

Lorenza Perini

Giving Feminism a bad name: the uprising of the anti-feminism instances in times of populisms



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Foreward – In a wild elsewhere

I want to dedicate this small essay of mine to my students at the University of Padua.

Up to now, my commitment as a professor of gender politics in this institution has always been a testing ground, where I've been able to experiment beliefs and theories in order to renew and refine my political culture and my posture as a white, female and feminist scholar.

Tackling an issue like “gender equality” implies considering a situation of unbalance and the attempt to repair the scene with tools like policies and practices, for example.

The feminist perspective, on the contrary, leads to consider a transformation, a completely new scenario, different from the one that has produced the unbalance.

The pro/contra, yes/no, equality/inequality logic, at best, leads to a static condition. The goal in the feminist perspective is, instead, open and fluid, balance is just a step towards something ahead, towards the goal of freedom and self-determination for all.

Something achievable only through a transformative process.

It is not repairing the wounds of the wounded, but moving forward.

Towards a wild elsewhere.

History proves it. It is demonstrated by current events, which increasingly bring to the forefront of the media a huge amount of cases of mortification of the dignity of human beings and in particular of women, who are not free to choose, who are not in the condition to be -as much as men are- free.

Every day their body is a bargaining chip, a reward, a battlefield and a weapon at the same time, and after decades of struggle, under certain perspectives, “freedom for all” still seems to be a distant goal.

Over time, scenarios may have changed, the legislative system kept pace with social change and some - many - stereotypes on the roles of sexes in society may have fallen under the weight of the continuous pressure of the feminist groups -together with the anti-discrimination forces and other so-

cial movements- and parts of this freedom have now been conquered, and not just for women.

Fortunately, the new generations seem at times to be much more sensible to inequality and abuses, and this is definitely a positive result of the patient and tenacious work of those who have always believed –now and in the past- in the patient and persistent dissemination of a culture of respect and equality for all.

Much remains to be done, the forms of concealment of freedom are increasingly hidden and camouflaged; new forms of slavery may even present themselves wearing the mask of freedom.

What type of weapon do we have at our disposal at this point?

In this scenario, what I want to address most, is precisely this: it is of crucial importance to pay a constant and continuous attention to the language we use to speak about “gender”, “women”, “feminism”.

Words build the world.

We can't get them wrong.

Do handle them with care.

Introduction

1. The research question

The questions I pose to myself in this essay are apparently simple: why has feminism grown so unpopular in the last decade? Why does the mere mention of the word give rise so frequently to negative, disdainful -sometimes even ugly- responses? From a different perspective: what is behind the current anti-feminist backlash? And finally: what can feminism learn from all this?

Nowadays, anti-feminism includes people – specifically women- who do not feel represented by what the feminist movement refers to: they find it dangerous and absolutely unnecessary, because women can “have it all”. As posed by Christensen and Høyer (2015), women have good reasons to fear feminism since

to stand opposed to your culture, to be critical of institutions, behaviours, discourses--when it is so clearly not in your immediate interest to do so--asks a lot of a young person, of any person.

Considering how everything is framed in mass communications, today dissenting social campaigns can spread very easily, especially in online forums. According to Sherryl Vint, as regard to feminism we have been facing an “online backlash” so far, where women’s equality is treated as a fact that no sensible person would deny and feminism is made to seem ridiculous and passé in its insistence on still talking about gender discrimination when we all clearly live in a post-feminist utopia.

New backlash compromises feminism’s ability to critique economic and other gender divisions that still disadvantage women, and it evacuates political consciousness from the consumption of popular culture by reducing gender questions to personal stories, refusing to acknowledge structural problems (Vint 2010).

The most notable example in this sense is the “Women Against Feminism” (WAF) campaign, emerged during summer 2013 on the social media

Tumblr. The basic WAF assumption is that gender equality has already been achieved and the feminist instances are no more relevant in the today's society. Testimonies of the campaign are invited to share and disseminate pictures of themselves holding papers and billboards with statements describing why the feminist movement disappoints them. Most of the statements underline the acceptance of the biological determinism, like this one, reported by the philosopher Margarethe Mapes:

I am a woman. I adhere to traditional gender roles. I am a Christian and a conservative. I aspire to be a stay-at-home mom one day. I have known a variety of feminists, all of whom responded to my personal choices and beliefs with scorn and hatred. They have done nothing but dehumanize me and my family, friends, and colleagues who hold the above beliefs and make the above choices. I don't need feminism, and I will not allow individuals to quote dictionary definitions at me and call me ignorant. The dictionary still defines marriage as a union between a man and a woman, which isn't always the case in practice. Feminists have changed the definition, and I don't want to be, in any way, associated with modern, third wave feminism. (Mapes, 2016).

WAF blames feminists of having destroyed morality and happiness in women 'life. Furthermore, they accuse them of hating men, being angry or hysterical, spurring victimhood in relation to rape (drunk sex and catcalling can't be count in), having caused crisis in marriage, consuming traditional family values (such as motherhood) and aiming for superiority and not equality. The new anti-feminist's strategy they offer relies on love: the realization of the individual contentment passes through an heterosexual relationship. According to Mapes again:

The old backlash attempted to frighten women into accepting traditional gender roles and identifying with such roles as their only authentic source of personal happiness. The new backlash realizes that it is unlikely that women en masse will be forced back into the home and exclusively domestic roles, yet still tries to distance women from feminism and convince them that their lives should revolve around the heterosexual family. (Mapes, 2016).

The main idea is that if a woman has a good relationship with a man and he is a respectful person, she doesn't need to adhere to any of the feminist instances. Hidden behind sex and procreation and focusing on a happy

heterosexual relationship and then on marriage as the most valid experience, women can consider their mission in society accomplished. Moreover, if finding the “right man” is the main objective in their life, and if this man is someone who refuses to behave as a privileged by nature, there is no need to change the societal gender roles. The consequence is that, if the man is not that person and if the relationship is not working, the only one to blame is her – the woman, because she is the one who picked the “wrong man”.

In this scenario, it is clear that topics like domestic violence or sexual abuse are completely underestimated, treated as exceptional and individual experiences and not as systematic issues. Anti-feminists believe that the new victims of sexism are not women but men, since feminists punish the other sex for their fortune of being males. Consequently, men are marginalized from society and specifically from its basic constitutive cell: the family.

The disconnection from reality is evident in this reasoning: despite “alpha girl” statements and media reports of this last decade indicate that women have the power and can do it all, sexism is still strongly present in worldwide politics, in movies and media, in the workforce and in society at large, and if the “girl power”’s narrative doesn’t match with women’s realities at all and, according to Shauna Pomerantz and Rebecca Raby, the reason is that girls are influenced by what academic researchers and cultural critics consider a post-feminist perception of gender inequality, a notion that women are somehow running the world and that sexism towards women no longer exists (Pomerantz and Raby, 2017).

All this to say that both feminism and its rejection are clearly framing our reality.

And it’s a fact we have to consider today, when the so-called “fourth wave feminism” is showing multiform and contradictory features. Feminism, non-feminism, anti-feminism, new feminism: all these seem to be different labels for the same “feminist something” era in which we are living – a time of crisis that harbours, within itself, both the rejection of historical feminism and the possibility of re-discovering new forms of activism able to erode and challenge patriarchy and authoritarianism. The point is our capacity to recognize these opportunities and draw from them practical and positive rather than theoretical and negative elements, in order to keep going, to continue walking the path of freedom. Even in times of rising populisms.

Before entering into this discussion, I want to position myself in this composite scenario following the aquis outlined by Brabon and Genz (2007) who, in their use of the prefix “post”, evoke a sense of positive evolution, a moving ahead, albeit warning that the directionality and the meaning of post-feminism are far from being established, allowing a certain margin of discretion in the interpretation of the concept.

