models of masculinity and heterosexuality, male sexual fantasies and imaginaries) by speaking *as men* starting from oneself is a process that contributes to putting into question the onto-epistemological habits of *Abstract Masculinity*. Some may argue that, in an attempt to rethink the male imaginary and normative sexuality in the plural, the collective reflection of MP runs the risk of re-proposing, even if in positive, a new stereotyped model, another norm. Nevertheless, the social, media and political visibility of men's anti-sexism in Italy is so little that it is not able to consolidate a positive model. It is therefore worthwhile to listen to this desire (of change) and to the personal-political tensions that are being articulated not without difficulty or paradoxes: 'getting rid of these packages, we then ask: desire of what?' (MP 2010).¹²⁸ Indeed, as commented by members during the national meeting in Milan in 2014, the problem of the network has been the difficulty of formulating positive proposals and of taking public stands under 'one voice' that could summarize the critical and self-reflective positions discussed in MP. The incapacity to offer 'one public voice' can take the work of MP to remain self-referential, and that is seen as a limitation for the social impact of its politics.

The innovative part of this approach is methodological -a situated speaking *as men-* and theoretical understanding how dominant cultural practices are embodied and supported personally by men in their relations. Mobilizing as men corresponds here to meeting other men to denounce VAW and to express dissatisfaction and distance from sexist cultures. It also involves turning men's personal experience into a gender-aware experience. This deconstructive and self-reflective work done individually and in group is the ground for considering men's desires 'in transition' from critical approaches to

¹²⁸ MP 2010, *Quell'oscuro soggetto del desiderio. Immaginario sessuale maschile e domanda di prostituzione*, viewed 06/03/2018, available at <https://www.maschileplurale.it/incontro-nazionale-maschile-plurale-torino-2010/>.

creative proposals. The difficulty of affirming clear political proposals, for MP, lies in the constitutive deconstructive effort of anti-sexist engagement, which is experienced more in the form of a 'desertion' and a 'distance from my brother' than as a group struggle against a personified enemy. For MP the possibilities to say yes, to affirm a different way to become a man on a daily basis, has to be lived in the personal relational sphere.

This chapter thus analyses the approach proposed by MP in relation to power, male heterosexuality and masculinity as significant at the personal-political level for contributing to gender justice in contemporary Italian culture. Diagnosing 'male misery' MP denounces men's lack of relational intelligence and the impoverishment of their erotic experiences and relationships. MP's sexual politics express men's demands to live more fulfilling experiences with themselves and with women. This is done so by recognizing women's subjectivities and advocating for desire in relational terms rather than commodificatory ones. In this way, MP's gender justice approach demands a formulation of a feminist sexual politics, encompassing an ethics of relations among subjects. The creative part, as expressed also in Chapter 3, is the performative practice that introduces men to affective and relational skills, as well as a collective discourse on the urgency of a relational and sexual ethics. Men are encouraged to improve their lives by acting in more engaging and relationally aware manners in their affective, sexual, romantic and family relationships.

The anti-sexist masculinity sexual politics analysed in this chapter calls for a different type of love and sexuality, questioning men's sexual desire as a naturalized, commodificatory, predatory, uncontrollable, heterosexual impulse that would justify men's demands of commercial sex and their natural necessity to receive affective and sexual labour from women. Beyond men's commodification of women for constructing men's capital (economic, social, human) *as men*, men's anti-sexist engagement in Italian sexual politics is a fundamental part of their anti-violence stand. This is crucial for reconfiguring men's relations to women, and it is done so by recognizing women's subjectivities and desires on their own terms (intrinsically), and not as markers or mirrors for men's value among other men and for their self-appreciation *as men*.

Chapter 6. Advocating for ‘egalitarian fatherhood’: AHIGE’s online campaigning and its care politics

1. Introduction

This chapter is dedicated to describe how AHIGE intervenes in the celebration of ‘father’s day’ by turning it into ‘egalitarian father’s day’ (*día del padre igualitario*), creating anti-sexist fatherhood politics and care politics. This move becomes meaningful for its onto-epistemological outcomes. By choosing this day to celebrate men’s gender justice commitment towards promoting egalitarian fatherhood, a symbolic political date for men’s anti-sexist engagement in Spain is established (AHIGE, *Agenda Común*, 2013)¹²⁹ and, with it, also a framework of action for its advocacy, out-reach and transformation-oriented initiatives takes shape. The focus of the chapter lays on the online campaign in favour of responsible fatherhood and men’s involvement in care work, launched by AHIGE in 2015 and 2016 on March 19th which is, in Spain, Saint Joseph’ day (and is, according to the European Catholic tradition, dedicated to honour fatherhood and celebrated as ‘Father’s Day’ (*día del padre*). AHIGE’s online campaign (its methods, materials, strategies and outcomes) offers interesting food for thought to discuss characteristics and challenges of men’s gender justice activism when it comes to fatherhood and care politics.

The potential for transforming political practices through web activism has become visible at least since 2011, with the g/local cases of the social movements in Egypt, Spain, the U.S., Iran and Italy. According to Castells (Castells 2015), what he named ‘Networked Social Movements’ (NSM) are collective transnational movements, triggered by strong emotional discontents, locally rooted but globally networked, characterized by the use of digital technologies in their communication, organization and strategies for action. In relation to this, we could affirm that NSM act within, through and in contestation with the cultural, technological and institutional

¹²⁹ AHIGE 2013, ‘AGENDA COMÚN DE LOS HOMBRES POR LA IGUALDAD. Declaración de Barcelona’ available online at http://www.ahige.org/pdfs/DECLARACION_DE_BARCELONA.pdf accessed on 08/12/2018.

configurations of contemporary society. In NSM, shared transnational concerns are related to informational politics, to the inequalities hidden within and sustaining neoliberal democracies, and to the local material effects of global networked capitalism. Although processes of individuation may give rise to practices of power-blind individualistic networked cosmopolitanism, those very processes can also allow for the construction of a new political subjectivity and a civic participation whose networks and communities are alive in the cyber and metropolitan spaces. Activism performed on the internet, and specifically on social media, is transnational in communication and outreach, and can also offer a wide span of themes for personal/collective contestation.

The political implications of using social media in a convergence culture which is dominated by the visual in general, is materialized through the production and use of visual data by digital activism. As I analyse in this chapter, AHIGE's egalitarian fatherhood online campaign relies largely on the production, publication and circulation of photographic portraits or 'selfies' shared on social media. Selfies are self-portraits, a practice which has exploded with the growth of camera-phones and smartphones, wireless connectivity and social media usage. Accepting its pervasiveness in society, the Oxford Dictionaries named the term 'selfie' the Word of the Year in 2013 (Oxford Dictionary).¹³⁰ Described as acts of self-exposure, self-enhancement and potential narcissism by those who study them (Senft and Baym 2015; Eckel, Ruchatz, and Wirth 2018), selfies have also transformed bodies, intimacy and activism (Enguix and Gómez-Narváez 2018). Selfies posted on social media platforms travel at the speed of a click becoming a property of the internet universe.

The existence of social networking sites not only allows for the image to be received by a vast audience of active users, but also to be circulated far beyond the person who produced and posted the image on the first place, becoming viral. The speed and pervasiveness of this communication makes selfies a tool adopted in marketing and political campaigns. More than just a practice for self-representation in virtual spaces, '**activist selfies**' have been used as political tools to visibilize alternative lifestyles or as triggers to encourage the diffusion of alternative ideas and to initiate engagement in critical discourses and practices. More than as a 'representation,' I am interested here in understanding the selfie as a practice, a socio-cultural interaction with on/offline

¹³⁰ Oxford Dictionaries (2013, November 19) 'Selfie is named Oxford Dictionaries word of the year 2013' Retrieved from <http://blog.oxforddictionaries.com/press-releases/oxford-dictionaries-word-of-the-year-2013/> accessed on 09/12/2018.

potentially activist interferences, as a sociotechnical phenomenon that momentarily and tentatively holds together a number of different elements of mediated digital communication (Cruz and Thornham 2015; Eckel, Ruchatz, and Wirth 2018). An activist campaign involving selfies on social media could seem a paradox in terms, given the call for individualism and authenticity of the self attached to the selfie portrait. However, if picked up as a collective practice, selfies can spread messages, multiply participation, engage campaign's participants with non-participants. Activist and political campaigns enacted online are part of our daily life as internet users and interconnected users.

'Hashtag activism' became popular during the Occupy Wall Street movement, and became central in other recent campaigns, such as with the initiative *#Bringbackourgirls*. In this case, as with the egalitarian father's day Facebook event, posting self-portraits of activists holding signs while spreading their message with hashtags is the strategy adopted, and this is now becoming a trend in online protest. Signs have always been a recurring tool of protest and activism, and they also carry a strong symbolic force in messaging for mobilizations; images of bodies, of real people, combined with tweets and hashtags, enable highly personalized participation, in campaign networking and fuels participants' engagement. Scholars have analyzed the emergence of the activist selfie as a 'political convergence of the object and subject of photographic practice' (Olszanowski 2014, 84) a concept which is useful to understand the egalitarian fatherhood campaign in this chapter. Considering selfies as a normalized cultural practice for identity redefinition (Dijck 2008) and as acts of self-documentation (Ardevol and Gomez-Cruz 2012), their power lies also in the over-present popularity of the visual media and the already existing effectiveness of visual material for conveying messages.

Common activist initiatives organized through selfies are often related to the politics of representation, as in the case of self-acceptance and body-positivity initiatives aimed at deconstructing stereotypes underpinning exclusions, opening up the imaginary to more inclusive scenarios. Examples of this can be found in the cases of the no-make-up selfie or feminist selfie, in which the narcissistic and image-obsessed cultures sustaining selfies are used to promote non-normative looks and a focus on 'doing' more than on appearance.¹³¹ This has led to reconsidering selfies beyond their

¹³¹ Jessica Bnnet, The Time, 11/08/2014 'Our Bodies, Our Selfies: The Feminist Photo Revolution' retrieved from <http://time.com/3099103/feminist-selfies-uglyfeminists-iwokeuplikedis/> accessed on 09/12/2018.

self-centred focus and to speak of self-less selfies;¹³² and their are also practices of re-appropriation of the power of the gaze by young girls, with the potential of deconstructing the phallogentric male gaze (Mulvey 1999; Rose et al. 2016).

A very interesting case in which activist selfies are used by men to question gender norms and discourses has been the Facebook campaign of ‘Kurd men for equality’ started on April 2013, involving men dressing in women’s clothes to protest against the consideration of femininity as something diminishing and humiliating. The campaign came as a response to a judge’s verdict for a man convicted of domestic abuse that obliged him to wear Kurdish women’s clothing as a form of public punishment. Some of the pictures online feature men wearing women’s clothes and veils while holding posters in support of gender equality; the majority of the participants pose in front of the camera with their whole body visibly covered in women outfits. Texts are added to support the claim that ‘Being a woman is not a tool to humiliate or punish anyone’ (from the text of the campaign). In a patriarchal context that considers the feminization of men as a humiliation, men are using their culturally-given authority in order to shift gender-related norms: re-evaluating femininity and at the same time disentangling the definition of masculinity from its rejection of the feminine. Sharing this message on social media becomes a collective action to gain support among users and to be heard.

2. Egalitarian fatherhood and feminist care politics

When I was a child for Father’s Day we used to draw postcards, write poems, make collages using different-colour paper, adding sweet words and drawings. Our message, built on perishable material, had a sender and a specific receiver; after reaching its destination hand-to-hand, with the help of a magnet, they ended up on the fridge door in our kitchen. This was Father’s Day during the 1990s, at least where I come from in central Italy. But we were just in the midst of the development of information technologies, and digital natives were yet to be born. Almost three decades later and a great amount of interconnected transformations in society, Father’s Day - still celebrated by children once a year - has become a well-established event collectively

¹³² Jessica McKenzie, 6/09/2013 ‘The rise of self-less selfies in online activism’ retrieved from TechPresident website <http://techpresident.com/news/wegov/24323/rise-of-selfless-selfies-in-online-activism> accessed on 09/12/2018.



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celebrated by fathers themselves and among themselves, generating interesting on/offline outcomes. On March 19th 2015, with the hashtag *#hecandoit!* the Spanish *Asociación de Hombres por la Igualdad de Género* (AHIGE) invited Facebook and Twitter users to their virtual event *Día del Padre Igualitario* (Egalitarian Father’s Day). Those who actively joined the online event were asked to take a picture of themselves holding a sign with one of the following messages: *por una paternidad igualitaria; por una paternidad responsable; por unas masculinidades cuidadoras* (In favour of egalitarian and responsible fatherhood, in favor of caring masculinities). The event resulted in a proliferation of images of self-portrayed men in their spaces and moments of care-giving, loving parenthood, housework, domestic and housework tasks. In 2016 the campaign was organized again by AHIGE with *Homes Igualitaris, Homes Valencians per la Igualtat* and *Papás Blogueros*. This action is in line with international campaigns and programs (such as *MenCare*) that focus on engaging men in gender justice starting from and through their caring and responsible fatherhood practices. Celebrating Father’s Day under this egalitarian flag is rooted in the activism of anti-sexist men in Spain, as proclaimed in their ‘Common Agenda for Equality’:

picking up the idea from our colleagues of Jerez to celebrate the ‘egalitarian father’s day’ and the promotion of fully-engaged, caring and responsible fatherhood. This date will concentrate our actions in favour of shared care and co-responsible parenthood, advocating for equal, non-transferable and paid maternity and paternity leave at the expense of the Social Security to 100% of the base.¹³³

Aimed at giving visibility to more egalitarian understandings of masculinities and fathering while fostering men’s roles as caregivers, the event is also intended to mobilize men advocating for equal, fully paid and non-transferable parental leave for fathers. Approaching this initiative as a research site to study men’s anti-sexist engagement in enacting critical-creative approaches to masculinities and gender

¹³³ AHIGE 2013, ‘AGENDA COMÚN DE LOS HOMBRES POR LA IGUALDAD. Declaración de Barcelona’ available online at http://www.ahige.org/pdfs/DECLARACION_DE_BARCELONA.pdf accessed on 08/12/2018.

relations, it is interesting to note the many aspects involved in this online activist phenomenon: father's day is reclaimed politically to raise awareness, gain public visibility as a movement, connect activists and potential participants, and engage men as gender justice actors in relation to care politics.