2. The structure of the book

In the first part of the book I will examine the challenges coming from within the feminist movements of the post-feminist era, focusing on its more conservative branches and on the limitations of the “girl power” discourse of the Nineties, which was able to turn feminism into a sort of commodity.

I will then analyse the obstacles to the feminist discourse coming from the outside: the cultural stereotypes shaping the general perception so inimical to the movement and its members, which are one significant cause for the increasing disinclination of women to identify with the causes of feminism. And these same stereotypes are an essential element of the heteronormative and sexist discourses fuelling men’s rights activism.

In the second part I will try to explain how “masculinism” exploits the argument that feminism can be a threat to men’s rights and represents a powerful tool for women to impose their superiority over men.

The institutional and political dimensions of anti-feminism in our time cannot be overlooked. I will, therefore describe, in a specific chapter, a concrete manifestation of the explicit “state anti-feminism” that has been taking place in countries like Poland in the last years and I will discuss the devastating consequences that this institutional approach is having on women’s rights not only in that country, but worldwide.

In the last part of the book, I will draw the case of actual feminism that appears to have taken into consideration the greatest hindrances that feminisms have to face in the post-feminist era and represents a strategy for tackling these problems and revitalize feminist discourses: the instances of the Ni Una Menos (NUM) movement will be discussed, together with its ideological pillars, as a way to contrast both the growing individualism and the commodity feminism that have prevented – is the thesis advocated in the book - the feminist movement from fulfilling its transformative and

active purpose, and the institutional/political system that overtly opposes feminist struggles and initiatives. As the nature of the NUM movement is not homogeneous, either in its goals or in its organization, this research does not attempt to analyse it as a whole, but just to provide an understanding of the particular moment that feminisms are witnessing today, in the XXI Century.

As concerning the research methodology, throughout the book I will adopt a feminist approach to select, describe and analyse the most useful sources and pieces of information (Reinharz, 1992). Feminist principles will inform all the stages of the research, from choice of topics to presentation of data. In this sense, Ollivier and Tremblay (2000) identify three different principles characterizing the feminist approach in research:

Feminist research, being transformative, includes both the construction of new knowledge and the production of social change, since historically, feminist research has been informed by women's struggles against the multiple forms of their oppression.

Feminist research, as being grounded in feminist values and beliefs, focuses on the meaning women give to daily life, while recognizing that research must often involve a constructive challenge with the institutions, which are still grounded in patriarchy.

Feminist research, being interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary, uses different and multiple methodologies and is constantly redefined by the concerns of women coming from very different backgrounds and perspectives and addressing cross-cutting issues such as racism, class, religion, ethnicity, poverty.

In the conclusive lines of this book, I will offer some suggestions as to how feminist movements can interact profitably with political parties, and I will seek to highlight an issue — the misunderstanding of the feminist instances with the one of maternalism's - as the most relevant of the contemporary era, and one of the reasons why we are still dealing with the all recognize that the only revolution accomplished of the Nineteenth Century is feminism, but then nothing is really changing in the daily lives of women.

CHAPTER I

Feminism/anti-feminism/post-feminism

The aim of this first chapter is to present and describe the characteristics of the historical and cultural times of post-feminism and to explain the anti-feminist drift typical of this era. I will discuss the various definitions of post-feminism provided in literature, clarifying the one followed in my own analysis.

The manifestations of post-feminism I address in this chapter arise in a late twentieth-century Western context characterised by the spread of media technologies and a neo-liberal, consumerist ideology that replaces collective, activist politics with a more individualistic insistence on consumer choice and self-rule. My objective is to question how this peculiar era can harbour anti-feminist sentiment without, however, wishing to suggest that anti-feminism is the only form of post-feminism identifiable.

In its most denunciatory forms, post-feminism misreads and classifies feminism as an archaic and unproductive movement, irrelevant to the lives of contemporary women. I find it interesting and helpful to study the movements that run against the gains made in the first and second waves of feminism, from the most blatant overt to the least. To find a feminist movement able to overcome the difficulties of our times, one must look back at the forces that operated against it in the past, and see whether such forces are recognizable today.

It is important to know what are the hindrances working against feminism, especially in contemporary Western society, which is characterized by the generic belief that “women already have it all”, but in practice still subordinates and discriminates against women in all areas. From a theoretical point of view, the fact that instances of anti-feminism do exist and are discernible is not so negative: they can represent an opportunity for reflection, self-analysis and constructive self-criticism by the movement.

In this chapter I will therefore identify some of the forces that opposed feminism from the 1980s onward and, subsequently, analyse the strands in action today with the vilification and negation of feminism as their main agenda. Before addressing this, I will set out the post-feminist context, then

shed light on certain key words, clarifying what is meant when I speak about post-feminism or about anti-feminism backlash.

1. Anti-feminism and sexism in the post-feminist era

Post-feminism is a contradictory concept, with no univocal meaning. It emerged during the late Twentieth Century in cultural, academic and political circles, from popular journalism and media, feminist analyses, post-modern theories and neo-liberal rhetoric (Gill, 2017). Rather than referring to a single definition, there are several interpretations of post-feminism, highlighting the variety of meanings attributed to the term. The dispute arises firstly from the indefiniteness of the “post” prefix, the connotations of which are clear grammatically, but not politically. Although the word seems to evoke a sense of evolution, referring to a time subsequent to another, the directionality and the meaning of the prefix are far from established (Brabon, Genz, 2007).

“Post” can also be employed to indicate a complete break with the past: as the American historian Amelia Jones declares, what is “post” tends to take the signification of a kind of termination, something that has ended, done with, obsolete (Jones, 1990). In this sense, post-feminism acquires deadly connotations as it proclaims the passing of feminism or at least the end of a stage in feminism’s history. Thus, on this side of the debate, post-feminism is used to suggest that the project of feminism is arrived at an end, either because it has been accomplished or because it has failed and is no longer valid.

In the mid of the Nineties the most prominent advocates of this standpoint, such as Naomi Wolf, Katie Roiphe, Natasha Walter and Rene Denfeld, affirmed that the political demands of first and second waves of feminism (empowerment, equal pay, sexual liberation) had been recognized. Accordingly, Rene Denfeld argued that for women of her generation, feminism was a birth right. They knew what it is to live without excessive confinement, being the first generation to grow up expecting equal opportunity and equal education, as well as the freedom to express their sexuality (Denfeld, 2009). The implicit assumption of such a statement is that feminism no longer needs to be politically enforced, since women, through their individual and personal choices, now have the possibility — like men

— to bring about fundamental societal changes. In this case, the meaning of “post” becomes equivalent both to “anti” and to “after” feminism, indicating a successor to a feminist movement by now superseded (Brabon, Genz, 2007).

An opposite view to this understanding is the idea that the prefix “post” symbolises the need for a reappraisal of the feminist movement in most of its manifestations. This approach is favoured by post-modernist interpretations considering the post-feminist age as part of a process of ongoing transformation. According to this view, the meaning of “post” is a dependence on, a continuity, something that follows (Giddens, 1991). In this sense, post-feminism does not necessarily imply the rejection of previous feminist ideals, as they remain of value in the post-feminist picture.

With this conception of post-feminism, we can find attacks by feminists on younger generations of women for their historical amnesia and misappropriations of the feminist legacy. Segal, for instance, declares that “by the 1990s the radical spirit of feminist politics had long since waned” and that “there was a kind of cultural forgetting of the intellectual legacies of feminism” (Segal, 2003: 152). These critics define post-feminism as a sexist, politically conservative and media-influenced epoch, able to jeopardize the fundamental principles of the feminist movement. According to this viewpoint, the advent of post-feminism has turned the transformation of sexism into a more indirect and insidious form of discrimination. Popular media are criticised for appropriating feminism’s language of choice and empowerment, converting these terms into consumer products to be sold to (mostly young) women. Consequently, post-feminism represents an illusion of progress that ends up subjugating and oppressing women on more unconscious levels.