Within the Spanish movement of men for gender equality, promoting involved and responsible fatherhood is considered pivotal in contributing to gender justice, not only for the emotional and relational wellbeing of men as fathers and of their families but also and especially for the political implications that 'co-responsible fatherhood' can have on promoting men's involvement in care work in general as a key area in which gender justice is at stake. I refer here to the embodied care work performed in the private space of unpaid domestic economy mostly by women, involving emotional, loving, reproductive, relational actions as well as house chores and child-care tasks. In a patriarchal context, this type of care work is feminized and devalued, and when this occurs within a capitalist (industrial and post-industrial) context, despite its necessary function to reproduce paid 'productive' labour, feminized unpaid care work is also made invisible (Comas d'Argemir 1990; Hochschild 2012). In the context of industrialization, the gendered division of labour contributed to raising and socializing men to become paid workers and family breadwinners, preventing them from having to carry out care work and ensuring they received it from women. At the same time, women are socialized from an early age to acquire the affective, embodied and relational skills to perform care work. Showing that these caring skills are socio-culturally learned and become part of people's embodied experience is a central point in the gendered analysis of the division of care labour (Borderías Mondéjar, Carrasco, and Torns Martín 2011; Doucet 2007; Risman 1987; Bosoni and Westerling 2018). Naturalized caring skills (or a lack of them) sustain not only an unequal distribution of care labour among men and women but also the moral obligation to perform it (Comas d'Argemir 2017): women learn to consider it as their gendered family duty and a 'gift of love' (Gunnarsson 2013; Federici 2017), expecting no recognition in return. Therefore, we view care work as a pivotal political arena for feminist analysis and politics, given its fundamental role in creating the conditions that make social reproduction possible: power differentials and economic relations are negotiated for social reproduction.

Thus, the aim of fatherhood and care politics in anti-sexist masculinity mobilizations is to intervene transformatively in what feminist analysis has defined as the gendered division of care labour, starting with promoting men's involvement in a

responsible fatherhood. Involving men in childcare is also considered from a policy level as a strategy for engaging men in performing care work in a broader sense and contributing to a more gender-equal division of labour (Scambor et al. 2015). Learning how to care *about* others, supports an ethics of care (Elliott 2016). Promoting *caring fathers* seems to work as an effective entry-point for men to engage with care work, building on the material-discursive importance of the father's role and its intersections with gendered men's practices and the social construction of masculinity. As Hochschild noted in her study of 'the second shift,' even when men recognized women's willingness to work outside the home, they expected them to perform the whole share of domestic labour at home, because they did not have a 'notion of manhood that encouraged them to be active parents and householders' (Roberts 2018, 277).

According to the ways in which masculinities are socialized in western industrial contemporary cultures, parenthood has been described as a marker of the entrance into adulthood (Marks and Palkovitz 2004) and as a rite of passage in the life course of men (Hobson 2002). The precarious labour market due to the economic crisis and the neoliberal celebration of youth and individualism might change the ways in which fatherhood is performed. Indeed, studies on contemporary fatherhood explain that ideal 'good fathers' change historically and contextually (Gerson 1997 in Abril 2016) because of the intersections of economic, institutional and cultural conditions. On the basis of the research project 'Work changes gender' (Abril and Puchert 2005), and in his thesis on committed fathers in Spain Abril argues that the recent changes in the economy of labour (increased flexibility, precarity, unemployment and a less structured organization of productive work) facilitate the involvement of men in reproductive and care work (Abril 2016, 61). These dynamics ask men to re-negotiate their identities as men beyond the normative association between manhood-productive work and as a father beyond the breadwinner role (Abril, 2016, 67). This process is not linear, it encompasses men's socio-economic diversity and different degrees of personal willingness to become more caring fathers: some men are moved by the 'new circumstances' of economic changes in work organization, and others add to this their volunteer commitment to be more involved in care and reproductive labour, and are called 'new men' (Holter 2007; quoted in Abril 2016, 82).

In the analysis provided in this chapter on how AHIGE and other actors in the Spanish movement of 'men for gender equality' are advocating for egalitarian

fatherhood, shifting meanings associated with fatherhood are entangled with shifting meanings associated with manhood. That is how ‘mobilizing *as men*’ can have onto-epistemological potentials for men’s practise of anti-sexist care politics. Activists and professionals in the field of engaging men into more egalitarian relations speak about *paternidad activa, cuidadora, igualitaria, responsable, and co-responsable* (active, caring, egalitarian, responsible and co-responsible fatherhood) to describe the active caring role of the father who takes an equal share in the work required to raise a child. In institutional policy it is common to speak about fatherhoods in the plural and about *nuevas paternidades* (new fatherhoods) to indicate men’s recent willingness and engagement in caring parental work, a phenomenon which becomes exemplary of changes in what men do as men: this it is frequently labelled as *nuevas masculinidades* (new masculinities). In this chapter, I draw upon these concepts to understand the ways in which fatherhood and care politics are elaborated by men involved in anti-sexist masculinity politics, starting from the online campaign on egalitarian fatherhood.

3. Mobilizing in favour of egalitarian fatherhood

Promoting co-responsible fatherhood is part of the ‘Common agenda of men for gender equality’, signed by AHIGE. Points 4 and 5 say:

4. We promote co-responsibility of men and shared care work, with special reference to the responsibility of men in our own self-care and the care of dependents and elderly people, supporting measures to facilitate work and personal life balance.
5. We promote active and responsible fatherhood, encouraging inclusion of the involvement of fathers and improved parenting skills in the preparatory courses before childbirth, natal and post-natal mother&child care. In this regard, we claim that maternity and paternity leave must be equal, non-transferable and paid by the Social Security at 100% of salary.¹³⁴

AHIGE’s positioning in relation to fatherhood and care politics is expressed in the concept of *corresponsabilidad* (co-responsibility). During my fieldwork with the

¹³⁴ AHIGE 2013, ‘AGENDA COMÚN DE LOS HOMBRES POR LA IGUALDAD. Declaración de Barcelona’ available online at http://www.ahige.org/pdfs/DECLARACION_DE_BARCELONA.pdf accessed on 08/12/2018.

members of *Homes Igualitaris*-AHIGE Catalunya in Barcelona, I first read the term during the public talks on co-responsibility given by two members in a roundtable dedicated to the very question of *corresponsabilidad* at Casa Golferichs (Oct 2012). Co-responsibility is a social policy concept coined to indicate the ‘equitable or equal share of the responsibilities, rights, duties and opportunities related with the domestic sphere, the family and care labour by men and women’ (2006) also aimed at challenging the gendered division of public/private labour. This concept emerged in gender equality policies as a shift away from the limited approach of ‘*conciliación*’ (lit. conciliation, work-life balance): the latter addressed labour policies to women to enable them to balance work and personal life without impinging on men’s productive and reproductive labour practices (Bustelo and Lombardo 2009; Goñi-Legaz and Ollo-López 2016). This shift from work-life balance to co-responsibility in labour policies was encouraged institutionally by the Spanish government,¹³⁵ and AHIGE supports this shift towards involving men in care work by promoting co-responsible men’s practices roles as fathers, partners and relatives (Gabo 2016).¹³⁶



Il·lustració 13

In the Spanish men-for-gender-equality movement, two main public actions contribute to advocating and promoting men’s co-responsibility when it comes to care politics. The first implies joining the action-oriented Spanish section of the international platform of organizations [PPIina: Plataforma por Permisos Iguales e Intransferibles de Nacimiento y Adopción](#) collecting signatures for parental leave that ought to be ‘equal, non-transferable and fully paid for every parent’ (PLENT, www.equalandnontransferable.org). In Spain, parental leave currently amounts to 16 weeks for mothers and 5 weeks for fathers. The second public action consists on celebrating March 19th as *Día del padre igualitario* (Egalitarian fatherhood day) and organizing public initiatives to give visibility to and promote men’s co-responsible

¹³⁵ *De la conciliación a la corresponsabilidad: buenas prácticas y recomendaciones*, Instituto de la Mujer report available at <http://www.inmujer.gob.es/observatorios/observIgualdad/estudiosInformes/docs/010-conciliacion.pdf>, accessed on 30/10/2018.

¹³⁶ Gabo 30/06/2016 ‘Por la corresponsabilidad...’ (Editorial), online publication in *Hombres Igualitarios* online journal, available at , accessed 28/02/2018.

fatherhood. These activities include setting up theatre-type performances in public spaces, giving talks open to the public as well as addressed to local governments and administrations, screening relevant films as material for debate in cineforum events, participating in roundtables on co-responsible fatherhood, and collecting signatures for the above-mentioned PPIINA campaign through online platforms such as Change.org.

Egalitarian Father's Day becomes an activist issue by giving voice to men-for gender-equality fatherhood politics and showing their positioning, advocating for equal and non-transferable parental leave, joining public conversations and debates at local and national levels. In the performances in public squares, these objectives are combined with a joyful celebration of childcare tasks. In 2013, performances were set up in Madrid (*plaza de Oriente*) and Barcelona (*Plaça de la Vila de Gràcia*). In these performances a small group of men occupy public space to vindicate care tasks related to childcare and household chores: they wear aprons and bring ironing boards, clothes-hanging racks, baby bathtubs and dolls to the square; they iron, do the dishes and the laundry, hang clothes, show how to bathe a baby and play with their children in front of a billboard that says '*Hombres por la corresponsabilidad en los cuidados*' (men for co-responsibility in care tasks). The performance is open for people who pass by to join in.¹³⁷

From 2014 onwards AHIGE invited its members to celebrate March 19th and other activist dates (October 21st against machoist violences, and May 17th as the international day against LGBTphobia)¹³⁸ through online campaigns launched mostly in Facebook and Twitter. On all three dates, AHIGE created Facebook events and specific hashtags for the occasion. As a way to mobilize men and gain visibility, members of the movement were asked to post images of themselves and self-portraits holding signs.

During the months of October and November 2014, AHIGE created the event *¡Hombre! visibilízate contra la violencia machista* on Facebook and collected more than a hundred photographs and selfies of men expressing their anti-violence stand with the sign '*Hombres contra la violencia machista*' (men against machoist violence), often accompanied by the message '*hasta el #25N*' or the hashtags

¹³⁷ A video of the performance organized by AHIGE with the organization StopMachismo in Madrid in 2013 is accessible [here](#), accessed on 09/12/2018.

¹³⁸ Whereas the international day against VAW is 25th of November, AHIGE celebrates the 21st of October to remember the first demonstration of 'men for gender equality' in Sevilla in 2006, and from the *Declaración de Barcelona*, this date is institutionalised within the movement to manifest men's commitment against VAW.

#violenciadegenero *#ahige*.¹³⁹ The aim of this campaign was manifold: to gain visibility as a collective movement, to connect members' commitment across different cities in Spain and internationally; to add personalized faces to the anti-violence claim expressed by AHIGE's motto ('let's break the silence around violence, silence make us complicit'), and, as with the hashtag *#ruedadehombres*, to finally generate mobilization for the *rueda de hombres* organized on October 21st every year in many cities.



Il·lustració 15



Il·lustració 14

Online campaigning as a strategy for commitment was repeated for the international day against LGTBphobia on May 17th, an activist date introduced in the *Agenda Común* during the national meeting of the movement in Sant Boi, Barcelona in November 2013.¹⁴⁰ With the title *Hombres por la diversidad afectivo-sexual, de género y familiar* (Men in favor of affective-sexual, gender and family diversity) in 2015 the online mobilization was launched by AHIGE asking men to post their photographs with the messages: *Hombres contra la LGTBfobia* u *Hombres por la diversidad afectivo-sexual, de género y familiar*traduce. In 2016, AHIGE re-launched the campaign with *Homes Igualitaris* and *Homes Valencians per la Igualtat* and the collaboration of *Federación Estatal de Lesbianas, Gays, Transexuales y Bisexuales* (FELGTB).¹⁴¹ The organizers of the campaign proposed to publish tweets and posts mentioning @ahigeorg with the hashtags provided: *#diversidadsexual*, *#masculinidades* (#sexualdiversity, #masculinities in 2015) and *#hombrescontralalgtbfobia*

¹³⁹ The images shown in this chapter come from the online campaigns launched by AHIGE through Facebook, and are accessible publicly.

¹⁴⁰ During this meeting, I could participate at the plenary session in which representatives from groups presented themselves, while during assembly and discussion sessions I was not granted access. It was during these sessions that the date of 17th May was formally added to the document *Agenda de los Hombres por la Igualdad*, collectively elaborated and signed in Barcelona on occasion of the conference CIME2011.

¹⁴¹ To my knowledge this is the first time AHIGE collaborates with the FELGTB.

#afectoentrehombres #masculinidadesplurales (#menagainstlgbtphobia, #afectamongmen, #pluralmasculinities in 2016).¹⁴²

The egalitarian fatherhood online campaign was first launched in 2015 and repeated in 2016 a month before March 19th to allow participants to join the event and share their photographs and videos on the Facebook event [*Por una paternidad, igualitaria, responsable y cuidadora*](#) (In favour of a caring, responsible and egalitarian fatherhood) with the following mottoes indicated in the instructions of the campaign: *Por una paternidad igualitaria, Por una paternidad responsable, Por unas masculinidades cuidadoras, Soy Papá y cuido a mis hijos* (In favour of egalitarian fatherhood, responsible fatherhood, caring masculinities, I am a dad and I take care of about my children), or a free-choice motto. The hashtag provided by AHIGE for Twitter e Instagram was *#padresigualitarios*. In 2016, AHIGE co-organized the action with *Homes Igualitaris, Homes Valencians per la Igualtat* and *Papás Blogueros*, and with the collaboration of the LGBT federation *Federación Estatal de Lesbianas, Gays, Transexuales y Bisexuales* (FELGTB, State Federation of LGTB people); with mothers' network *Madresfera*; with *Plataforma de Permisos Iguales e Intransferibles por Nacimiento y Adopción* (PPIINA) and with the men's for equality forum *Foro de Hombres por la Igualdad* (FHXI, Forum of Men for Equality). These events ask for sharing personal visual material as photographs, videos with messages and hashtags, a practice that internet users recognize as legitimate transnational communication and a strategy for political campaigning.



Il·lustració 16

¹⁴² AHIGE, 2016, Description of Facebook event [Hombres por la diversidad afectivo-sexual, de género y familiar](https://www.facebook.com/events/655849087889137/) (Men in favor of affective-sexual, gender and family diversity), online at <https://www.facebook.com/events/655849087889137/>, accessed on 07/01/2019.



Il·lustració 17

In order to make men's engagement in responsible fatherhood visible, the online campaign generated an array of images of men holding signs with #padresigualitarios (#egalitarianfathers) vindicating their own involvement and an equal share between both parents.



Il·lustració 18



Il·lustració 19

The vast majority of the images show men together with children, while holding the sign and/or while engaging in caregiving activities. The pictures show the written messages or hashtag (as requested by the event) but the message that really comes forward is the men 'doing care' (self)portrayed in the pictures. Irrespective of how each photograph is taken, all the men pose while acting as affectionate and engaged fathers, caught by the camera while playing with their kids, helping them with homework, in the intimacy of their kitchens and living rooms, or doing household chores such as cooking, ironing or taking care of another person. The photograph is taken inside the private domestic space, or in open spaces in outdoor activities with the children. Egalitarian fatherhood becomes both the stage and the purpose of the online demonstration based on practicing what it advocates for: *caring masculinities*, including the concept of 'responsible fathers' used by participants, who become active subjects of the mobilization and the practice which is advocated for.



Il·lustració 21



Il·lustració 20



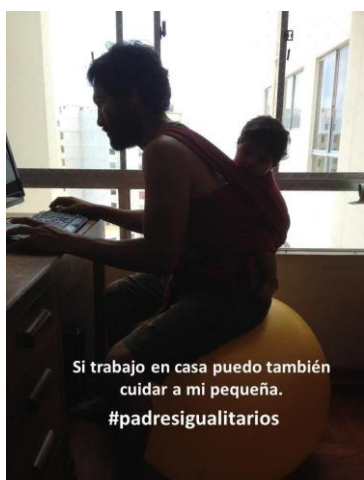
Il·lustració 22

These images are intended to celebrate fatherhood in its egalitarian and co-responsible activities in practice: photographs are self-portraits or taken by another person during those caring activities, and some of them are explicitly performative. Humour comes into the message, or the sense of pride in being an ‘egalitarian father’, combined with the simple pleasure and joy of spending time with their children.

The positive affective communication of these images seems to convey the effort and willingness to re-signify the practice of fatherhood as relational, caring, emotionally involved, joyful, and co-responsible; that is, egalitarian. The practice of fatherhood is thus reconfigured and enacted according to egalitarian caring values; furthermore, what men do and value *as men* is also at stake: this is when fatherhood care politics becomes a crucial part of anti-sexist masculinity politics.

Sharing this campaign online allows for rapid network communication and community-building.

Supporters of the campaign show their participation



Il·lustració 24



Il·lustració 23

transnationally as well, based in other countries. In this case Omar from Lima, Perú shares the following images

and adds the text: ‘If I work from home I can take care of my little one too’ and ‘me too I clean, well...we clean!’ (Picture 24).

Solidarity and celebration of responsible fatherhood is also performed by women who publish photographs of their partners (men) in care-taking activities. ‘We join the campaign for egalitarian fatherhood because he can also take care (of the baby)’ writes a blogger from Madrid. Clara, also from Madrid, says: ‘Happy day to all egalitarian, caring and responsible fathers. And happy to day all the mothers as we accompany you in this adventure of raising the future.’ Another blogger celebrates the campaign and adds a link to her blog and comments: ‘Happy Egalitarian Father's Day! This year I want to congratulate all the fathers, especially all those who are totally involved in upbringing the little ones. And I share with the future parents this because it will be very interesting for them. [#Padresigualitarios](#)’ (Maribel, Facebook user).



Il·lustració 27



#Padresigualitarios



Il·lustració 26



"Soy papá y también cuido a mi hijo"



#padresigualitarios

Il·lustració 25

The vindication that men can be caring actors too (as the hashtag of 2015 campaign enthusiastically says *#hecandoit!* with reference to PPiNA logo) also demonstrates men’s confrontation against those socio-cultural norms and relations that feminize and devalue care work (Comas d’Argemir 1995) and that prevent men from learning the embodied and emotional skills required to engage relationally in caring for others (Hanlon 2012). This is expressed in comments such as: ‘*Soy padre y cuido de mi hijo*’ (I am a father and I take care of my child’, as to emphasise the meaning and practice associated to being a father) and ‘*Los hombres también saben cuidar*’ (men can take care too). Alongside *#padresigualitarios*, other messages and keywords used are: *#masculinidescuidadoras*, *soy padre y cuido a mis hijos*, *los hombres también saben cuidar*, *hombres aprendiendo a cuidar* (*#caringmasculinities*, I am a dad and I take care

of my children, men can take care too, men learning to taking care). These messages and images, partly provided by the organizers and partly circulated by participants, express the urgency of addressing care work as a practice that men *as men* are able to do, can learn to do, and should commit to in order to become more egalitarian.

‘Fathers’ acquire political significance and become a strong political identifier in activist terms. ‘*Soy padre, Soc pare, Soy padre*’ is repeated as a mantra in the video campaign *Somos #padresigualitarios* launched by the group *Papas Blogueros* on occasion of Father’s Day 2016 in order to collaborate with the homonymous online Facebook campaign. Men are primarily mobilized as (egalitarian) fathers; the potential for change is seen in the relational implications of engaged and caring fatherhood; moreover, the change they advocate for is envisioned in their everyday practices and experiences.



Il·lustració 28

While the objective of the action is to raise awareness on the importance of taking up co-responsible father roles and giving them visibility, the manifesto of the campaign also extends men’s involvement in care work to a wider political claim: doing house work, caring for a partner or elderly people, cleaning the house. This is made explicit with the unified figuration of *masculinidades cuidadoras* for men’s egalitarian identifications. This becomes visible in some of the shared images and messages, while the majority of photographs portray men with their children. The efforts to extend the concept of caring masculinities beyond fatherhood-related activities, with the claim that men are capable of care work too, is also evident in the description of the 2016 campaign:

A year later, the men-for-equality movement wants to make visible new ways of being fathers (*nuevas paternidades*) and caring masculinities (*masculinidades cuidadoras*). It is an initial but irreversible change of men in favour of equality. That is why on March 19 we celebrate the Egalitarian Father's Day to promote and claim that *we too can take care of other people* (AHIGE online campaign 2016, emphasis mine).

Most of the photographs portray men in educational or playful activities with children, involved in tasks that are considered the most appealing, easy and ‘clean’ in childcare. Only a few show men’s involvement in doing care work beyond parenting tasks, such as

caring for other people, cooking, ironing (Pictures 29, 30, 31).

4. Embodied politics of visibility and protest



Il·lustració 30



Il·lustració 29



Il·lustració 31

The online campaign under the heading *paternidades igualitarias* brings together men's anti-sexist mobilization so as to make visible their involvement in care-taking activities starting with responsible fatherhood. Caring masculinities are practiced and performed with and without a camera, and their images are used to visibilize activist claims and political engagements. Texts, images, hashtags, tweets, selfies and videos are tools for this activism that benefits from the trans-media, inter-textual and perpetual connectivity.

In the event *Día del padre igualitario* visibility plays a crucial role: the posted pictures show the posters provided that claim for caring masculinities and shared parental work as fathers. Facebook events celebrated in March 2015 and again 2016 were described with the mottoes: *Visibilicemos una forma igualitaria de entender la paternidad. Visibilicemos las masculinidades cuidadoras. El 19 de marzo: Día del padre igualitario. Para la Igualdad: permisos iguales, intransferibles y pagados al 100%*.¹⁴³ (Let's make an egalitarian manner of understanding fatherhood. Let's make caring masculinities visible. On March 19th: egalitarian father's day. For gender equality: equal, non-transferable and fully paid leaves). The intention to gain visibility is a recurring element in AHIGE online mobilizations, starting with anti-violence actions where it is fundamental. Visibility allows activist performances, to break the silence and to become visible *as men* against machoist violence.

¹⁴³ Description of the event, Facebook retrieved <https://www.facebook.com/groups/diadelpadreigualitario/> accessed 04/11/2018.

Visibility is thus not only a strategy for spreading a message and denouncing violence, but seems to function also as a goal in itself, as a starting point for encouraging anti-sexist practices in men's lives. In LGBT+ demonstrations visibility implies gaining social space and legitimacy as (political) subjects, and this visibility is gained with the body as a central actor of the protest (Enguix 2017). With the egalitarian fatherhood campaign visibility is used as a strategy to raise awareness and to engage men in care work. Borrowed from civil rights struggles, this strategy is inscribed within the dominant epistemological framework of western thought that prioritises the visual in knowledge and political claims based on representation and recognition (Brighenti 2007). Through visibility, men here demonstrate their caring capabilities and claim for individual authenticity in selfies as part of a political strategy.

Rather than being a message of protest, we could read in these claims the willingness to verbalize the hope for more equitable relations, the attempt to show how egalitarian fatherhood and care by men can be practiced. As a result, the imaginary for masculinities is broadened to embrace active roles in childcare, gender-aware parenthood and care work. In parallel, the need for positive role models emerges, in order to change the collective imaginary of what appropriate fatherhoods and masculinities should be. In a public interview for the gender-sensitive online newspaper *La Independent.cat*, AHIGE and *Homes Igualitaris* representatives explain: 'The aim is to let people know about new role models for those fathers who are actively involved in raising their children and, in this way, to promote egalitarian masculinities' (Escudiero, interview quoted in *Tercera Información* 2016).¹⁴⁴ Participants thus believe in the positive influence that the dissemination of personal images of caring fathers can have in encouraging other men to practice childcare and 'egalitarian masculinities.' In the same article, the spokesperson for *Homes Valencians per la Igualtat* adds that this campaign allows caring men, as well as men who stand for gender justice, to see and to know that 'we are not alone' (Fons, interview quoted in *Tercera Información* 2016).¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ 'El objetivo es dar a conocer nuevos referentes de aquellos padres que se implican activamente en la crianza de sus hijos e hijas y fomentar así las masculinidades igualitarias.' In *Tercera Información*: 'El movimiento de hombres por la igualdad y Papás bloggers lanzan la campaña #padresigualitarios para visibilizar a los hombres que cuidan.' The movement of men for equality and dad bloggers launch the campaign #padresigualitarios to give visibility to caregiving men). Available online at <http://www.tercerainformacion.es/antigua/spip.php?article100530>, accessed on 10/12/2018.

¹⁴⁵ *Tercera Información*: 'El movimiento de hombres por la igualdad y Papás bloggers lanzan la campaña #padresigualitarios para visibilizar a los hombres que cuidan.' The movement of men for equality and dad bloggers launch the campaign #padresigualitarios to give visibility to caregiving men). Available online at <http://www.tercerainformacion.es/antigua/spip.php?article100530>, accessed on 10/12/2018.

The activist aim of creating a network and engaging participants in action is combined with the need for generating agreement and support among (other) men and women for making masculinities more caring and egalitarian.

For the participants in the egalitarian fatherhood campaign visibility is an activist performative tool to create personal and political identifiers *as men* while documenting and spreading caring masculinities. Visibility is thus claimed for men's caring bodies as a tool for showing minority practices and for changing gendered norms. As Enguix explained with the concept of 'cuerpo-protesta' (Enguix 2012, 886), political expressions in which bodies are the actors of protest necessarily rely on visibility to challenge social norms, voice political claims and create social imaginaries of demonstrations and their agents: 'bodies not only mediate protests, they are protest. The re-signification of body-as-protest requires visibility and context, a context that bodies-in-protest themselves help to produce' (Enguix 2012, 886, translation mine). In the campaign for egalitarian fatherhood, I suggest that digital images of men's caring bodies appear to be used not only as the *tool* for mobilizing awareness but also as the *subject* of protest.

Care-giving men as subjects and objects of photographic portraits is an uncommon occurrence in mainstream media and could be a subversive act when it comes to the politics of representation as well as to intersectional gender norms. The repertoire of selfies shared on social media is vast, nevertheless normativity in doing selfies (taking and sharing them) exists. Selfies as social artifacts intertwine with gendered and raced practices (Williams and Marquez 2015). What happens when a white grandpa shares a selfie as a 'caring masculinities' activist while doing the dishes? What emotions does it stir among fellow participants in the campaign and among outsiders? The image does not pass unnoticed and I would argue that here we also find the possibility of disrupting ideas of who counts as activist and which practices count as activism. As with other social media campaigns, bodies and private life are exposed in the cyberspace becoming a stage for collective action in order to generate awareness and affective engagement among those who are sensitive to gender justice matters. In the multilayered mix of self-documentation, the quest for authenticity and men's willingness to show their efforts towards egalitarian and caring masculinities, they raise questions connected to the online performing of activism and anti-sexist masculinity care politics mediated by the act of photo-sharing with *#padreigualitario*.

The egalitarian fatherhood campaign also tries to overcome the gendered shame that comes as a punishment for crossing the boundaries of normative masculinity when entering a realm marked as ‘feminine.’ Engaging in care work is commonly seen as a loss in men’s status and can be the object of sick jokes. As we have seen, campaign participants feel the need to prove their caring capabilities. One of the members of *Papasblogueros* confesses that this online action can contribute to the possibility of ‘losing fear and shame in talking to other men about these questions’ (Perez, interview quoted in Canet 2016): tellingly, shame and fear are related to how men are seen by other men, what makes us think about the emotional and relational dynamics implied when changing men’s practices. The campaign itself calls men into action by challenging gendered fears, and making themselves visible (*‘dar la cara’*): ‘Have you already shared your photograph while caring?’ asks AHIGE and *Homes Igualitaris* in Facebook pages, reposting other members’ images and messages as examples so as to increase participation. Gendered shame and fear are turned performatively into the pride of taking responsibility as egalitarian activist (*and*) father.

Importantly, men’s gendered affect related to their involvement in care work and fatherhood activism is connected with the ways masculinity norms intersect with class. As Dr. Klett-Davies reminded me,¹⁴⁶ when working class men or unemployed men engage in childcare they usually do not celebrate it publicly (Klett-Davies 2010), neither do they reclaim it as an achievement to be proud of on social media. In relation to this, Usdansky uses ‘lived egalitarianism’ to refer to the practice of doing care work by working-class men, and ‘spoken egalitarianism’ for the tendency among higher class men to speak about this although they engage less in domestic work (Usdansky 2011). Gendered affects are thus always already classed and aged; in the online campaign, the move from ‘losing fear and shame’ towards ‘claiming caring masculinities’ is a manifestation of a particular social positioning, in which class and cultural capital material-discursively allow this embodied politics of visibility and its situated affects.

Talking about the differently embodied gendered emotions and effects of caring masculinities, we should not forget the disproportionate praise some men receive when engaging in child caring tasks, for the professionalization associated to masculinity and men’s apparent exceptionality in this field.¹⁴⁷ We can therefore connect the voluntary claim of public visibility for caring with ‘new’ masculinities as coming from a

¹⁴⁶ Personal conversation, May 2017.

¹⁴⁷ A similar problematic dynamic occurs with some men in gender justice activism in general.

privileged position among men, whose status is not questioned on the basis of class (neither of sexual orientation). Their socio-cultural capital provides them with the connections and political and intellectual strategies to organize such a mobilization. Despite the socio-economic diversity of the men involved in caring fatherhood roles (Grbich 1987; Hobson 2002; Musumeci and Santero 2018), middle-class employed men have more freedom and resources to voluntarily engage in caring roles to different degrees and making it a practice for self-appraisal and activist visibility. Nevertheless we could also consider the pervasiveness of social media, together with the homosocial networking among men, as entry points for differently situated men to renegotiate imaginaries as men, as fathers and as caregivers.