This stance has been thoroughly examined by the Pulitzer Prize American journalist Susan Faludi, who portrays post-feminism as a disruptive reaction against the ground gained by the second wave of feminism and associates the work of younger feminists with a backlash against feminism (Faludi, 1991).

From McRobbie’s remarks on the limitations of seeing post-feminism only in a denunciatory light, it becomes clear that a perception of the concept as reflecting a merely retrogressive, anti-feminist era that retracts and invalidates the gains and social transformations achieved by the feminist movement, is completely misleading.

The understanding of post-feminism as simply an unfaithful reproduction of feminism that renders feminism out of date (McRobbie, 2004) is problematic, not only because it adopts a one-dimensional reading of “post”, but also because it assumes a distinction between an “authentic” feminism, on the one hand, and a supposedly “bad” feminism on the other.

Concerning the interpretative struggle on post-feminism, it should be added that feminism itself has never had a universally accepted agenda and a shared or unique meaning. As Geraldine Harris highlights, feminism has never had a single, clearly defined, common ideology (Harris, 1999), and it can be said to have several operative definitions that are always set in specific contexts, specific issues and personal practices. It exists on both situated and theoretical levels, dealing with specific issues and involving diverse individuals while promoting a universal policy of equality for women. Indeed, the assumption that there is (or there was) a unique and easily identifiable feminism denies its competing perceptions, its different social and political programmes.

Thus, when talking about post-feminism, it is not possible to simply refer to a former time when feminism had a stable signification and unity. Given these difficulties of interpretation, it is worthy to define post-feminism as a term that allows for a variety of versions and readings; it should be assessed dynamically in the relationships and tensions among its various manifestations and contexts.

As Sarah Projansky observed, post-feminism is -by definition- contradictory, simultaneously feminist and anti-feminist, liberating and repressive, productive and obstructive of progressive social change (Projansky, 2007). This is the reason why the concept of post-feminism is deemed to encompass both anti-feminist stances and new possible feminist activism. In fact, it is far more interesting and thought-provoking to look at how the intersection of feminism and popular culture and politics works in the post-feminist era, rather than merely limiting the research to define post-feminism as pro or anti feminism.

The post-feminism frame of reference expands to include not only a conceptual and semantic bond with feminism, but also links with other social, cultural, theoretical and political areas (such as consumer culture, popular media and neo-liberal rhetoric) that might be favourable to or in conflict with feminism, or maybe both.

I will, therefore, regard post-feminism as being neither a simple rebirth nor a total rejection of feminism, but as a period of complex resignification during which both the threat of backlash and the potential for innovation are present.

In this scenario, it is clear that the main difficulty of attributing a unique and shared definition to post-feminism resides in the fact that, in any case, definitions could be misleading; they might provide appealing conclusions and neat answers at the expense of more complex and searching questions. Therefore, it is appropriate to take the view of Genz and McRobbie on post-feminism as admitting of both continuity and disjuncture, rather than as either pro or anti-feminist instances. In particular, Genz argues that any effort to fix a sole meaning of post-feminism is futile and erroneous, so it is crucial to develop thinking on post-feminism that can conceive of both continuity and change (Jordan, 2016).

For these reasons, post-feminism is referred to in this study as a descriptive popular trend and a political phenomenon prevalent in late modern, Western societies. Rather than polarising specific strands of post-feminism, I retain the idea of a multifaceted post-feminist landscape (Jordan, 2016).

This view, potentially both feminist and anti-feminist, does not, however, overlook the need to question the meaning of basic concepts that will be at the centre of this entire work: feminism and anti-feminist backlash.

Although there can never be a single, incontestable meaning associated to these words, it is, nonetheless, useful to outline some general criteria for recognizing them, both for the sake of clarity as well as to facilitate a better understanding of what will be frequently mentioned hereinafter. Despite all the complexities, some demarcations are helpful in better defining the boundaries of my analysis. Before tackling the anti-feminist backlash in detail, it is important to understand the target of the backlash in question, namely of feminism.

2. Feminism as an opposition to patriarchy

The meaning of the word “feminist” has not really changed since it first appeared in a book review in 1895, describing a woman who “has the capacity of fighting her way back to independence.” (Faludi, 1991).

The definition of feminism offered in this essay is intended to allow for the plural diversity of the feminist thought but, at the same time, to avoid an implausibly open-ended interpretation. On the contrary, it is my intention to affirm that feminism can be defined, and that one of the reasons why anti-feminism flourishes is indeed that a real contact with the basic meaning of the term has been lost. Expressing her frustrations for the absence of clear definitions of feminism, Carmen Vasquez commented in 1983:

We can't even agree on what a feminist is, never mind what she would believe in and how she defines the principles that constitute honour among us. Feminism in America has come to mean anything you like, honey. There are as many definitions of Feminism as there are feminists, some of my sisters say, with a chuckle. I don't think it's funny. It is not funny at all. (Vasquez, 1983: 11).

Of course, these words do not suggest that feminism should be a fixed movement around which many women gather in agreement. Nor they imply that the women's movement has not continued to grow in some sort of linear or progressive way. Nonetheless, the assumption that the meaning of feminism is either obvious or too varied to be defined needs to be challenged (Delmar, 1994).

The content of the word feminism seems self-evident, frequently taken for granted, and consequently very often misinterpreted, so it is important, for the purposes of this essay, to construct a base-line definition of feminism that does not underestimate its diversities and specificities, but represents the core values that any feminist person might share and that the anti-feminist backlash attempts to question.

Defining feminism has never been an easy task, and in a post-feminist era, characterized by increasing global exchange of ideas and strategies, it is even more complicated. Globalization, in fact, has produced new local feminisms and, subsequently, new anti-feminisms. The problem of definition is further complicated by the fact that even among self-proclaimed feminists (and anti-feminists), great philosophical diversity is the rule.

First and foremost — both historically and conceptually — feminism precedes anti-feminism, which arises as a repudiation of feminism and can be defined only on that basis (De Keseredy, Dragiewicz 2018). There are various definitions and different types of feminism, but the explanation of-

ferred by the historian Linda Gordon has the necessary balance of precision and flexibility to serve as a starting point:

Feminism is a critique of male supremacy, formed and offered in the light of a will to change it, which in turn assumes a conviction that it is changeable (Gordon, 1986).

This definition calls to choose a side, as it provides a conceptual umbrella, broad enough to contain diverse and even contradictory elements (Keetley, Pettegrew 2005). These words convey the idea that feminism recognizes and critiques discrimination against women, identifies social injustice, and therefore organizes itself into a social movement to change the status quo. It is a statement in which one can identify some fundamental elements: the challenge to male supremacy and to the patriarchal society, together with the will to change a situation that is recognized as changeable.

On this premises, I will begin by considering feminism as an opposition to patriarchy. Patriarchy is understood by feminism as the major hindrance to women's advancement and development (Sultana, 2012: 2). Despite differences in levels of male domination, the broad principle is that, in a patriarchal society, men usually occupy positions of control and power, subordinating women in both public and private spheres. In order to work for women's development, emancipation and independence, feminism has to understand the patriarchal system whereby women continue to be dominated and subordinate. Thus, feminists use the term patriarchy to define the power relationship between men and women as well as to understand and to unravel the sources of women's subordination (Sultana, 2012: 2).

The word patriarchy literally means the rule enacted by the patriarch, and was used originally to describe a specific type of male-dominated family, the large household including women, young men, children, slaves and domestic servants living under the rule of one dominant male (Sultana, 2012: 2). Now the notion is used more generally to refer to male domination, to the power relationships by which men dominate women, and to characterise a system whereby women are kept subordinate in a number of ways (Bhasin, 2006: 3). According to Walby, patriarchy is a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women (Walby, 1990: 20). Patriarchy, in its wider definition, refers to the institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the

extension of this private form of dominance over women in the public space as a whole. Feminism sees patriarchy as a societal phenomenon that allows men to hold power and that denies women the chance of access to such power. Thus, patriarchy is an institutionalized system of male dominance, a set of social relations between men and women, having a material base and establishing or creating independence and solidarity among men in order to dominate women (Sultana, 2012: 3).