Indeed the networking possibilities that social media offer as a communication technology embedded in users' everyday life, that is, what Senft called 'networked reflective solidarity' (Senft 2008), are used in this campaign to strengthen the relations among members, outreach towards outsiders, increase feelings of belonging to a transformative movement towards 'new fatherhoods' and is also a way to seek other men's approval and support. The importance of feeling connected to other men in advocating for egalitarian masculinities takes advantages of the perpetual connectivity we live in, and also seems to respond to an existing gendered homosocial dynamic that functions as a cultural glue sticking men's feelings of respectability, self-acceptance, group-belonging and self-worth. Sociological studies show that homocialities are negotiated among men in patriarchal cultures as a way for patriarchies to sustain themselves (Lipman-Blumen 1976; Rubin 1975; Hearn 1987, 1994; Bird 1996; Broadbridge and Hearn 2008; Gabriel 2014). Other studies in men's gender-conscious collective activities have shown that homosociality and seeking other men's support and acceptance is crucial in giving participants the confidence to propose changes in masculinity norms without having their manhood questioned (Oddone 2017; Camoletto and Bertone 2017). The affective forces mobilizing this campaign suggest that a symbolic re-evaluation of care labour in relation to masculinity is needed for men to take part in it (Hochschild 1989, 12 in Roberts 2018, 277), and making of it a political claim contributes to this. Similarly, a performative affective shift in the online campaign moving 'caring masculinities' and 'egalitarian fatherhood' from shame to pride seems to work in this re-evaluating direction for engaging men in care labour and mobilise them collectively. Participating in a men's discussion group or in a virtual selfie-campaign not only builds on these homosocial dynamics but also reproduces them,

generating collective pride and a sense of togetherness. We could understand this as a strategy members rely on while not being fully aware of this and of the privileges this powerful dynamic can recreate. In the case of the egalitarian fatherhood campaigns this peer solidarity network is enacted by sharing others' posts and selfies, by commenting on them, and by publicly asking the imagined Facebook audience to make visible men's personal involvement in caring masculinities and fatherhoods.

Men who carry out care work either do it in silence, or they turn it into a collective mobilization *as men* in which the networking among other men and the positive concepts they create to re-signify masculinity (egalitarian fatherhood, caring masculinities) help them to give voice and embody what men are supposed to do *as men*, without questioning their manhood. These dynamics are at the core of my analysis of the online campaign organized against LGBTphobia by anti-sexist men in Spain, in which mobilizing *as men* is crucial in renegotiating men-to-men relations beyond homophobia. This campaign questions normative masculinity while giving credit to alternative clearly-defined masculinities (*affect among men, men against machoist violence, plural masculinities*) and thus it keeps the manhood of the participants secured (Nardini 2018).

In my affirmative reading, I would like to see men's selfies as 'material visual practices' intertwined with their everyday relations (Gómez Cruz and Lehmuskallio 2016) with the hope that they won't remain just visual material shortcuts to earn praise online, but rather interfere affectively with their personal embodied daily commitments, and thus become activist material. Elaborating on the phenomenon of mutual interaction between consumers and producers of selfies, Williams and Marquez (2015) termed this 'conspicuous presumption'. This term can help us understand the egalitarian fatherhood campaign as a strategy that explicitly relies on the conspicuous presumption of men's material visual practices for increasing collective support, gender justice engagement and movement building. The effectiveness of this method is expressed in the report AHIGE made public on Facebook after the campaign in 2015:

The Facebook event created for the Egalitarian Father's Day reached over 600 participants and 1800 visits, and we received about 60 photographs from more than 130 men. With these data, we have demonstrated that caring masculinities are possible, that reaching beyond the limitations machoism has imposed on men (in the emotional, domestic, care field and in personal relationships) is possible. (we also demonstrated

that) Men who self-question machoism in this sphere, and are willing to publicly show it, do exist. And that with equality, a social justice goal, we do all win, us men too.¹⁴⁸

The goal of the campaign, that is, to show that caring masculinities are possible, exist and men are willing to put their face on it, is considered as achieved. Visibility here is claimed for caring masculinities; images move affects (from shame to responsibility and pride) to engage men into anti-sexist fatherhood politics. Even if care tasks are practiced and made visible online by those actors who hold the socio-cultural capital to do it, they challenge machoist culture constraining men's relational, emotional and caring skills and experiences. The contribution to gender justice is clearly expressed and machoist culture is approached critically (questioning it and its consequences) and creatively (proposing alternatives). The emphasis on the positive reward of equality for everybody and for men as well seems to be addressed to those who, thinking within a logic of competition, would fear 'gender equality' as an attack to men's privileges and powers by favouring women's. This last sentence resonates with AHIGE key motto '*los hombres ganamos con la igualdad*' (men gain with equality).¹⁴⁹

In opening up the spectrum of masculinities as men and caregivers, the tension expressed between the online performing of 'caring' and 'egalitarian' masculinities, and the everyday co-responsible practices that this campaign advocates for is notable; there is a tension between labels used as political identifiers and the praxis they promise to encourage. We can witness this tension in the need to verbalise one's own *compromiso* beyond the social media appearance. Many of the comments, interestingly, speak of 'commitment' to refer to the act of participating beyond the activist date or act in itself. '*Gracias por tu compromiso*' (Thank you for your commitment), is a common reply to many of the pictures uploaded, either from Spain or from other members virtually connected from Chile, Ecuador, Argentina. Indeed, the event closes with the post: '*Hemos visibilizado las masculinidades cuidadoras en el día del #padreigualitario. Ahora nos quedan 364 oportunidades para seguir visibilizándolas en nuestro día a día*' (We made caring masculinities visible in the day of egalitarian fatherhood. Now we

¹⁴⁸ Retrieved from the online journal 'hombres igualitarios' at: http://www.antiguahombresigualitarios.ahige.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2113:las-nuevas-paternidades-se-visibilizan-en-las-redes-sociales&catid=45:nuestras-actividades&Itemid=55 accessed on 27/02/2018, currently unavailable.

¹⁴⁹ On AHIGE website we can read more on their key mottoes that explain their section 'philosophy': <http://ahige.org/filosofia/claves/los-hombres-ganamos-con-la-igualdad> accessed on 27/02/2018

have 364 opportunities left to keep visibilizing them in our daily life).¹⁵⁰

5. Anti-sexist masculinity politics of fatherhood and care

Current social movements, such as the men-for-equality movement, undoubtedly rely increasingly on social media to generate and coordinate networks, organize actions and stimulate future engagements. We can see a rhizomatic cross-referentiality in this, because after successful cases of hashtag- or selfie-activism, these strategies become recognisable as activist practices online, taken up by different forms of mobilizations regardless of their political promises and goals. To this we can link the reflection on the tools used by activists for their online appearance, in particular the cross-cultural usage of selfie with a sign as the new visual symbol for social media activism more than other strategies like generating music, videos, newsletters or lengthy text. The use of selfies in hashtag-activism denotes a more personal/personalized form of manifesting commitment than just posting a link, a message, a text. Not only the person and his/her private life is the protagonist of the action, but also he/she is identifiable and connected to an online personal account. In the campaign *#padreigualitario* different things overlap: documenting the existing reality of men proud to be co-responsible fathers and partners; giving visibility to the international political campaign in favour of equal and non-transferable paternity leave; and finally, encouraging themselves as well as other men by creating a social imaginary supported collectively as men to adopt caregiving roles and daily practices towards *paternidades igualitarias*, claiming and showing that *los hombres también saben cuidar*. Visibility is also reclaimed as an engagement tool among activists themselves, as a proven manifestation of belonging to this collective action of men publicly committed to gender justice, and as a demonstration, in both senses of the term, that men are and ought to be involved in parental and care work equally.

The act of showing the activist's personal involvement is also a necessary condition for his claims against gender-based violence or in favour of *paternidades igualitarias*. As mentioned already, among the members of the men-for-equality

¹⁵⁰ As in the final public post AHIGE wrote on March 19th 2015, available on Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/events/974956579234065/permalink/989697781093278/>, accessed on 5/11/2018.

movement, while protest is directed towards the material-symbolic coordinates of structural and cultural *machismo*, social change is imagined and negotiated within one's own daily interactions as a man. This peculiarity gives anti-sexist men's mobilization a different twist when compared to other, more dialectic and oppositional, social movements; here 'caring masculinities' and 'egalitarian fathers' are used as political identifiers to mobilize men into gender justice, and reclaimed as locations to speak from so to show their daily involvement into doing care work and demonstrate 'they exist too' and 'they too are capable of it.' The focus on men's caring capabilities in the egalitarian fatherhood campaign seems to emphasise the urgency to question the cultural stereotype according to which men would be less apt than women to do care work. According to this gendered and thus relational stereotype women in turn are by nature and instinct better caregivers than men and care tasks become part of women's job. This stereotype is related to the material-symbolic conditions underpinning the gendered division of labour constitutively connected to kinship organization; as doing gendered care labour is part of creating kinship (Comas d'Argemir 1995).

Moreover, thinking with feminist economics, we could argue that reclaiming caring capabilities *as men* seems to be addressed to ensure a symbolic recognition for the work done before and while doing it: on a collective level, by revaluing positively the field of care work (making it claimable, bloggeable, facebookable, twittable); on a personal level, by adding a focus on men's capabilities (as something that is recognizable as a well-done job). Studies on men in paid care work show that a revaluation and a professionalization of the job take place when more men start doing it, independently from their class and ethnicity. Following this, we could read men's presence in online claims of egalitarian fatherhoods and caring masculinities as contributing to the visible 'masculinization' of care labour and thus, according to patriarchal values, to its positive revaluation - or devaluation of men, because both moves coexist. Participants are partly aware of this mechanism: by explaining that promoting caring masculinities can help to create positive role models for men, other men can be stimulated to join the campaign.

That 'men are capable of caring too' is a recurring rhetoric in policy documents and international campaigns aimed at 'engaging men in gender equality' by encouraging responsible caring fatherhood. As per feminist-oriented analysis, these approaches agree on two main points. Firstly, that sexist men's practices, produced by gendered socialization, can be unlearned. Secondly, that men's involvement in childcare can

provide the embodied and relational experience for men to learn how to care *for* others - as studies on fathers have shown (Hanlon 2012; Rehel 2014) - acquiring caring skills beyond fatherhood-related tasks only. Involving men in childcare is thus considered at a policy level as a strategy for engaging men in care work in a broader sense, that is, for contributing to a more gender-equal division of labour (Scambor et al. 2014) and learning how to care *about* others in general, supporting an ethics of care (Elliott 2016).

Men's volunteer involvement in performing caring masculinities is also what characterizes the online campaign on egalitarian fatherhood in Spain advocating for 'new masculinities'. The experience of fatherhood seems crucial to this kind of activism: it mobilizes men's responsibility and awareness of their role as educators and role models, by moving their core affective involvement in caring for and about others towards making more egalitarian and just relations for their children. In this sense 'caring' comes to acquire a double and relational meaning: to care for others and to care about the cause of gender justice. Practicing fatherhood beyond breadwinning values emerges as a material strategy to deal with neoliberal changes in paid work organization and unemployment. Furthermore, as in the campaign, the positive re-evaluation of men's caring practices and competencies as 'egalitarian fatherhood' and 'new masculinities' could come as a strategy to deal with men's sense of loss in situations of crisis and loss of paid work.

The centrality of paid work for men's identities and their social and economic capital that came about with industrialization has been studied in relation to the masculinization of productive labour and the public sphere socio-culturally constituted in opposition to the feminized reproductive labour and private context (Fuller 2000 in Abril 2016). Accordingly, if the values of paid work for men's lives constitute their entrance into adulthood, becoming responsible, gaining respectability and supporting their family's economy, the material-symbolic reconfigurations of men's identities beyond paid work appear as co-constitutive with the material-symbolic reconfigurations of fatherhoods beyond breadwinner roles. As anthropological approaches to care labour point out (Offenhenden 2017), performing gender and kinship relations are combined in providing care: 'doing gender' intersects with 'doing kinship' (Cunill, Masdeu, and Rey 2017) in contextualized care relations. This helps us to understand how, as in the campaign here analysed, 'doing masculinities' in caring cannot be disentangled from 'doing fatherhoods.' However, doing fatherhoods is performed in the campaign mainly through play-related activities; very few references appear in relation to the 'dirty work'

involved in child-caring that most of the time mothers do, even when parents agree to equally share housework.

Few men in the campaign show themselves doing house chores or caring tasks not involving their role as fathers. In this respect, other types of care work remain outside of focus in the campaign. I am talking about house-chores, emotional labour, and caring for elderly family members. In my opinion, this is symptomatic of the fact that, regardless of activists' actual involvement in these socially considered 'demeaning' activities, for the sake of the campaign visibility, in the overall spectrum of care labour 'caring as fathers' is claimed as the primary engagement factor for men to enter care work. The lineage between father and children, with the social importance and status attributed to fatherhood, contributes to granting 'caring as fathers' a privileged location to promote men's engagement in care labour. Moreover, this mechanism confirms that it is more difficult to envision and practice caring responsibilities beyond family ties (Comas d'Argemir 1995).

Fatherhood is also the experience in which male embodiment is central in caring practices and it is so for the first time for many men. In his study on American fathers, Rehel (Rehel 2014) indicates that fathers' involvement in childcare right after birth of the baby generates parenting skills and a sense of responsibility, as well as a shift from helper to co-parenting which also provides the opportunity to develop a more gender-equitable division of labour (Rehel 2014, 110; quoted in Abril 2016, 91). The affective rewards of this embodied care labour are thought to have important transformative potentials in engaging men in nurturing practices and in sharing parental responsibilities and workloads (Hanlon 2012). The experience of fatherhood for many reasons (and passions), can become a relevant context for renegotiating men's practices as men (Doucet 2007, 2007; Morales and Díaz 2006; Romero and Abril 2011).

The affective, embodied and relational nature of caregiving experiences is thought to have transformative potentials for men's practices and masculinities (Deiana and Greco 2012). In Brandth and Kvande's (2016) study on fathering alone during the parental leave in Norway, fathers reported more confidence and self-esteem by feeling loved and appreciated by the child and this gave them a new meaning in life. The authors explain that in this experience of caring, fathering men can re-signify their sense of worthiness as a father and as a man: 'self-worth is not measured against the acquisition of status and resources, but against building care competence, intimate relationships with one's child, and being a person contributing love and security to their

children’ (Berit Brandth and Elin Kvande 2016, 16). In his study on men and care work in Ireland, Hanlon (Hanlon 2012) stressed that caring was believed to offer common rewards including feeling loved and respected for doing it, experiencing emotional intimacy, and feelings and self-esteem, respect, and competence’ (Hanlon 2012, 137 in Elliott 2016, 14). This process emerges in the egalitarian fatherhood campaign analysed here as well, in which feelings of pride and self-worth as fathers or caring men are expressed as mobilizing affects. We have also observed that affects are socially situated and thus the shift from shame to pride via responsibility occurs for those men whose positioning of gender, class and age give them the capital to articulate this online embodied politics of visibility. Accordingly, in this case mobilizing affects are used to publicly claim care competence *as men*. This is an expression of masculinity fatherhood politics because meanings and practices of what matters *as men* are explicitly and collectively reconstructed in relation to fatherhood. Differently from fathers’ rights groups and men’s rights activists’ (MRAs) in mobilizations around fatherhood (see, for instance, (Collier and Sheldon 2006), in anti-sexist groups ‘men’s capabilities and rights to care’ as fathers and relatives are claimed in line with feminist care politics.¹⁵¹

As a peculiarity of this type of mobilization, actors in anti-sexist masculinity politics propose social change starting from their own practices and beliefs *as men*; activists’ personal implication in the transformation advocated for is essential in the making of this politics and in making it accountable. During my fieldwork and conversations with anti-sexist activists in Barcelona, fatherhood is the experience in which those who claim to be anti-sexist should prove they behave so. Among men involved in anti-sexism, identifying oneself as a father before any other professional position is a practice used to denote their care-politics awareness, to show their implication in child caring, and to verbalise the importance of being a father for their life and identity as a man. This happened during the presentations of the different gathering at the estatal meeting of the ‘movement of men for gender equality’ in Sant Boi, Barcelona (November 2013), and also during the individual introductions of AHIGE members when invited to give talks in public settings. Sharing personal anecdotes and experiences of child caring, and expressing love for their children is also a common practice among members. Participating in demonstrations, *ruedas de hombres* and meetings with their toddlers or children is also welcomed and appreciated.

¹⁵¹ This positioning is supported with joining the PPIINA campaign for equal and no-transferable paternity leave and advocates for a social policy based on *co-responsabilidad*.

On the contrary, declining an invitation to participate in a public event because of childcare responsibilities is also felt as a demonstration of the personal-political commitment to be egalitarian men and fathers: for example, David prioritized his childcare duties over joining the roundtable on accountability I invited him to during the conference ‘Men in Movement III’ in Barcelona.¹⁵² Producing visual material to be shared online and asking for visibility of these caring fatherhood practices can be considered parts of this politics and quest for recognition based on personal-politics accountability. Online social platforms offer the space, technologies and networking for performing this demonstration, for creating and disseminating a shared imaginary of ‘caring masculinities’ as ‘new masculinities,’ and for social movement building among participants.

6. Conclusion

The questions I addressed in this chapter relate to the contextualized peculiarity of practicing anti-sexist masculinity politics through online activism on fatherhood and care politics in a global information neoliberal society. As a NSM in the information age, men’s anti-sexism is locally active and working towards being transnationally connected, engaging with virtual sociability as a means of network- building and awareness-generating, in which men’s caring bodies are the protagonists of their own activist performances and claimed transformation. Practicing visibility within the context of the ‘conspicuous presumption’ (Williams A.A and Marquez B.A 2015) (Williams A.A and Marquez B.A 2015) of activist selfies is the strategy put into action to build relatable social imaginaries of and for caring masculinities. As in a recent growing trend among social movements, social media are used as the preferred a platform on which mobilization is informed, kept alive and organized. In this chapter, I started precisely from this last element, namely the activist use of digital platforms as mobilizing tools and awareness-generating spaces in our networked society (Castells 2015). Online campaigning is a strategy adopted to raise awareness, increase participation, and to change social imaginaries and practices. Visibility is claimed to

¹⁵² International Conference ‘Men in movement III: Decolonizing Masculinities. (Re) configuring Bodies, Affects and Politics.’ More details available at: <https://meninmovement.wordpress.com/>, accessed on 04/11/2018.

speak up *as men* and '*romper el silencio*' (breaking the silence) on issues that normative masculinity would rather keep untouched, like men's violence against women. Claiming online visibility could be used to question *Abstract Masculinity* and to show men as gendered subjects. Speaking out against this silence is a way to perform an anti-sexist masculinity engagement in anti-violence actions, and is common as well in online campaigns against LGBTphobia and in favour of caring masculinities.

For AHIGE's members, visibility as caring men is not only used to disseminate information, show concern, and build networks but it is primarily performed as a gendered practice subjected to critique and transformation that serves to show individual commitment and personal involvement with the cause they collectively advocate for. This is the reason why I have called it 'embodied politics of visibility and protest.' Caring men's bodies like the ones uploaded in their online campaigns, and especially the ones on *#padreigualitario*, are uncommon in mainstream media as well as on internet social media. Men of different generations, staging themselves publicly in care-giving activities and reclaiming these as activist moments, is indeed a new phenomenon. The photographs shared and accompanied by the messages *#padreigualitario*, *#masculinidadescuidadoras*, *#nuevasmasculinidades*, and also '*aprendiendo a cuidar*' or '*home co-responsible*,' constitute the mobilizing material visual practices of this online anti-sexist masculinity political campaign. Remaining within the western epistemological and political paradigm of visibility (Bringenti 2007), claiming visibility is borrowed from LGBT+ demonstration strategies and identity-based politics (Enguix 2017), and it is used and reproduced as a vehicle of and for engagement, belonging and shifting imaginaries on masculinities.

Reclaiming an active role as fathers and reclaiming caring masculinities come with the need to open up the spectrum of men's imaginaries and practices. It is done so to promote the involvement of men into a more equal share of care labour; to improve men's affective and relational experiences by including caring and nurturing skills in their daily practices *as men*; and to revalue men's caring competences and responsibilities in the reproductive sphere. These proposals are articulated also against neoliberal economic changes in the organization of labour that currently make it difficult to measure men's status with 'productive' work and breadwinning roles. We have seen that the online performance of 'embodied politics of visibility' and claiming caring abilities comes from socially situated affects and subjects, in which gender intersects with class and age. Caring as fathers is made visible with the aim of engaging

men into egalitarian fatherhood practices, and it is claimed as an entry point for men into care labour at large, legitimizing caring masculinities giving priority to the mobilizers *as fathers* and *as men*.

In this effort to associate caring capabilities and political commitments to the manhood of the actors, we perceive the identity politics of mobilizing *as men*, even if the main force and goal of this mobilization is not intended as such. By focusing mainly on *fatherhood* as the entry-point for men to legitimise care labour, despite its mobilizing potentials, there is the risk of distancing men from engaging with socially and personally less rewarding types of care work that nevertheless has to be carried out beyond family ties (house chores, organizing time and activities, emotional labour, caring for elderly people). Moreover, carework acquires value once men claim it 'as men' publicly. These facts are very problematic for the anti-sexist masculinity care politics advocated for, because patriarchal gendered division of labour remains unchanged at its core, and thus they require more adequate attention for future actions.

Conclusive Remarks

1. The threads of this thesis

Academically based in gender studies and written from a socio-anthropological approach, with a qualitative, feminist ethnographically engaged research, this thesis explored different critical-creative elaborations on masculinities and gender relations coming from contemporary anti-sexist men's engagements in Italy and Spain, in the context of a neoliberal economic crisis and information society.

Arguing in favour of feminist situated epistemologies and their ethico-ontological potential, I embarked on this ethnographic research among anti-sexist men's organizing with the aim of understanding the transformative possibilities for men's practices inspired by questioning *Abstract Masculinity* and the social relations of power interfering with it. As a field of activism in which gender justice claims are associated with acknowledging gender-awareness 'as men,' the aim of my fieldwork has been to follow the routes this onto-epistemological move generates: debates, concepts, affects, relations, political proposals, tensions. The analyses are delivered by practicing a critical approach so to highlight the tensions and contradictions encountered in the field of men organizing for gender justice but, with an affirmative approach and a new feminist materialist understanding of concepts as figurations, this thesis also provides a generous analysis attentive to the generative nature of concepts and practices. By writing-thinking-with-from-fieldwork, this affirmative approach allowed me to focus on the potentials for reconfiguration contained in men's engagements' proposals.

In feminist theoretical terms, this thesis thus springs from my willingness to join the project of questioning the onto-epistemological primacy of *Abstract Masculinity* while exploring ethnographically the possibilities of personal and social transformation coming from this critical move, through men's process of reconfiguring embodied-embedded (Braidotti 2011) subjectivities and practices. This distinction between theoretical inspiration and ethnographic exploration is however fictitious, because once the habit of separating thought and action is debunked, what is left is the transcendental

immanence of thinking-with-fieldwork or embodied theory. With this I mean that, by following masculinity political elaborations in their local cartographies, each chapter performs the creation of a space of debate and offers ethnographically-grounded theoretical relevance. The contribution of this thesis is thus manifold and the structure of this dissertation helps organizing the flow of information into separate conversations.

Chapter two describes MP and AHIGE anti-violence approaches and main actions, drawing connections between their political positionings and the feminist genealogies they establish. This chapter shows the relevance of gender-awareness for the men involved, lays the ground for the analyses explored in the following chapters, and contributes to illustrate the panorama of men's activism for gender justice in Europe. The third chapter analyses how MP in Italy works with feminist theorizations and practices of sexual difference, contributing to feminist debates concerned with the onto-epistemological practice of self-consciousness raising and its transformative politics. In chapter four, I dedicated my work to put fieldwork in conversation with feminist studies on love and love politics, contributing to their debates on a scholarly level as well as in the level of social intervention aimed at VAW prevention. A contribution to sexuality studies and men as buyers of sex work can be found in chapter five's account of the approach proposed by MP in relation to the topic. Finally, chapter six analyses the political claims around egalitarian fatherhood with a focus on AHIGE's online campaign; doing so, it contributes to feminist debates on care politics and labour on the one side, and on the possibilities and challenges of online activism for anti-sexist masculinity politics, on the other. The chapter addresses the challenges in promoting 'caring masculinities' as a political claim.

Read together, the overall effort sustaining these chapters contributes to understanding cultural intervention in relation to gender meanings and relations (sex/gender system) activated by subjects and their collective mobilizations. The routes for socio-cultural critique and transformation enacted by men's engagements for gender justice transversally rely on mobilizing 'as men' in all the fields of reconfiguration I have analysed. Across all the chapters, we can indeed see that men's gender awareness functions as a transversal force of this mobilization, in which gender acquires epistemological priority in their proposals for reconfiguring masculinities and men's practices. With an affirmative approach, I understood gender as a figuration, following its onto-epistemological effects and various outcomes. With an emphasis on its creative aspects, we might also understand the transformative power of gender-based

mobilization in its possibilities of re-negotiating what men do and think ‘as men’ (*potentia*). We could consider this as a form of strategic essentialism that serves to inspire and engage men into shifting material-discursive practices related to gender as a doing.¹⁵³ Critically seen, in mobilizing from men’s gendered location we might encounter the risk of leaving the gender binary unproblematized and reproducing the centrality of ‘men’ as a social group (*potestas*). The maintenance of the onto-epistemological centrality (of embodied men) that this politics claims to deconstruct and transform using a different language than the one of unmarked *Abstract Masculinity*, constitutes the most concerning risk of this political effort, in which many paradoxes and challenges emerge.

As paradoxical as it might seem, this type of gender justice masculinity politics is nevertheless necessary and contributing to the feminist project of making positive transformations. The self-reflective emphasis of this politics, and the epistemological and affective force that mobilise men into it, needs to be taken profoundly into account when it comes to creating accountable political practices as men involved in feminist matters. As unfortunate and real as it is, embodied cultural doings underpinning privileges are no immune to inserting the sexist automatic pilot into wannabe-transformative practices, with the risk of re-affirming already existing power mechanisms or creating new ones. Ambiguities and tensions emerging from men’s desires of contestation are worth listening to, and their proposals for change are worth establishing conversations with. This thesis is my major written work in these directions.

2. Anti-violence engagements as personal politics

For men, to take part in anti-violence action stands, and questioning sexism are intended as changing the ways they relate to women with a move from sexist to egalitarian relations as friends, colleagues, relatives and also as romantic, sexual and family partners. This reminds us, and can be explained by, the understanding of gender as

¹⁵³ Strategic essentialism is a term coined by Spivak to refer to women’s identity politics (Spivak 1988). In the case of men, we cannot compare their politics to the identity political term coined by Spivak, because they are not advocating for an identity whose invisibility is based on material and intersectional oppression or discrimination. What they are advocating for is the gender-aware deconstruction of given for granted (unmarked) discursive-material men’s practices and for their reconfiguration into more egalitarian relations.

relational in both its discursive and material realities. Based on my fieldwork, I can say that most participants in gender justice organizing are white cis-men, self-identify as heterosexual, are aged between 40-65 years old, and are well-educated.

Men's previous political/civic involvement and/or professional background in the social sector and/or academia constitute the entry point to the field of engaging in gender justice. Thanks to their background, those men who hold the cultural capital to dialogue with feminist theories (for their education/profession/activism), can also easily access the social capital of establishing connections with feminisms (personal, professional, political relations with women involved in feminist politics). Moreover, the possibility to read feminist theory as part of a larger body of critical political theories is created by material and discursive conditions of access or lack of access to such intellectual and political knowledge. It is the intersection between professional level, education and class that provides the cultural and social capital to engage actively with anti-sexist men's intellectual and organizing endeavours. What counts as activism (meetings, reports, articles, books, public speaking) is classed-gendered and culturally constructed, and it is made possible by this intersection. The socio-cultural capital is circulated among men who are identified as political intellectual 'leaders' of the networks, sometimes legitimating a self-celebratory practice that is rather problematic and contradictory.¹⁵⁴

This is an important point to be reminded in order to understand the conditions of possibility of such mobilization. Paradoxically, in order to take a critical stand against patriarchy, men who embody a social position with a higher social and educational status come with an advantage in this critical process, be it individual or collective. Accordingly, cultural and intellectual capital is acquired by men in education and professional contexts, or thanks to their status as retired professionals (many men in the groups analyzed are retired). This capital is shared among those who participate in activities organized by men's associations, where retired men participate frequently (as they have time). On the other hand, in my fieldwork, I have encountered also men who are not situated within such privilege, given their precarious economic status as students, unemployed, young fathers or freelancers. These last ones compensate their unstable economic capital with their professional trajectory and higher cultural capital

¹⁵⁴ During various conversations with men involved in gender justice, I have been warned about this 'rockstar effect', as it is called in the USA, although it is widespread. It is very problematic and highly contradictory when preaching against men's privileges coexists with celebrating anti-sexist men just for criticising their own privilege. A different treatment is commonly given to less normative subjects when they address (gender) injustices; in Ahmed's words, they are feminist 'killjoys' (Ahmed 2017).

in gender-sensitive social work. Those who, despite not holding this capital, are engaging with groups of men for gender justice, slowly acquire it with a sense of respect and discomfort, while participating in the group-sessions and the activities organized.

In all the cases, the experience of participating in this engagement as anti-violence men appears to offer men, for the first time in their life, the space to speak about masculinities self-reflectively and critically, and above all, collectively with other men. 'Telling' is a political action for 'questioning male silence' and 'men's lack of words', also picked up as a motto for AHIGE: 'silence makes us complicit, let's live without violence.' This process springs from the personal urgency to rethink interpersonal relations, to open up room to discuss the discomfort produced by unquestioned dominant socializations or unsatisfying and painful personal experiences. As we have seen in the case of MP with the speaking as men *a partire da sé* and with AHIGE group-sessions of *trabajo grupal*, questioning men's silence is performed in the first place with the narrative method of sharing experiences in small groups of men only. This is recalled as a practice to address and to transform men's lack of affective and relational skills, as well as for constructing more meaningful men-to-men friendships.

The heterosexual orientation of these political concerns comes from the fact that deconstructing normative masculinity implies addressing and unpacking the compulsory heterosexuality of normative masculinity; but the vast majority of men involved in anti-sexist groups of men identify themselves as heterosexual. For them, the process of rethinking masculinities beyond sexism, means problematizing personally-politically their relations towards and with women. Nevertheless, the deconstruction of the role played by femininity in constructing men's practices and norms occurs interestingly within separatist spaces among men, in which men-to-men interactions give participants the possibility to open up about gender meanings. In these contexts, questions of internalized homophobia emerge, when men can discuss openly about those practices of male socialization that respond to the fear and obligation to distance from femininity in order to reaffirm one's manhood. The presence of some homosexual-identifying men contributes to question the given-for-granted practices and imaginaries associated with male heterosexual desire, including considering male body as subject and object of erotic desire.