Patriarchal ideology serves to assure men the dominant or masculine roles and to keep women in subordinate or feminine roles. This ideology is so influential that, as stated by Kate Millet in 1977:

men are usually able to secure the apparent consent of the very women they oppress [...] through institutions such as the academy, the church and the family, each of which justifies and reinforces women's subordination to men" (Millet, 1977:35).

Women's subordination refers to the inferior position of women in society, to a limited "grasp on the world" (in De Beauvoir's words) compared to men, to their lack of access to resources and decision-making. Women's subordination expresses itself in social situations where women are forced to stay under the control of men. In the continuous attempt to maintain this control, patriarchy operates through social customs, social traditions and social roles.

This is why feminism needs to resort to social activism in order to bring about the change it seeks. The "will to change" is what renders feminism not only an ideology with its complex corpus of theories, but also a social movement, needed in order to uproot patriarchy through political activism. The American activist and writer bell hooks defines feminism as a social struggle to eradicate sexism, seen as the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture in many domains (hooks, 2000: 24). In her words:

Feminism is the struggle to end sexist oppression. Its aim is not to benefit solely any specific group of women, any particular race or class of women. It does not privilege women over men. It has the power to transform in a meaningful way all our lives (hooks, 2000: 24).

hooks refers to feminism as a commitment to reorganize society, requiring each individual participant to acquire a critical political consciousness

(hooks, 2000: 24). Feminism, therefore, has a political connotation with specific emphasis on collective as well as on individual experience, challenging women to enter a new domain and leave behind the apolitical dimension in which patriarchy seeks to confine them. To end sexist oppression, feminism actively engages participants in revolutionary and transformative struggle.

Sharing the concept of feminism expressed by hooks, feminism in this study should be seen as a political commitment, a social engagement resisting the emphasis on individual identity and the Western ethics of imperialism and capitalism, which are personal rather than social. A view such as this suggests that commitment to feminism it is an act of will, a political choice against social injustice. The injustices feminism seeks to solve are those one rooted in gender. To arrive at a more comprehensive connotation of feminism that includes the gender issue, I also take into consideration the definition provided by Jordan. According to her explanation, feminism is based on two empirical prerogatives:

1. feminism acknowledges that significant gender inequalities exist in contemporary society and that women are generally disadvantaged compared to men;
2. feminist theory and activism are considered necessary in order to bring about gender equality (Jordan, 2016: 31).

This view is accompanied by three normative assumptions:

1. gender equality is a socially and morally desirable goal;
2. feminism is conceived of as a necessary and benevolent force for social change;
3. gender is political and there is a need for collective feminist politics.

Feminisms have in common the argument that gender is “a difference that makes a difference” (Jordan, 2016: 31). Gender equality is a complex and greatly debated issue. First, it is important to stress that through feminist lenses, gender is seen as a social and political category and gendered social structures are understood in terms of power relations rather than as a matter of genetic destiny or of individual choice. Denying any kind of biological determinism, feminists have argued that behavioural and psychological differences have social, rather than biological, causes. For instance, Simone

de Beauvoir famously affirmed that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman, and that social discrimination produces in women moral and intellectual effects so profound that they appear to be caused by nature (De Beauvoir, 1949).

Commonly observed behavioural traits associated with women and men do not, therefore, depend on anatomy. Rather, they are culturally learned or acquired. To distinguish biological differences from social differences and open up the debate on the social dimension, feminists appropriated the term “gender”. Until the 1960s, the word was used exclusively to refer to masculine and feminine words (Nicholson, 1994: 80).

In 1968, psychologist Robert Stoller began using the terms “sex” to refer to biological traits and “gender” to express the degree of femininity and masculinity a person exhibited. Along with psychologists like Stoller, feminists found it useful to distinguish between sex and gender. This enabled them to argue that many differences between women and men were “social” in origin and could, therefore, be changed.

Describing gender as the socially imposed division of sexes, Rubin’s thought that, although biological differences are fixed, gender differences are the oppressive results of social interventions that dictate how women and men should behave. Women are oppressed as women and by having to be women (Mikkola, 2017). However, since gender is social, it is thought to be changeable by political and social restructuring that would eventually put an end to women’s repression. Which social practices construct gender? What is social construction? These are questions at the core of most feminist debates. At all events, action to remove gender inequality must be central to any plausible definition of feminism (Mikkola, 2017).

This said, it is important to better clarify what it is meant (and what is not) by the expression “gender equality”, and what place it occupies in the understanding of feminism, at least in the one provided by this work.

In my understanding of gender equality, I always acknowledge the aforementioned social constraints of male rule and the systemic sexism that afflict our society. A call for gender equality is possible and authentic only if it considers the system of patriarchy we live in, and the mistreatment of women and girls designed to keep them in a position of subordination. The gender equality expression can become unsafe if one overlooks these fundamental principles. Gender equality is not about making women comfortable within the current structure of society. It is not about women attaining a

position of value in society, if this society is imbued with sexism and unfair rules. Neither should feminists see men and their power as the goal to be achieved in their pursuit of equality. Any definition of gender equality that removes patriarchy from the equation is inevitably inaccurate and panders to the idea that male rule does not exist. Therefore, it should be recognized that the concept of gender equality, however appealing, carries the risk of damaging women's ability to effectively challenge the common barriers that all females experience to some extent in their lifetimes. For these reasons, it is important to stress that "feminism" will not be used in this work as another way of expressing equality, given both the ambiguity of this term, and the need to recognize the existence of a specific patriarchal social structure embedded in our reality.

3. The anti-feminist backlash

As women's collective quest for equal rights smacks into the backlash's wall of resistance, it breaks into a million pieces, each shard a separate woman's life (Faludi, 1991)

I follow the analysis made by Gill, according to which framing post-feminism solely as anti-feminism would not allow the possibility of seeing all the contradictions and entanglements in post-feminist discourses (Gill, 2017: 607). In this part of the essay, I will look at some manifestations of backlash against feminism during the post-feminist period, without however regarding anti-feminism as a synonym of post-feminism or as its unique trend. My suggestion is that in a wider context, where it seems that feminist ideals have entered the general culture, or been adopted by organisations and public bodies, this development has also been accompanied by a process of discouraging and rejecting the further extension or regeneration of feminism.

According to DeKeseredy and Dragiewicz, anti-feminism rejects critiques of male supremacy and resists efforts to eradicate it (often in the conviction that no change is possible whatsoever). Following a sequence that continues to the present day, much early anti-feminism was both an authentic display of opposition to the dismantling of male rule, and an effective weapon against women and men looking for change in social, religious, moral, economic, and political relations. Among writers, the two functions of anti-feminism, as a means and as an end, have complemented and enhanced

one another. At the core of the anti-feminist program is the conservation or restoration of social, economic, and political differences based on sexes.

The most basic principle of anti-feminism is that the differences between men and women are such that inequalities of treatment and status are desirable or needed (DeKeseredy and Dragiewicz, 2018: 340). Moreover, feminists and anti-feminists have opposing claims to a range of positions on sexuality and reproduction. Importantly, regulation and control of female reproductive health was always a historic purpose underlying the establishment of patriarchal forms of male superiority globally.

For this reason, control of female reproduction and sexuality has been among the major anti-feminist themes and goals. Early feminist activists challenged direct legal manifestations of patriarchy by demonstrating for married women's property laws, maternal rights, and liberalization of divorce statutes. Feminist success led to counter-movements in the late twentieth century, largely concerned with the divorce-related issues of alimony, child support, and paternal custody rights. In each of these cases, anti-feminists claimed that the resulting reforms would render women inept at reproduction and motherhood (DeKeseredy and Dragiewicz, 2018: 342).

Anti-feminism perspectives compete against feminist demands, making the empirical claims that: (1) no important gender inequalities remain in current Western societies; (2) feminism is no longer necessary as any minor gender-related inequalities will disappear naturally over time (DeKeseredy and Dragiewicz, 2018: 342). These claims imply that feminism is anachronistic and lacks legitimacy since it has already been largely successful. Consequently, gender becomes a depoliticized issue, and feminism an individual lifestyle choice rather than a focus for collective, transformative action.

Anti-feminist backlashes are essentially reactions against the aforementioned concept of feminism, enacted by groups in society who feel somehow threatened by the gains of women's movements and want to re-establish the status quo, that is to say the conditions existing before feminism took over.

The term backlash is used to describe hostile responses to the perceived impact of feminism: Jane Mansbridge and Shauna Shames define it as resistance from those in power to attempts to change the status quo (Mansbridge, Shames, 2008: 623). Backlash is, therefore, a countermovement, a reaction against the gains obtained by the feminist movement. Social movements in general are intrinsically anti-institutional and anti-establishment.

Conversely, counter-movements are pro-institutional and supportive of the establishment and the status quo. Change-oriented social movements often produce their antithesis: efforts (not necessarily organized) to prevent or reverse such change. As explained by Saltzman Chafetz and Gary Dworkin, the backlash does not always take the form of an organized movement, but that does not make it less effective.

In fact, the absence of a clear or single scheme simply makes the backlash less recognizable and predictable. In fact, the authors emphasize that a backlash against women's rights is more likely to succeed when it gives the impression of not being political, so that it appears not to be a countermovement at all. It is most powerful when it hits private aspects of life, to the point that women begin to enforce the backlash on themselves. It operates according to a subtle divide-and-conquer strategy: elevating women who are compliant and isolating those who are not (Chafetz & Dworkin, 1987: 50). A backlash movement is most expected to appear when the movement it opposes grows large or enjoys success in the pursuit of its objectives, coming to be perceived as a considerable menace to material and status interests.

Women's movements have incurred backlash responses on several occasions throughout history. These movements have called for a variety of changes, from upgrading legal, political, educational, and occupational restrictions on women to the complete overhaul of gender definition and sex stratification systems. In so doing, they have inevitably threatened vested interests, and when the threat has been perceived as particularly considerable, backlash movements have arisen. Counter-movements, as backlash movements are termed, embody "a conscious, collective, organized attempt to resist or reverse social change" (Mottl, 1980: 620). They are the work generally of existing groups whose statuses are threatened by the gains made specifically by the social movement they campaign against, or who are reacting to more general social changes occurring concomitantly within society. While counter-movements may precede the mobilization of the movement they resist, they neither fully organize as a countermovement nor develop their ideological scope until after the rise and initial success of the movement they attack (Mottl, 1980: 621). Feminist movements in particular, because they challenge deeply embedded structures of privilege, and provoke powerful reactions (Chafetz and Dworkin, 1982: 38). Backlash works by simultaneously denying and justifying social inequality. This involves the individualization of problems that social movements sought to contextual-

ize in society. At the same time, the key component of backlash is the desire to return to aspects of an idealised past in which structural inequality existed but was accepted. Central tactics of the anti-feminist backlash include: efforts to reverse the changes wrought by feminism; blaming feminism for social problems; claims that feminism has “gone too far”; and attacks on women’s authority.

Susan Faludi writes at the beginning of the 1990s that the last decade has seen a powerful counterassault on women’s rights, a backlash, an attempt to retract the handful of hard-won victories that the feminist movement did manage to win for women. Rather than a new phenomenon, though, backlash is described by the author as a

recurring feature in the history of feminism. Feminist successes have often been met, not only with resistance, but with renewed determination by patriarchal forces to maintain and increase the subordination of women (Faludi, 1991: 89).

As indicated by Faludi, fear and repulsion of feminism are a sort of perpetual condition in our culture, not always an acute presence, but generally latent and resurfacing periodically. These episodes of resurgence can accurately be termed backlashes to women’s advancement.

As we will see in the following examples, these outbreaks can be defined backlashes because they are driven by a rejection of women’s gains interpreted as dangerous, especially by men facing real threats to their economic and social well-being on other fronts. Interestingly, the anti-feminist backlash was set off not by women’s achievement of full equality, but by the increasing likelihood that it could happen. The anti-feminist backlash is a pre-emptive attack designed to stop women in their tracks, before they reach the finish line.

4. Conservative feminism and girl power

According to Gill, some of the core features of post-feminism include the emphasis on individualism, choice and agency; the disappearance, or at least muting, of vocabularies to indicate both structural inequalities and cultural influence; the de-territorialisation of patriarchy and its re-territorialisation in women’s bodies and in the beauty industrial complex (Gill,

2007: 620). These clearly were developments that took place during the 1980s and 1990s and laid the foundation for more recent forms of rejection and vilification of feminism.

In effect, Judith Stacey shows how, from the 1980s, there has been a resurgence of what she calls “conservative feminism”, which defines a women’s movement seeking a retreat from the critique of sexual difference and male dominance of the public domain, in favour of a re-evaluation of home, mothering and heterosexual love. Conservative feminism was promoted as a celebration of femininity, especially when connected with maternity and traditional female roles. This underlines a common link made by society between feminism and non-motherhood or feminism and lesbianism, which will be better explained later. For now, it is important to stress that during the 1980s there was a conservative backlash against the feminism-lesbianism camp, which was accused of going “too far” in its many critiques of male power. This vision of feminism made the movement grow deeply unpopular and unpalatable to so-called ordinary women.

Even the word gender became loathsome to those who endorsed conservative feminist positions, since what was being argued for was a return to the full endorsement of sexual difference and to the social value of maternity. As confirmation of the theory that this trend can be considered a response to feminist movements, Judith Stacey points out that the central, definitive characteristic of new conservative feminism is a refutation of sexual politics, the distinctively radical core of the women’s liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s (Stacey, 1983: 574).

As already explained, one of the fundamental insights of feminist thought was the realization that woman is a social and not a biological category, one that has been constructed historically and on a social basis, and has subordination at its core. For feminists, therefore, sexual politics has played a role of direct struggle against this social construction, a weapon to combat the systemic, structural subordination of women. Pursuing the argument that “the personal is political”, feminists have made efforts to transform gender and sexuality in both the public and the individual spheres. This form of sexual politics is rejected by conservative feminists, who indeed seek to avoid all forms of direct challenge against male power.

This repudiation of sexual politics is linked to three additional aspects of conservative feminist thought. First, it promotes a “pro-family” stance that views sexual politics as threatening to “the family.” Second, it affirms gender

differentiation and celebrates traditionally feminine qualities, particularly those associated with mothering. Finally, conservative feminists believe that struggle against male domination detracts from political agendas they consider more important (Stacey, 1983: 575).

Susan Faludi, referring mainly to the American society of that time, explains why the 1980s was the right period for this kind of conservative and anti-feminist backlash. According to her, the early 1980s provided not only a political but also an economic prompt for the backlash to emerge. The “traditional” American man’s real wages shrank significantly at this time. Specifically, the decrease in wages most severely hit two groups of men: blue-collar workers, side-lined by the shift to a service economy, and younger baby boomers (Faludi, 1991: 80). During the ‘80s, plant closures put millions of blue-collar men out of work, of which only 60 percent found new jobs (about half at lower pay). Of all men losing earning power, younger baby-boom men were losing the most:

The average man under thirty was earning 25 to 30 percent less than his counterpart in the early ‘70s. Most vulnerable to its message, they have picked up and played back the backlash at disturbingly high volume (Faludi, 1991: 81).