When it comes to family, romantic, erotic, parenthood and friendship relationships, self-reflectivity and personal experience enter men's talk. In this process, gender-awareness is a key factor to understand how power and injustice affect one's life and social relations. As in the analyses selected in the chapters, major attention is given to the quality of sexual-affective and care relationships, that situate men's practices as the product of relational and corporeal subjects. This process can acquire political relevance after experiences are shared collectively and turned into social critique; when men call each other accountable to interrogate themselves critically, recognizing a shared background complicit with sexism. When claims and interventions for socio-cultural transformation are formulated, men's gatherings become personally-political, and articulations of feminist-oriented masculinity politics come into being starting from self-reflectivity, romantic love, sex and fatherhood politics. The main challenge is inscribed into the embodied possibility of this politics: its own subjects are the ones mobilizing for change and the ones whose change they are advocating for. Therefore, challenges inhabit personal transformation of men in everyday meanings and practices, when change is incorporated into the relational experiences with others.

As I explained in chapter two, for MP and AHIGE anti-violence action holds a central role in mobilizing men for gender justice collectively. Anti-violence is an affective mobilizing force of outrage against VAW, organizing men and becoming the most visible public manifestation of men's anti-sexism, celebrated across October and November every year. Interesting is to note that, beyond the denounce moment and public action, taking a public stand against VAW can function as an entry point for men into critical outlooks on sexism in general, and on their own practices. Public offline and online mobilization make them gain visibility and positive recognition among feminist-oriented circles. Despite functioning as a mobilizing factor, if the conditions for becoming an anti-sexist activist exist, the act of taking a public stand against VAW is necessary but does not guarantee the transformative power of men's political engagements. Moving between personal discomforts and public denounce, and from public action to personal critique, this process can occur when men engage in group sessions to share personal experiences among other men. This practice is transversal across men's engagements, in which the self-reflectivity as well as the separatist male space is recalled to stimulate gender awareness. Moreover, these spaces allow men to verbalise among other men their discomforts with dominant masculinity, deconstructing the 'costs of masculinity' on their lives, making explicit the affective and personal

dissonances that motivated them to take part in anti-violence action in the first place. Therefore, even though anti-violence action is the most visible manifestation of men's organizing for gender justice and functions as a mobilizing force, for many men involved in this type of organizing, it is the personal urgency of voicing their own distances and tensions with gender meanings while finding a 'safe space' for self-reflectivity what keeps them engaged in this anti-sexist involvement. For many men this space comes as a new practice in their lives and as a transformatively positive new way to socialize among men.

Anti-violence approaches and actions are related with feminist theories and practices, and with existing policy interventions. Among anti-sexist groups of men, anti-violence commitment encompasses a critical approach to masculinities and patriarchy, differently formulated according to the local context and to the relations established with feminist political experiences. As I have described in the chapters of this thesis, relations among groups of men and feminist positionings materialise through personal contacts, through initiatives organized by groups, and through practices put into action. Among men within MP network, the self-reflectivity practice of speaking *a partire da se* is acknowledged as a feminist one, borrowed from the consciousness-raising movement in order to deconstruct 'male silence' and 'the neutral subject of discourse' that prevent men to engage critically with themselves (Chapter 3). The onto-epistemological potentialities of this practice are recalled by participants as performative, as through this practice men can learn to speak from their personal lived experiences and to relate with each other differently. This masculinity politics of consciousness-raising 'as men', performed by MP and inspired by sexual difference feminisms, contributes to the project of elaborating (political) subjectivity taking the sexed-embodied experience of the subject into account. This way, it offers innovative approaches to feminist-oriented masculinity politics, and shows the potentialities of sexual difference practice beyond essentialism.

The situated perspective that this practice aims to create, 'speaking as men,' lead MP to elaborate an interesting approach to anti-violence action and VAW prevention, focused on the gendered processes that generate power relations, and starting from the personal implication in such dynamics. This approach can be summarized as 'it concerns us, it concerns me.' This self-situating and reflective exercise is the protagonist of the critical and creative efforts that MP has engaged with to critically approach men's demands of paid sex and what this implies in terms of heterosexual

male sexual desire, their cultural sexual imaginary and masculinity, and men's erotic experiences (Chapter 5). The peculiarity of this approach lies in this self-directed and collectively shared exploration, aimed at changing the cultural imaginaries and men's common practice of buying sex. Importantly, sexual politics emerge at the core of masculinity politics among Italian men's groups during the years 2010-2015, in alliance and conversation with women feminist mobilizations against Berlusconi's politics of sexuality. Different from other masculinity politics on this issue defended in other European and global contexts, the peculiarity of this approach is the focus to critically engage with men's personal erotic experiences and imaginaries. The dominant imaginary involves commercial sex as a normative relational pattern. This pattern is gendered and turns heterosexual interactions into sexual-economic exchanges, legitimising and normalising the act of buying (feminized) sexual services for men. Interestingly, through MP men's perspectives, a critical focus enters the material and discursive practices underpinning commercial sex, and generates a masculinity politics of sex starting from personal lived experiences and male sexual desire. The transformative potential of this approach gets radically at the core of the question, making sexual desire a political matter; however, the public outcomes of the elaborations produced by MP did not offer a clear proposal. The priority given to the narrative method of 'speaking as men starting from oneself', together with their choice to maintain a plurality of voices within the network -respectful of different feminist positions on commercial sex- did not allow MP to offer a unified public stand. Despite the common agreement against trafficking, this lack of public positioning created conflicts among MP participants, and motivated the 'Network of clients, false clients and non-clients of prostitution' to leave MP for not clearly mobilizing against commercial sex as a way to fight sexual trafficking in Italy.

Politicizing sexual-affective relationships is central as well to the politics of the groups of men in Barcelona, although the door into their critical-creative work is opened thanks to a different feminist entry point: the one of addressing 'romantic love' as a political matter (Chapter 4). The debate on deconstructing cultural norms of romantic love is indeed a prominent question among Spanish anti-violence actors and feminist activists. In the chapter on love politics (Chapter 4), I explained how romantic love becomes a political issue for anti-sexist men's groups in Barcelona and showed different approaches to this question. It is by following the political agenda set by established feminist positions (and responding to them, either in agreement or

disagreement), that groups of men engage with romantic love politically. The relations with feminist genealogies here is taken into consideration, given the institutionalization of equality policies in local municipalities and the possibilities these programmes offer for NGOs and men's groups as well. In this chapter, I explained how love politics enters masculinity politics and affects anti-violence initiatives, violence prevention and sexual-affective education. Although with a focus on different questions, the personal level of sexual-affective relations is politicized by all groups, creating a masculinity politics of romantic love, aimed at shifting the gendered division of romantic labour. Interestingly, although the aim is changing sexual-affective relations, the discussion on romantic love rarely touched the issue of commercial sex as inherent to heteronormative sexual relations.

All groups agree on eradicating VAW by improving men's relationships and affective skills, in order to live more satisfying experiences and more just relations with their partners and families. Sexism beats inside them, with the high price of living an impoverished relational, corporeal and affective life that has negative consequences for others. With the words of my colleague and friend Alexander Waddling in one of our recent conversations, it is by learning the intrinsic value of themselves that men can learn how to love others on their own terms. It is precisely the affective and corporeal dimension that provides force for engagement and willingness to make a change. This is particularly visible in the fatherhood politics enacted online by AHIGE with the 'egalitarian fatherhood' campaign (Chapter 6). In AHIGE's campaign, we discuss the potentialities and limitations of fatherhood politics related to online and offline strategies of/for engagement. Co-responsible fatherhood is discussed as an onto-epistemological figuration that enables mobilizations and transformative initiatives not without tensions when it comes to feminist care politics. Once again the personal is political, and it gets to the core of the gendered division of care and reproductive labour. Despite the productivity of 'fathers' as a strong political identifier and mobilizer for men online, the analysis of the campaign also shows a series of problematic questions related to the limitations of those politics around caring masculinities. Even considering its strategic purposes, centering the care politics campaign on fatherhood involves the risk of reaffirming the primacy of men's parental care against other types of care, less attractive for men yet equally necessary (care for the elderly parents, for one's partner, for others) and thus leaving power relations untouched.

As part of my analytical work as researcher, I decided to deepen each chapter explicitly on a theme that has been significant during fieldwork, exploring the ways men themselves approached the question. While among groups in Italy more attention is given to rethinking male normative heterosexuality and desire, in Spain the focus is directed towards developing men's emotional intelligence and bodily awareness. This does not mean, however, that in Italy activists do not engage with love discussions or fatherhood, and that in Spain the question of commercial sex is left untouched. On the contrary: since my first contacts with MP, anti-sexist fatherhood politics in Italy is growing (with the recent network *Il Giardino degli Uomini*); and in Spain the act of buying sex has been more recently discussed as an important issue of the movement. Nevertheless, within my writing choice I had to accept its limitation as well, and the questions I could not explore here I believe can offer food for thought for future analysis.

The fact that certain themes move some contexts/groups more than others depends on the cultural location and the political genealogies established with feminist knowledge contextually. From the standpoint of anti-sexist men, feminist traditions provide the entry-point and the vocabulary to formulate what matters as personal politics. This creates a very interesting scenario in which some questions touch the core of anti-sexist masculinity politics more than others, generating debates that can inform other groups (in other cities, regions, countries) and mobilize men at a transnational level.

It is important to remember that this difference in approach comes from cultural and political differences. The discussion on male desire and sexual politics in Italy, for example, springs from the political climate created by the last few years of Berlusconi's government. Interestingly, the sexual politics proposed by MP encompass a way to critically discuss love relations ('a real man is the one who knows how to love: a free woman cannot be bought'), and to discuss the ethics of relationship *tout court*. This tells about the pivotal role that sex(uality) plays for reconfiguring men's practices in Italy, and it tells us as well how (hetero)sexuality can work as a privileged site to address sexual-affective relations in general. In the case of AHIGE's care politics, fatherhood is used as the open door into the care work debate. It can be criticized for giving priority to the already powerful institution of fatherhood in patriarchal societies and for maintaining a hierarchy among different care tasks. The transformative power that, affectively, 'becoming a father' can engender is used to connect men to other spheres of

care work that are usually considered less appealing. All differences taken into account, the point of the parture and the final political goal are shared by all the groups: eradicating VAW by making men's relational practices more livable for all.

From the location of anti-sexist claims, not only privileges and injustices are denounced but also the gender norms that discipline and impoverish men's experiences are criticized. Men's personal discomfort, dissatisfaction, and dissonance with gender norms are used as positive and engagement forces, motivate self-reflective and deconstructive mechanisms performed in groups in which self-critique and awareness are facilitated by the collective exchange. The quest for transformation springs from personal urgencies and is addressed to personal practice in relation to others: in this sense, men are the subjects of political claims and the actors called into action.

From my field experience, the personal is political and corporeal (affective and social) and theoretical. From the analysis provided in these chapters, the personal politics of the men involved in anti-sexism is concerned with fostering men's self-reflectivity, social justice awareness, emotional literacy, relational and affective skills. These are the issues tackled with a critical creative approach, mostly renegotiated in the fields of love relations, sexual-erotic relations, caring fatherhood and care responsibilities. These are indeed pivotal spheres of action in which a transformation in men's practices is necessary in order to contribute to gender justice.

As known from historical feminist debates, these themes constitute in fact pillar-questions in transforming gender relations and meanings by digging into power inequalities and injustices at the personal, intimate and relational level. Indeed, from a socio-anthropological perspective, we know that these are questions related to the configuration of the gendered division of labour: emotional, love, sexual, reproductive and care labour are entangled with gender, sexuality and kinship meanings and relations. These are spheres of embodied labour that patriarchal culture disengages men from while asking women to be the main providers. These are the realities of embodied labour, relying on relational corporeality to ensure social reproduction and social relations. These are terrains of feminist political analysis and intervention as they become terrains of gender (in)justice. In patriarchal post-industrial societies, these spheres are conceived as feminized spheres of unpaid work. They are made invisible and devalued by the private/public hierarchical dichotomy in order to sustain productive and paid labour, and thus they support imbalanced power relations at a social as well as at a personal-affective level.

3. Gender-conscious mobilizing: only paradoxes to offer?

In the fieldwork conducted among MP and AHIGE, we have seen that their (online and offline) public mobilizations take place around anti-violence whereas men's involvement into reflection groups is less known. This gathering of men with the aim of discussing men's experiences and issues (gender-conscious) is motivated by different affects and reasons, and it must be reminded that the self-reflective focus on personal experience does not guarantee a political implication against sexism. Gender-awareness and critical engagement are generated through difficult and not linear processes in group sessions, meetings with women, personal conversations, daily relationships, protests, publications, readings and debates. Importantly, whether this awareness affects the individual and collective transformation depends on the political orientations within groups, and, most of all, on the personal commitment of the men involved. The practice of sharing personal experiences 'as men' across gender-separatist groups helps moving away from the neutral position of unquestioned disembodied masculinity. This is part of the process of becoming gender aware and a more responsible subject in relation to others, in line with feminist invitations to acknowledge situated experience, knowledge and subjectivity. 'Speaking as men' is a narrative method with onto-ethico-epistemological outcomes that traverses the group setting and is taken as a starting point for the articulation of political claims and campaigns. Indeed, the formulation of an anti-sexist political position as men is transversal to all the groups.

Mobilizing and speaking as men is a recurring practice in the group sessions and in public demonstrations, characterizing the gender-conscious politics of men involved in gender justice. From this epistemological and political positioning, creative proposals for change are expressed within the work of men's groups, framed as VAW prevention initiatives or elaborated through anti-violence involvement. I have followed this move towards becoming partial, embodied and relational (allowed by group practice and personal engagement) because I was interested in the generative potential of this move. Indeed, it shows where transformation is needed, opens up affective tensions (as social facts) to interrogate where discomfort emerges, makes visible male socializations, voices and desires for change, helps men experience relations differently.

Understanding these creative proposals and their onto-epistemological implications for personal politics is what I chose to deepen in the chapters on self-reflectivity and the politics of gender awareness (Ch.3), romantic love politics and VAW prevention (Ch.4); sexual politics and heterosexual male desire (Ch.5) and fatherhood and care politics (Ch. 6).

Indeed, mobilizing *as men* refers to the process of gender-awareness that serves to make visible to men their experiences of socialization and, by politicizing them, to reconfigure them.