It was during these years that, for the first time, American women out-ranked men among new entrants to the work force and, for a brief time, joblessness among men registered higher than among women. For the first time, white men became less than 50 percent of the work force, and more women than men enrolled in college; likewise for the first time, more than 50 percent of women worked, more than 50 percent of married women worked, and more women with children than without children worked. Significantly, 1980 was the year the U.S. Census officially stopped defining the head of household as the husband (Faludi, 1991: 81). If the backlash originated when it did, it was because of this sudden loss of economic power by men:

When the enemy has no face, society will invent one. All that free-floating anxiety over declining wages, insecure employment, and overpriced housing needs a place to light, and in the ‘80s, much of it fixed itself on women (Faludi, 1991: 83).

For some high-profile men in distress, feminist women became the all-purpose scapegoats. Once a society projects its fears towards female individuals, it can try to channel those fears by controlling women. In times of anti-feminist backlash, this is done by pressuring them to conform to comfortably nostalgic norms; the pressure is applied, first, through the demand that women “return to femininity”.

If the backlash is particularly incisive, women too become conduits of this pressure. When “femininity” is normally perceived as what “a true woman” wants or should want, then women are naturally persuaded to crave for it. It is in this sense that the conservative backlash intersects with the ideology of so-called “Girl Power” in the 1990s and with the marketing strategies of post-feminist culture. According to Faludi, during the post-feminist era, the mass media and the advertising industry began adapting feminist rhetoric to marketing policies, intent on selling old sexist products. This approach is described by the author as a redirection of women’s self-expression to the shopping mall, a process whereby feminists were turned into passive consumers who exercise their “right” to buy products and make their own “choices” from the options offered to them by the market.

In this way, feminist appeals for autonomy and independence would become a merchandising plea to obey the call of the market, an appeal that weakened and degraded women’s pursuit of true self-determination (Faludi, 1991: 85).

Post-feminist consumerism artfully undermines women’s progress because it conceals its anti-feminist face, to the point that it appears to side with women against male oppression.

According to Christopher Lasch:

The advertising industry thus encourages the pseudo-emancipation of women, flattering them with its insinuating reminder, “You’ve come a long way, baby” and disguising the freedom to consume as genuine autonomy. ... It emancipated women and children from patriarchal authority, however, only to subject them to the new paternalism of the advertising industry, the industrial corporation, and the state (Lasch, 1991: 74).

Post-feminism’s commercial appeal and its consumerist implications are viewed by Gill and Scharff as selling out feminist ideologies and exploiting them as a marketing tool. The authors express concern at the potential of this commodification to generate a “fake feminism” that works through

capitalism and free market rules and is based on competitive, individual choices rather than social activism (Gill, Scharff 2011: 42). Indeed, during the 1990s, celebrations of female success and “can-do girls” were notable features of cultural imaginary, albeit represented mostly in terms of “girl power” and individual achievement, not feminism. The girl power discourse of those years is characterized by a persistent individualism, diverting the focus of feminism away from the institutions of patriarchal capitalism and toward individual women and their bodies. This process, making use of feminist vocabulary like “empowerment” and “choice”, ultimately blames women for their disadvantaged positions, calls for greater focus on the self and enrolls women in an intense regime of control (McRobbie, 2015: 261).

As a matter of fact, the Oxford English Dictionary defines girl power as: “used in reference to an attitude of independence, confidence, and empowerment among young women” (OED, 2019). The post-feminist conceptualization of girl power is characterized by an aesthetically oriented consumerism, created through mainstream commodification for economic purposes. The anti-feminist message of girl power attracts women’s attention to fashion and appearance, an emphasis on style and aesthetics that then becomes a marketing strategy for the culture industry.

This post-feminist view of girl power centred on style is defined by scholars as commodity feminism, which redefines feminism as “a style—a semiotic abstraction—a set of visual sign values that say who you are” (Bae, 2011: 29). The fact is that, as explained by bell hooks, that feminism is neither a lifestyle nor a ready-made identity or role. Diverting interest from a social movement intended to change society, many women began to concentrate at this time on the development of a counter-culture, focused on women seeking to live the “feminist lifestyle”.

Bell hooks criticizes these women because they do not see that this conception of feminism undermines the feminist movement and is therefore anti-feminist in essence. Under this girl power ideology lies the assumption that feminist is another pre-packaged role women can choose in their search for identity. As stated by hooks, the willingness to see feminism as a lifestyle choice rather than a political commitment is significantly problematic (hooks, 2000:27). Post-feminism aligned with commodity feminism represents a weakening of conventional feminist social goals through an aesthetic de-politicization that fetishizes feminism by focusing on individual style.

According to Goldman (1991), women's search for emancipation through sexuality and physical appearance constitutes a pseudo-liberation. Girl power sends the message that self-improvement is principally achievable through appearance and style. Such self-improvement provides girls with the power that comes from social distinction and the attraction of male attention. In her article Michelle Bae suggests that post-feminism creates a model of feminine identity bound up strictly with product consumption and constructs a logic in which empowerment depends on self-confidence and sexual attractiveness, which in turn depend on the services offered by the fashion and beauty industries (Bae, 2011: 32).

Therefore, empowerment through a beautifying project in post-feminist girl power assumes an understanding of female empowerment as possible only in negotiation with the dominant social/cultural field (Bae, 2011: 32). The sense of female autonomy, agency and choice provided by the girl power ideal was mainly transmitted by media discourses (Gill, 2017: 617). In the media culture of the time, celebrations of female power and success sat alongside proclamations concerning the redundancy of old school feminism.

The culture of girl power shows an intensified interest in sexual difference, in which remaining inequalities are seen as the result of natural differences or as women's own choices. Feminism seemed, using Angela McRobbie's expression, "to be taken into account yet repudiated" (McRobbie, 2009: 10).

Faludi shows how popular culture, women's magazines, fashion and beauty industries, films and TV programmes worked as disseminators of traditionalist and anti-feminist values. Faludi notes the way in which anti-feminist principles are presented as sophisticated. She describes how cultural producers stereotype feminism as out of date and uncool, often through the use of irony. Overall, Faludi provides a widespread explanation of how, during the 1980s, American culture and politics set out to ridicule, reject and pre-emptively disarm the critical force embodied in the women's movement (Faludi, 1991: 90). It is also suggested by McRobbie that seemingly modern ideas about women began to be disseminated and aggressively directed against feminism, to ensure that a new women's movement would not re-emerge.

This was done through vilification and negation conducted mostly at the cultural level, making feminism unnecessary or even repulsive to younger women, who would be encouraged to distance themselves from it for the

sake of social and sexual recognition. McRobbie analyses popular movies of the 1990s which contribute to a cultural politics of disarticulation, by demonising feminism and presenting it as outdated. McRobbie talks about a complexification of the backlash thesis, referring not only to the conservative response challenging the gains of feminism as intimated by Faludi, but also that post-feminist girl power discourses suggest equality has been achieved, and feminism is a spent force. The rejection of feminism is rewarded, in this perspective, with the promise of freedom and independence, most evident in the new women's wage-earning capacity that denotes a sign of women's respectability and entitlement.

According to McRobbie, a process of displacement and substitution occurred: the young woman was offered a form of equality concretised in access to education and employment and through participation in consumeristic culture and civil society, in place of what feminist politics had to offer. This is how feminism is "undone" in the post-feminist era. McRobbie explains that what has been undone is the possibility of feminism remaining in circulation as an accessible political imaginary. Following her analysis, after the first period of modernisation which created the welfare state and institutions, in the second period, women were allowed to become more independent. As a result, post-feminist young women are called upon to invent their own structures. Following the tenets of girl power, they should do this individualistically. McRobbie describes this process as a feminist disarticulation (McRobbie, 2009: 24). The author argues that disarticulation is the objective of a new kind of regime of gender power, which functions to prevent "the possibility or likelihood of expansive intersections and inter-generational feminist transmissions" from developing.

McRobbie describes the idea of articulation as a process in which progressive social movements such as feminisms establish connections and alliances with each other, with the result of constantly modifying their political identities. The theory of articulation is based on a concept of social identity as never fixed, as in constant renewal and transformation, always open to intersection and new solidarities.

The feminist agenda specifically based on these types of socio-cultural interchanges and bonds is what McRobbie argues was being actively disarticulated so that the idea of a new feminist political imaginary becomes increasingly inconceivable.

The appeal to young western women that they are the privileged recipients of western values of sexual freedom actively creates barriers against gender arrangements in other cultures where female sexuality is subjected to different modes of control. Through the process of disarticulation, the only logic of affiliation that could exist with women living in other, non-Western cultures, is to consider them as victims. Past alliances are made to appear broken, and inter-generational connections unappetising.

This process not only rejects what may still exist of feminism, but also aims at interrupting the possibilities for feminisms to dialogue again with one another (McRobbie, 2009: 25).

In conclusion, it is worthwhile mentioning and analysing the expression “post-feminist masquerade” offered by McRobbie, which efficiently summarizes all that has been said before. With this formulation, McRobbie describes a new form of gender power typical of the post-feminist years, which re-introduces the heterosexual norm, femininity and the role of motherhood in order to secure the resistance of patriarchal law and masculine hegemony. Under this masquerade, the elements of choice and empowerment become synonymous with a kind of feminism that actually allows women to choose only that part of consumer culture in which physical appearance and a return to femininity and female beauty daily procedures play the major roles.

The post-feminist masquerade functions through the re-emergence of traditional feminine practices of self-maintenance re-instated as norms. This new masquerade is hard to recognize because the woman in masquerade is making a point that this is a freely-chosen look (McRobbie, 2009: 66). The masquerade rejects the loathsome figures of the lesbian and the feminist with whom they might conceivably be linked. It saves women from the menace associated with these figures by reinstating the focus on excessive femininity. The post-feminist, or rather the anti-feminist masquerade, helps women to feel that their sexual identity is not jeopardized. It is an instrument to resort to when there may be a fear of being considered aggressively unfeminine in their perceived status as powerful women.

The masquerade consists in a non-coercive strategy that ends up emphasizing female vulnerability, fragility, and uncertainty about the possible rejection of male desire. The post-feminist masquerade comes to the rescue of women when they need to mask their rivalry with men in the working environment and to conceal the competition they threaten. Through this process, the patriarchal authority appears absent from the scene of judgement

and delegates this power to the beauty and fashion system, which requires constant self-judgement and makes it look as though women are doing it for themselves. The masquerade functions to re-assure male structures of power by defusing the presence and the aggressive and competitive actions of women as they come to inhabit positions of authority (McRobbie, 2009: 70).

CHAPTER II

Feminism as a popular brand

The aim of this chapter is to analyse the heritage that the anti-feminist backlash of the 1980s and 1990s, described in the previous chapter, has had on the generation of the so-called “millennials” and to understand the reasons for their de-identification with feminism. As we shall see, social stereotypes around the feminist movements are seen as playing a central role in young women’s rejection and de-identification with feminism.

Surveys and polls will be mentioned confirming the disconnection between women and the feminist identity, despite the general recognition of resistance to gender inequalities in contemporary society. This repudiation of feminism is problematic, as it turns the attentions of women to individualistic issues that undermine the fundamental collective dimension of feminist organizations.

To better comprehend the characteristics of contemporary misogyny, I will present the central concepts of heteronormativity and masculinism.

If on the one hand women’s anti-feminism manifests itself in a general dismissal of (and departure from) feminist identification, on the other hand men engage in new organized forms of anti-feminist and masculinist activities. Men’s rights activism will be presented, again stressing the importance of stereotypes in the construction of many of its anti-feminist stances and beliefs. It is interesting to note that anti-feminism in the post-feminist era appears as a twofold phenomenon, in which we find a general disinterested, distant and disperse de-identification on the part of women, and a more aggressive, organized and decisive counter-attack on the part of anti-feminist men.

1. Boycotting feminism

A recent survey conducted by Refinery29 and CBS News in August 2018 revealed that high numbers of millennial women (which means born between early 1980s and late 1990s) are boycotting the term feminism. In the survey, 2,093 women were interviewed about their socio-political views to

reveal how women might have voted in the November 2018 US mid-term elections. From the poll it emerged that a stunning 54 per cent of women in the US did not consider themselves advocates of the feminist movement and did not define themselves as feminists (Petter, 2018). Despite these substantial numbers, 53 per cent of the respondents acknowledged that the Trump administration's policies have generally had a harsh impact on women, and 70 per cent of those interviewed confessed they felt their individual rights and liberties under threat. These seemingly contradictory data have been commented by Dr Katherine Twamley, senior lecturer in sociology at University College London, who revealed that the reason for these results may come from people's general affiliation of the term feminist with negative connotations (Petter, 2018).

Some people, according to professor Twamley, typify feminists as "man-hating" and aggressive, and therefore refrain from identifying themselves as such. Interestingly, she recognizes such stereotypes as part of a strenuous backlash against feminism, which, in her opinion, is taking hold in many people's minds.

Another poll conducted during the same year by Gen Forward confirms that most millennials, across race and gender, think men and women should be treated as equals, although the majority do not identify themselves as feminists (Brancaccio, Mehta, Menendez, 2018). The survey had been carried out by the University of Chicago political science professor Cathy Cohen to evaluate millennial perceptions of major societal and political issues across race and gender. On the one hand, when millennials were asked about issues like equal pay for equal work or whether health insurances should cover the costs of contraception, respondents generally agreed. On the other hand, when asked if they identified themselves as feminists, the majority of people affirmed that they did not, in the traditional sense, but did support women's rights and equality (Brancaccio, Mehta, Menendez, 2018).

One interpretation offered by Cohen to these statistics is that the media, tending to narrate a somewhat rigid understanding of feminism, have distanced millennials from the movement. Despite this, when asked the question: "Has society reached a point where women and men have equal opportunities for achievement?" most millennial women acknowledged that society had not yet reached that point. On the other hand, significant numbers of men, the majority of men in every category except Asian American, actually believed that society has already reached this goal. In

short, looking at the overall patterns of the study, young millennials do appear to be in favour of gender equality (despite a division between men and women on the actual status of gender equality), but are not keen to call themselves feminists.

Less recent, but equally thought-provoking studies, carried out in the UK, demonstrate that young women embody feminist ideals; however, many do not identify with the women's movement. A study conducted in 2008 explored how young female undergraduate students related to feminism both as an ideological movement and as a possible identity position (Rudolfsdottir, Jolliffe 2008).

The survey was intended by the authors as a contribution to the discussion about the relationship of young women with feminism and to verify the claim made by some proponents of the anti-feminist drift of the post-feminist era that we had stepped into a cultural space where the feminist gains of the 1970s and 1980s were being undermined by popular culture and repudiated by many young women (Rudolfsdottir, Jolliffe 2008: 268). Summarising their findings, the study claims that: "It was disheartening to see how little engagement the young women had with feminism" (Rudolfsdottir, Jolliffe 2008: 273). The interviewees were young (18–23 years old), educated, middle-class women. Eight self-identified as white British and one as black Kenyan. The interviews focused on the women's conceptualization of feminism; what being a feminist meant to them and how relevant they felt feminism was in their lives. They were also asked about representations of feminism in the media and their understanding of post-feminism.

The results showed that many of the young women seemed at first confused, but when pressed they gave definitions of feminism as being about ensuring institutional or formal equality between men and women. This, they said, had not entirely been accomplished. The overall results of the survey indicated that the young women recognized the existence of a barrier to equality, but most of them suggested that women should take responsibility for what they want as individuals and were reluctant to call themselves feminists.