As a political collective location, it also refers to the way political proposals are voiced in campaigns, appeals, manifestos, letters and offline/online demonstrations. Political statements and campaigns are articulated maintaining a link to the manhood of the actors ('as men violence concerns us'; and 'as men'), and this seems to be transversal in anti-sexist campaigns addressed to men from different socio-cultural contexts.¹⁵⁵

If we think alongside the history of identity political praxis, the phrase mobilizing 'as men' might seem to re-enact a form of identity politics. This could be connected with the fact that the majority of men taking part in anti-sexism do hold social positions of privilege, given the intersection of their sex, cis-gender, class, education and ethnic background. Men's claim for visibility as anti-sexist men cannot be compared to other feminist efforts to mobilize marginalized subjects (i.e., as women, as migrant women, or LGBT+ subjects), considering the existing different asymmetrical positions in relation to power. Although we can agree on the common enemy against which social critique is enacted (heteronormative patriarchy), men's anti-sexism is constitutively different from other types of gender-sensitive critical movements as it departs from the embodied-embedded location of subjects whose privileges are complicit with the very society they are trying to change. The starting point for engaging with feminist-oriented masculinity politics 'as men' appears constitutively deconstructive. Epistemologically, we have seen that this move starts from the questioning of the silence on masculinity and men's practices (*Abstract Masculinity*), and involves the unpacking of gendered meanings felt and lived as hegemonic and disciplining upon men's experiences.

¹⁵⁵ With the US campaign 'Real men don't buy girls' for example, as I have discussed in my presentation during the conference Men in Movement II in Rome, dicembre 2016 (see Nardini 2016b).

This deconstructive stand requires a critical outlook both on oneself and on societal relations of power, exemplified by AHIGE's mottos 'the common enemy is machismo' and at the same time 'every man is a revolution to come.' In the words of AHIGE's member Casado, while writing about how important it is to deconstruct the role of homophobia in male heterosexual socialization, this inward critical attention is expressed as: 'we all carry the potential enemy within' (Casado, 2008), indicating that the fight against sexism is a political issue viscerally connected with men's embodied experiences. Indeed, the deconstructive approach leads to see how sexism affects one's own lived experience, with a significant and necessary focus on the interpersonal and corporal levels. Luciano, activist from Rome, recalled this constitutive deconstruction as a 'desertion' from patriarchy, linked to the very body of man:

In addition to the different sensitivity due to my man's body - which is not a little difference already - it must also be considered that as a straight man born in the patriarchy, I don't have to 'resist' or 'free myself' from male domination, because I'm part of it. My gesture is more that of a 'desertion' from the patriarchy, for which is yet to be invented a whole vocabulary and a practice (Luciano, interview March 2015).

In this absence of a vocabulary and practice for men inhabiting privileged position, mobilizing 'as men' is a primary method that gives voice and body to the collective engagement of men for gender justice. As Ciccone reminded us, the challenge is to overcome the risk of getting caught in gender-guilt on the one side, or in ethical voluntaristic discourses on the other (Ciccone 2009). In the case of AHIGE's egalitarian fatherhood politics, a strong mobilizer is the concept of 'co-responsibility.' In policy-speaking terms, this concept expresses the equal sharing of care labour. In personal and social terms, it builds upon the moral responsibility that men feel as social actors, fathers *and* men. Responsibility is part of the affective politics that can move men into feminist-oriented engagement because it is tightly connected to the their gendered social role.

In order to engender positive change, to become creative onto-ethico-epistemologically, the political claim of men's activism lays in the possibility of expressing plural masculinities and breaking the complicity with sexism. We can then hear the anti-violence statements that are used by Italian and Spanish groups: 'silence makes us complicit', 'let's break with the silence' (AHIGE), and 'we speak as men,

beyond male silence' (MP). In Joan words: 'mobilizing as men is also important not to elude our responsibility *as men*' (Joan, conversation, February 2018). Here, responsibility is intended as the necessary act of acknowledging the effects of patriarchal gendered history, of one's active role in it, and taking accountable action starting from this awareness. Here, responsibility expresses men's involvement and commitment to reformulate practices in relation to the sex-gender system instead of being complicit with sexist behaviours. As I commented, Luciano defines this as a **desertion** from patriarchy, and other members of *Homes Igualitaris* in Barcelona used the same anti-militaristic metaphor. This metaphor emphasises the rupture with the given order and the complicity with the group.

Nevertheless, in order to renegotiate men's practices beyond sexism, dynamics of complicity among men are recreated. In the formula of mobilizing 'as men,' next to providing a self-reflective epistemological practice, I observe as well the urgency of maintaining a link to manhood, with the aim of sustaining the peer pressure of being considered 'less than a man' by other men. In other words, collectively speaking 'among men, as men' allows to question gender norms and to reformulate meanings and practices while remaining within the social and peer acceptance of legitimate performance 'as man.' In this sense, articulating this politics from the enunciative location of men also could have the function of re-establishing an ontological safety to face the uncertainty coming from a political action that results in deconstruction, dismantling norms, ideas, experiences, behaviours, body gesture, values, etc. This dynamics resonate with an implicit paradox in the ideology of masculinity, explained by Cruz Sierra:

[the first element in this ideology is that] masculinity (being a man) is natural, healthy and innate, but the second is that you must maintain that masculinity, that masculinity should not fail. Therefore, being a man is seen as a natural and given-for-granted state, but paradoxically, that supposed 'nature' of being a man, of being male, is constantly protecting itself against the danger of losing itself (Cruz Sierra 2002: 14).

This danger is intimately related to the sanction of being considered 'less than a man' according to the disciplinary mechanism Cruz Sierra is talking about. The call to mobilizing 'as men' is used to communicate and reconstruct non-sexist practices and reimagining masculinities, without questioning the reaffirmation of masculinity as an

ontological mandate. This is a paradox and a situated limitation of mobilizing ‘as men’ in the analyses provided in this thesis. What counts as positive masculinities is open to reconfigurations: however, the primacy of gender as an ontological category remains unchallenged.

We could understand this as a form of **strategic essentialism**, in which gender (as category) helps to stretch the boundaries of gender (as a verb) onto-epistemologically. Mobilizing ‘as men’ entails many empowering aspects in the sense of *potentia*. As a speaking position, it activates in men critical discourses on the sex/gender system, contributing to create several routes of analysis and a reworking of daily practices with oneself and others. Also, this serves to express male awareness publicly, what is necessary for their collective action as anti-sexist men, as Luciano affirmed: ‘in my experience, you cannot define yourself as anti-sexist activist and be one without saying it out loud. Publicly expressing anti-sexism, now that we are so few men in it, it is part of anti-sexism and it cannot be done in a private or silenced form’ (Luciano, interview March 2015).

The figuration ‘as men,’ in its efforts of elaborating critical debates and reimagining masculinities (outside of gendered neutrality), speaks affirmatively to other men, offering a space and a language in which **homosociality** helps for discussing men’s gendered practices. Tellingly, in his chapter on homophobia, Casado begins by declaring: ‘I have been aware all the time of being a man who is addressing mainly other men, to deal with issues related to men, so that the generic male contributes to some extent to create this code ‘among men’ (Casado 2008: 126; emphasis in the original). As Casado writes, the fact of speaking ‘as men’ creates a code of conversation among men, able to reach out to other men. This dynamic is what is also practiced within group sessions, in which a different male homosociality serves to establish spaces of trust and complicity among men, with the aim of questioning men’s complicity with sexism. Given the pivotal importance that male homosociality holds in reproducing patriarchal power relations among men, we are facing an apparent contradictory dynamics.

Interestingly, here homosociality is practiced to create a safe space for men to open up about themselves without the peer pressure to act according to normative masculinity, and allows to perform non-sexist relations among men. It becomes a space where other men stop being a threat (for judging others’ manhood) and offers each other support and understanding for expressing vulnerability, establishing friendship, showing

affection and closeness among men. For participants, this is considered a positive transformation in men's relations, building trust and sharing vulnerabilities. At the same time, it is criticized because the group slowly becomes too internally focused and self-referential, while risking distancing itself from engaging newcomers. Paradoxically, a crucial social mechanism at the core of patriarchy – homosociality (men- to-men relations as power management) – is used to unlock men's privileges and promote egalitarian masculinities so to transform patriarchy; as an agreement among men, homosociality functions to authorize the collective process of shifting gender meanings.

4. Uneven routes and accountability

Men's anti-violence activism is a type of men's 'gender-conscious activism' (Hearn 2015b, 36) where the gendering of men 'as men' is constitutive to the making of this kind of social justice mobilization: it has a clear and public gender justice orientation. The ethnographic analysis in my research suggests that mobilizing 'as men' among Italian and Spanish anti-sexist activists holds multiple generative elements: it engages actors involved into anti-violence masculinity activism; it creates an epistemological location (away from *Abstract Masculinity*) from which activist claims are articulated and from which personal as well as social change is envisioned; it offers a material and symbolic separatist (offline and online) space among men where gendered practices are interrogated and re-negotiated, with possibilities of reimagining positive and transformative masculinities. **For these reasons I argued that anti-violence engagement 'as men' as a figuration can be considered a material-discursive strategy with interesting ethico-onto-epistemological outcomes.**

The practice of mobilizing from an explicitly masculine enunciative location, rather than using it as an identity claim, holds the function of a personal and collective reminder of the costs of male socialization and of the partiality of men's experiences as participants in the sex-gender system. And this responsibility involves breaking the silence on men's violence against women (as in MP and AHIGE anti-violence demonstrations), and, in general, breaking complicity with sexism. In this sense, if we read the formula 'as men' as a figuration that mobilizes towards critical-creative movements, this position stimulates personal responsibility to act according to anti-sexist relational ethics.

Together with men's commitment to personal and collective transformations, we could ask whether and how this social and political awareness can function as a type of feminist politics of location. The latter encompasses situational awareness and political willingness to articulate embodied-embedded change (Rich 1986). It is important to see the reminder 'as men' in a critical-creative way in its attempt to break with patriarchal complicity among men, and with its potential to reformulate more egalitarian men's practices (*potentia*). We should also pay attention to its limitations and risks of reproducing categories, positions and power relations with possible oppressive or hierarchical effects (*potestas*).

Considering the specificities of this type of gender justice engagement, I stressed the non-linear, self-centred and processual character of this journey. Stemming from a deconstructive urgency, personal politics is at the core of the transformation advocated for, moved by affective dissonances and desires for change inhabiting the corporeal and relational realms of men's lives. Moreover, I observed critically that these deconstructive and creative processes are not immune to internal tensions and contradictions as I have stated so far. Although the category 'as men' is not intended as a static political location nor it is seen as holding essentialist premises, mobilizing 'as men' does come with problematic questions to address. While mobilizing 'as men' is the operational focus of anti-violence masculinity politics (changing men's gendered practices), it also acts as a sticky figuration fuelling networking among actors, in which homosocial dynamics of power and visibility are at work, with the risk of reproducing existing privileges as well as new ones.

One of the challenges encountered in this masculinity politics consists in the need of creating new **labels** and categories by which men's engagement can be inspired and mobilized. Becoming 'anti-sexist,' 'caring,' 'egalitarian' or even 'new' masculinities, however, does not guarantee a person's commitment to transformative practices. Even considering the useful creative function of figurations for men whose activist work is mainly deconstructive, putting the emphasis on labels as political positionings can run the risk of providing empty categorizations with little space for self-reflection and responsibility towards personal politics (Cascales 2017, 89). Talking about labels, I agree with Cascales that another risk is the reproduction of binary categories and reified patronizing postures: bad VS good ones, which problematically

prevents self-critical outlooks and understanding that we are all always already infused with sexist material.¹⁵⁶

The quest for **public visibility** as an act breaking the silence of men is a core element of anti-sexist masculinity politics, and leads to the paradox implicit in ‘mobilizing as men’: moving away from the unquestioned centre of *Abstract Masculinity* while risking to re-establish a centrality by virtue of the material-discursive power already granted to masculinity in public space. Public visibility is referred as a necessary part of activism, to question the silence on men and create the conversation on men’s role in gender relations.

In practical terms, even if male silence and male **complicity** with sexism is broken, this is done by establishing another form of male homosociality in the group sessions, among members within the associations, and among activists within the field. This complicity stems from the act of creating a separatist space among men where to share personal accounts, and it fuels a sense of belonging to the movement against dominant norms and unproblematized social dynamics (‘other men who are not gender-aware’). Problematically, this type of men’s complicity could support a self-centred discourse, in which the focus on the self and the personal level gains priority: it runs the risk of distancing the critical reflection from the social and collective levels underpinning personal relations. In highlighting this risk, I agree with de Boise (2018) when he notes that the personal-emotional is not always progressive.

The act of becoming aware of privileges and deconstructing ‘dominant’ and normative men’s practices is aimed at opening up the spectrum of masculinities towards gender justice. Nevertheless, by pushing the boundaries of what counts as men and masculinities, we run the **risk of prioritizing gender** over other axes of differentiation and not considering an intersectional approach to power and social positionings. The primacy on gender could silence a possible intersectional sensitivity and a reflection on how class and generation do affect differently men’s experiences of power as *potestas* and *potentia*. This can also lead to making men’s groups homogenous and distant from those men who do not share their experiences/background/capitals. It can lead to making the content of their work rather self-referential, as noted by other activist researchers (Azpiazu Carballo 2017; Fabbri 2016; Cascales 2017). The negative effects of self-referentiality are also noted in their content of political debates, their lack of

¹⁵⁶ Other activists advocate for the transformative power of moral categories (Bacete 2017) reclaiming ‘good men’ as a positive label for men and as a starting point for changing men’s practices.

creativity in public action, and their poor dialogue with other gender-sensitive social movements.

The social homogeneity of the groups I studied and self-referentiality can be very risky, even politically contradictory. They can lead to a **self-centered discourse** that is highly focused on personal politics while it distances activists from addressing how power relations at a macro-level affect those very personal relations. Although this is often done on a theoretical level - as I could witness during my participation at meetings in Italy and Spain and with the networks' publications - when it comes to campaigns/actions the focus is limited to interpersonal relations. We can take, for example, the case of rethinking romantic love, in which, despite the innovative approach of politicizing sexual-affective relations, the link between capitalism and romanticism is not mentioned. Or in the case of Italian sexual politics, in which the method of 'starting from oneself' allowed a very interesting critical exploration into men's erotic experiences making desire a political matter, but it did not lead to taking a clear public stand against sexual trafficking. By moving away from generalized political discourses as in the long-established fashion of universal masculinity, men could engender an interesting array of personal politics 'as men'; however, the self-centered focus too often leads to a lack of macro-level considerations in actual campaigns. I can, as well, partially understand that, given the 'thickness' of the sexist realities these campaigns are addressed to, the political message should be strategically simple and narrowed down to concrete, circumscribed practices related to interpersonal partner violence, love relations, erotic imaginaries, sexual encounters, men's friendships, dialogue with women, fathers' caring responsibilities, house work. From my personal feminist standpoint, it is nevertheless necessary to link personal politics with social relations of power, operating at a local and transnational level.

Neoliberal values, models of the subject and of communication increase the challenges faced by anti-sexist masculinity politics. Men's transformative discourse can fall into neoliberal success-oriented rhetoric and become self-celebratory, using homosocial bonds to sustain these dynamics. Without self-criticism and openness to collaborations with other gender justice groups/actors, this activism can become politically contradictory. Not only there is a risk of self-referentiality, but also a high risk of re-establishing men's centrality due to their embodied-embedded locations as men within the existing cartographies of power. This can be due to the patriarchal privileges that the majority of men in anti-sexism hold (being white, heterosexual and

middle-class). It can be intensified by the intersections between patriarchy and neoliberal capitalist models. As clear examples, this would imply reproducing the myth of the self-made (male) subject; buying into and fueling individualism as a condition for successful personal change; creating competition among gender justice actors, and the professionalization of activist profiles. Creating a label that sells itself as ‘new,’ that could have the power to convince and engage others, involves the risk of being used as an empty brand.

In a **post-feminist political scenario**, women and other subjects historically confined to the status of ‘others’ have an epistemological privilege: they personally-politically worked through the material-discursive tools to navigate contemporary society and social justice politics. In relation to this richness of critical and creative politically-aware subjectivities, white heterosexual men in a post-feminist scenario can not only find themselves ‘a bit disoriented’ (as one interviewee told me), but also they could see themselves as ‘lacking’ the capital to maintain their centrality in this panorama. In this context in which gender and socio-economic relations offer material for reformulations, men’s roles in society are at stake (Cicccone and Nardini 2017), and men’s lack of gender-consciousness (i.e., intersectional) can create an onto-epistemological uncertainty. When it comes to the call for action from feminist-oriented men, next to the ethical-political gender justice commitment towards transformation, we could also see men’s desire to find answers to this uncertainty battling against the challenges of economic precariousness and the anxiety generated by the biopolitics of advanced capitalism, and in the attempt to create a ‘new’ social location to guarantee men’s ontological security, as well as to maintain their seat at the table of social justice politics.

In searching for ways not to be left out of the **post-feminist political agenda**, men’s engagement in gender justice faces many paradoxes, the first one consisting in advocating for change starting from oneself. Practically, men face the challenge of how to formulate feminist-oriented masculinity politics from their locations without reinforcing men’s privileges. As I have analysed in this thesis, some of those practices that support patriarchal power relation (homosociality, attachment to the category of men, complicity among men) can be used as transformative tools to reform patriarchy from the inside. From my research, I have understood that articulating such politics is in itself a challenge, as it asks its subjects (men inhabiting a rather normative social position) to rethink the very manner in which they were socialized: i.e., living at the

center, invisible to themselves, disconnected from their embodied-embedded relations with others. In other words, they were socialized according to the material-discursive effects of the *Abstract Masculinity* posture. That is why questioning the universality of masculinity is pivotal to acquire gender-awareness as men, as an unavoidable onto-epistemological move in order to understand one's role in gender relations as power relations.

Whether this self-reflectivity and partial perspective can activate, slowly, gender transformative practices, depends on deepening this awareness into relational and situational analyses. It should involve the exercise of connecting the micro with the macro-level, the personal with the social and transnational, and it should be followed by action. Indeed, in order for this gender awareness to be considered a **feminist politics of location** we need a committed practice to the situated and relational character of embodied-embedded power relations. And for the men in my research, this is quite difficult; sometimes it is overlooked, other times it is imagined but often it is not practiced.

For the women of their generation, mobilizing 'as women' built on the embodied-embedded experience of otherness and marginalization, in which their partial location could be turned into a valuable epistemological and political sight. Moreover, their relational *habitus* as women could be turned into a powerful tool for transformative feminist practice. From the position of white heterosexual cis-men, trained to inhabit a neutral socially-disengaged position (or to aspire to one), the majority of the work to be done is deconstructive. Despite their critical efforts against *Abstract Masculinity*, their social positioning and lived *habitus* give them the onto-epistemological limitation of maintaining a self-centered gaze. We cannot therefore argue that they are practising feminist politics of location.

Nevertheless, I do not consider this a static position. As embodied-embedded subjects, men experience *potestas* and *potentia*; their desire for change springs from their lived vulnerabilities. Transformation is occurring at a very slow tempo, with many tensions and challenges along the way. It is with their deconstructive and slow personal politics that we can envision a different type of men's socialization: onto-epistemologically not so self-centered, relationally and situationally-grounded, feminist politically involved.

The personal politics I have analysed in this thesis is urgent and necessary, and as we have seen, it holds the potential for making this transformation possible. At the

present moment, the limitations that are part of the uneven routes of this men's anti-sexist politics require a constant attention followed by coherent accountability work. Gendered awareness of privileges is itself not enough if it is not turned into action. Only with this constant effort it will be possible to navigate through the uneven routes of this politics and avoid the risk of supporting existing and new power mechanisms. This thesis is a contribution in this trajectory.

5. Researcher's reflexivity, limitations, responsibility

K.: You know what? Sometimes I am so tired of studying men wannabe-igualitarios...

A.: Ohh...

...can I be a wannabe-wannabe?¹⁵⁷

I feel that something we could learn from post-modernism is to be both fascinated and suspicious to what comes around as 'new.' Deeply immersed in the charming logic of advanced capitalism's mechanics of desire, 'new' is attractive, shiny, full of potential, positive by definition, sexy. Yet, faithful to its own logic, grasping what comes as 'new' leaves us dissatisfied shortly after, with a bitter-sweet taste and a sense of unfulfillment which eventually will lead us to join again, like faithful consumers, the well-known and safe path of desiring another 'new.' Is this, apparently very juicy loop, a kind of eternal return Nietzsche was talking about? Probably - with postmodernism we never know. Surely, though, we are witnessing the kind of capitalist schizophrenia Deleuze and Guattari generously diagnosed (Deleuze and Guattari 2017).

With regards to imagining men and masculinities differing from the sexist repertoire, I suggest here an open-minded yet suspicious curiosity towards the *content* of 'new' in talking about 'new men.' I also propose a critical attitude when it comes to the circular and addictively un/satisfactory dynamics of this postmodern invention. With this in mind, I discussed the potential of change and transformation of the material-discursive practices of men's involvement in gender justice and what, many times, is grouped under the umbrella of 'new men/masculinities.' Labels are working tools but can also be cages: as figurations they can help us moving through changes and open up

¹⁵⁷ Personal chat conversation I had with a friend of mine who is engaged in gender justice activism.

possibilities, but they can also be used as outfits and brands dismissing the awareness-effort it takes to embody them.

Not surprisingly, we are lucky enough to receive from postmodernism - next to spicy schizophrenias – also some tools for handling its own investigation and diagnosis. Indeed, analytical clues and intellectual suggestions do multiply to diffract the complexity and multilayered-ness of the waters we swim in. Accordingly, reality is messy, relational, non-linear, processual; understanding ourselves-in-it requires epistemological sensitive and non-prescriptive approaches and tools. How do we understand change? How do we practice change and give fuel to its own conditions of possibilities? In this thesis, I have elaborated upon different themes at the core of the public mobilizations of men in gender justice. During one of my confidential exchanges with a good friend involved in gender justice, I expressed my frustration with this research, and the term ‘wannabe-*igualitarios*’ came up to me out of a burst of feelings. Indeed, men’s engagement for personal-political change is fueled by the willingness to create change and is a process of becoming with all its tensions and ambiguities. With term ‘wannabe’ I wanted to point at the *process towards* becoming (willingness, doings, relations) that constitutes men’s engagement in reconfiguring masculinities and their lives with feminist orientations.

‘Can I be a wannabe-wannabe?’ my friend asked me, receptively understanding my dissatisfaction and intuition, and proposing an even more processual figuration to express the *desire towards* and the *slow motion* of his political involvement. Another question is, why did he ask *me* for a definition? Recently I came across the reflections on ally activism by Rus Funk (NorthAmericanMenEngageNetwork), and his phrase ‘aspiring to ally’ gave me one answer:

Self-defining this as a role or position that I achieve is, in my opinion, another example of my privileges. I don’t get to decide whether or not I am an ally (of if one understands being an ally as a role or position), it is not my place to determine if and when I achieve that role/position. It is the experience and perspective of Black, Latinx, Asian, Native, and Middle Eastern women and men to determine if I am acting in alliance in regards to combating racism; it is the experience and perspective to women of all racial and ethnic backgrounds to decide if I am acting in alliance in combatting sexism.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁸ Rus Funk, december 2018 ‘On Aspiring to Ally. Additional Experiences of a White Male at the Women of Color Network Summit and Conference’, Rus Funk Consulting webpage: http://rusfunk.me/2018/11/15/on-aspiring-to-ally/?fbclid=IwAR0oKP_ktINTzsd5nETHv5zLk7SyoCsS1HPr5rTQHqbjgB_ElzcRCrbuti4 accessed on 10/12/2018.

These are interesting reflections on definitions and processes. On a practical and political level I agree with ‘aspiring to ally’ as it shows the motion towards alliances, the willingness and the efforts, and especially the relations, this motion takes to exist. This helps me formulating my positioning, as it expresses ‘ally’ as a verb and it gives priority to establishing accountable relations with other activists in order to be practised.

My interest in men’s critical-creative political elaborations brought me to enter ethnographically the field of men’s engagement for gender justice, while engaging with their ethico-onto-epistemological potentialities. This affirmative approach required me to answer my research question (*in which ways critical-creative approaches to men and masculinities are created by men’s networks for gender justice in Italy and Spain?*) by selecting relevant themes emerging from the field. Around these themes I constructed my analyses with epistemological accountability and with ethnographic imagination. These themes have been chosen according to fieldwork encounters, social urgency, transformative potential and ability to speak with current feminist theoretical-activist debates. Throughout the thesis I maintained this affirmative outlook that motivated me into the research project. During the research process, as tensions and contradictory practices appeared along the way, I developed a critical view on men’s involvement into feminist-oriented politics. The conclusive part of each chapter, and the overall conclusion of this thesis, served me to comment on the limitations and problematic elements of the uneven routes of men in gender justice action.

Methodologically, following the action proved to be an adequate method to immerse myself ethnographically into the realities of men’s groups during fieldwork. While it allowed me to participate extensively at events and gatherings with enthusiasm and motivation, for the same reasons this method sometimes made me spend too much time on the field, with the risk of collecting a large amount of diverse data and to lose myself in them. Although participant observation constituted my main research method, interviews functioned as a good entrance and navigational tool in the field, complementing the insights I learned from participant observation. Interviews were not my main research method, because my focus was not on the oral accounts of men’s journeys into gender justice activism.

At the beginning, unstructured and semi-structured interviews allowed me to enter the field as a non-native. Later, I became more aware of the pressing topics and, thanks also to the snow-ball method, I conducted more structured interviews to deepen

specific topics with those members who were more active on that question. Interviews in general enabled me to establish closer connections with members and their involvement, although sometimes -and especially at the beginning- I noticed that members were searching for my approval as a feminist by sometimes rephrasing a common internalized discourse as men against-sexism. That is why non-recorded conversations were useful to continue the conversation. The Snowball method taught me about the relations of friendship and leadership within groups/networks and among them, and the information I received from informal interactions (on train trips, car rides, conference breaks and all those moments that are not recorded as fieldwork but nevertheless matter) gave me important information on tensions and relations among men in this activism.

Content-wise, I have learned a lot about their work, the limits of their actions and the imaginativeness of their political proposals. I have met the groups and the activists they collaborate with, for instance, feminist and LGBT+ activists. With some of them I carried out interviews and personal conversations.

With some members I became friend, collaborator or both. To my gatekeepers in Barcelona and in Italy I am personally deeply thankful: without them and our collaboration, my research could not have been done. In the field, I have been most of the times welcomed positively, as if my presence as a young feminist researcher already ensured, with my curiosity and field notes at hand, the validity and relevance of men's political practice. The men-only separatist moments (I was not granted access to) gave me food for thought about the possibilities and limitations of men's homosocial spaces. In general, my presence stirred surprise, respect, admiration, gratitude, unwanted flirting, narcissism, and all these moments contributed to raising questions. As I explained in the introduction, my background from Italy, my feminist positioning, and my research experience granted me epistemological authority; my commitment to join activities helped me gaining the trust of my informants.

I am aware that every research endeavour is a craft, made possible by the cartography of material-discursive conditions of the inquiry, including informants, collaborators, and researcher. My role as researcher has been participatory. As the most extensive and written form of my research, this thesis is produced by my analytical and fieldwork dedication. However, it does not 'represent' the field nor fully encompasses

the extent of my engagement in the field.¹⁵⁹ Exhaustiveness is not my ontological goal. A diffractive approach created the analyses I developed in the chapters, and with them I hope to contribute to or generate debate. I also hope to inform both local and transnational feminist masculinity politics. The type of ethnography I practiced, has served to map out and draw links between activism and feminist theories, show their potential and their problematic tensions. This methodological choice served to show the situated nature of theory making (no theory comes from nowhere) and the generativity of concepts when emerging from and engaging with practice. This methodology allowed me to write a thesis that is grounded in situated analysis and aims to be theoretically relevant. It implies thinking-with-fieldwork.

At the same time, this writing choice required me to leave out of the thesis relevant questions that are nevertheless addressed in men's groups, such as fatherhood politics and gender education (MP), the discussion on prostitution in HI and other Barcelona-based groups, the relations with other gender-sensitive mobilizations, the in/exclusion of transgender people and the involvement of boys and young men in the groups, and the relations with non-explicitly gendered political organizations. Those issues that were left out will guide my future research.

Other questions to be answered in future research have to do with the political tensions encountered in the field. The limitations that I observed, i.e., the self-referentiality and self-centering risks of masculinity politics, open up the way for urgent matters to be addressed in future analyses. The ways in which collaborations and alliances are established among groups of men with feminist and transfeminist groups are also a crucial topic worthy of attention. A burning question that emerges from this research journey has to do with the interferences among neoliberal socio-economical changes, political radicalizations, informational politics and the situated lives of young men. What kind of discursive-material possibilities of creating equitable relations will they encounter? Will the figuration 'as men' serve its purpose? Will 'gender' in its ontological forms be central to social and personal transformation? What challenges, desires and methods will they engender along the way?

¹⁵⁹ Along the way I have been following the action on a transnational level. When possible, I have served as networking agent and translator. I have worked on establishing relations between groups based in Italy and Spain and the organizations coordinating the MenEngageEurope Network. Recently, as from the MEE meeting in Vienna (in October this year), the Italian *Il Giardino dei Padri* is part of MEE and soon *Maschile Plurale* will be too. The associations from Spain that were present at the meeting decided to lay the ground for a national ME network and are, at the moment, working on that. The outcome of my research on a transnational level is materialized through these relations.

Considering the limitations of the research process together with the partial nature of accountable knowledge, this thesis does not provide an exhaustive picture of men's involvement in gender justice in Italy and Spain. Rather than obeying to a representationalist epistemology, this thesis acknowledges its epistemological partiality and limitations, both of them sources of responsibility. For me, this meant taking the 'ability to respond' seriously and making the research process feminist in its praxis, that is, oriented to transformation, self-critical, aware of my limitations.

Part of research's accountability relies in its ability to contribute not only to scholarly knowledge but also to the knowledge and practice beyond academic settings. Some outcomes of the research process have come from the academic-activist-interventions and collaborations that I contributed to create in Barcelona and transnationally: e.g., my work as a networking agent among groups, as a translator, consultant, and educator, and with the project *Men in Movement* whose conferences meant to provide a space for conversations across people and fields. Therefore, the contribution this thesis is manifold, and provides grounded knowledge on feminist politics not only on a scholarly level, but also for social intervention with activist and policy commitments.

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