To quote McRobbie (2004: 258): why do young women recoil in horror at the very idea of the feminist? These feelings may be one substantial legacy of the conservative backlash and the return to the obsession of femininity explained in the first chapter.

In her publication "I am not a feminist but..." Toril Moi (2006) expressed concerns for the future of feminism. She explained that since the

mid-1990s, most of the students taking part in her seminar on Feminist classics, no longer make feminism their central political and personal project. In the first session of the seminar, when the students are asked whether they consider themselves to be feminists, the answer is usually negative. Conversely, when asked if they are in favour of freedom, equality, and justice for women, the answer is always affirmative.

The analysis of the author, with regard to these contradicting statements, is that social stereotypes play a major role in the rejection of the feminist label. From her students' comments, the professor highlights a social fear of stigmatization deriving from identification with the feminist movement:

If they were to call themselves feminists, other people would think that they must be strident, domineering, aggressive and intolerant and that they must hate men (Moi, 2006: 1736).

According to Moi, we are witnessing the emergence of a whole new generation of women and men who are careful to preface every gender-related claim with the defensive "I am not a feminist, but...". The author claimed that both the conservative feminism and the return to obsessive femininity mentioned in the first chapter could be the reasons for this remarkable disconnection with the word feminism and for the spread of negative stereotypes around the term. In effect, studies have consistently found that, despite holding egalitarian values and sharing feminist ideals, many women reject feminist self-identification and add qualifications such as "I'm not a feminist, but" when expressing pro-equality sentiments (Scharff, 2009: 33). Although these women appear to embrace many of the values associated with feminist ideology, they want to avoid traits that are stereotypically associated with feminism. Women also worry that the mere act of identifying as a feminist will lead others to treat them badly. Moreover, feminism is commonly perceived to conflict with beauty and romance (Moi, 2006: 1740).

This type of anti-feminist backlash, in the form of negative attitudes toward feminists, can be traced in part to system justification motivations. The System Justification Theory (SJT) posits that individuals are motivated to reinforce the legitimacy and fairness of their system and the status quo in general, often by denying or rationalizing injustice and unfairness (Banaji, Jost 2011: 2). System-justification is the psychological process by which existing social arrangements are legitimized, even at the expense of personal

and group interest. The SJT can manifest itself in terms of social stereotyping used to legitimize social and psychological phenomena (Banaji, Jost 2011: 3).

Negative stereotypes on feminism, for instance, tend to justify the patriarchal status quo and reject the legitimacy of feminist objections. Activist groups that threaten to disrupt the status quo evoke ambivalent reactions in observers — even when these groups are perceived as pursuing positive goals — suggesting that negative attitudes toward activists undoubtedly exist, notwithstanding their acknowledged positive qualities and intentions. Banaji and Jost explain that while stereotyping serves to channel cognitive functions of simplification and categorization, it is a tool also employed for motivational purposes, since the systems of stereotypes is the core of our personal tradition, the defences of our positions in society (Banaji, Jost 2011: 3). The authors develop the argument that stereotypes serve ideological functions, justify the exploitation of certain groups over others, and explain the powerlessness of some groups and the success of others, in ways that make these differences seem legitimate and even natural (Banaji Jost 2011: 27).

A study carried out by Yeung, Kay and Peach show that people are likely to reject messages about gender inequality when they are endorsed by feminists. The authors provide evidence that women's disinclination to assume the feminist label is quite common and, unlike hostility toward many other groups in society, the anti-feminist hostility is often tolerated, since feminists are seen as belonging to a stereotyped subcategory of women deserving hostile sexism, presumably because of their opposition to the status quo (Yeung, Kay, Peach 2014: 4). Indeed, both hostile sexism (punishment for women who oppose the status quo) and benevolent sexism (reward for women who support the status quo) serve to maintain the gender inequality.

Data from this study suggest that as long as women refrain from classifying themselves as feminists, their egalitarian views are not opposed even when the System Justification motivation of the perceivers is high. It seems, then, that feminist self-labelling can be compared to a double-edged sword, associated both with the generally accepted acknowledgement of an unjust gender system and with a commitment to collective action which is, on the contrary, repudiated (Yeung, Kay, Peach 2014: 5).

The feminist stereotype is thus complicated, multi-faceted and contains many emotion-provoking elements. Opposition to the more radical de-

mands made by the women's movements (votes for women, economic independence, parent planning, or public child care) is motivated by a shared fear that these will destroy traditional social values and family obligations. It seems that the attachment to those traditional values in danger of being lost, and the source of the negative stereotypes mentioned, could be related to the concept of heteronormativity, a valuable theoretical tool for exploring women's reluctance towards feminism (Scharff, 2009: 40).

2. Heteronormativity and masculinism

Heteronormativity entails a gendered regime represented, on the surface, by the heterosexual couple with a masculine provider and a feminine caregiver as the normal paradigm. Beneath the surface layer, there are social, cultural, political and economic arrangements combining to generate and sustain the heteronormative. As stated by Christina Scharff, feminism is rejected today because the common stereotypes of unfemininity, man-hating, and lesbianism associated with it are perceived as threatening and troubling the heteronormative dimension of society (Scharff, 2009: 38). On the level of cultural representation, femininity and feminism are seen as diametrically opposed. Rudolfsdottir and Jolliffe likewise, from the studies conducted, evidence that women's reluctance to identify with the term feminist may be related to concerns over their femininity: "the word feminist clearly has a plethora of negative connotations and is often countered or seen as antithetical with femininity" (Rudolfsdottir, Jolliffe 2008:4). Indeed, the young women interviewed in their study made references to what they saw as the stereotypical view of the feminist: descriptions that recurred were "lesbian", "masculine", "man-hating", "angry" and "embarrassing". There seemed to be significant fear that, by subscribing to feminism, one might lose one's femininity and that was something the young women did not want to risk. This positioning of feminism and femininity as almost antithetical shows how young women have absorbed the hetero-sexism of contemporary society. The kind of femininity a woman embraces has to fit in with the dominant culture's definition of what is right and proper, and the feminist who challenges that system loses her right to be seen as having an attractive femininity (Rudolfsdottir, Jolliffe 2008: 5).

Scharff raises the interesting hypothesis that the repudiation of feminism could be read as a post-feminist re-affirmation of normative femininity. Considering this theory, the statement “I am not a feminist, but...” could be interpreted as an affirmation of a woman’s femininity, implying that she holds feminist views without corresponding to the traditional, unfeminine feminist ideal. As Pollitt argues, when women of whatever age say “I am not a feminist, but” they are signalling that “they like men and want men to like them” (2003: 313). This demonstrates that there exists a strong connection between heteronormativity and the rejection of feminism: attributing young women’s narrow conceptions of femininity to the post-feminist era, the latter can be seen as an attempt of the patriarchal power to re-secure gender hierarchies and heterosexual desire (McRobbie, 2009: 61).

The frequently established link between feminism and man-hating feelings has been carefully examined in a study by Scharff (2009), in which it appears that feminists and men were regarded as two mutually exclusive groups. Scharff demonstrated that sexuality, and more specifically heteronormativity, figure prominently in the association of feminists with man-haters (Scharff, 2009: 19). Several participants in Scharff’s research argued that feminists “did not like men because they liked women”. These associations between feminism and misogyny are embedded in, and reproductive of conventional heterosexist binaries. The connection between feminism and man-hating, unfemininity and lesbianism “parallels heteronormative assumptions and the heterosexist chain of equivalence that is sex/gender/desire” (Scharff, 2009: 226).

Accordingly, the materialist feminist and sociologist Ingraham argues that heteronormativity constitutes the dominant paradigm in Western society, which is the basis for the division of labour and hierarchies of wealth and power stratified by gender, racial categories, class and sexualities (Ingraham, 2006: 309). The high number of respondents who link lesbianism with feminism further supports the broader argument that sexuality and heteronormativity structure the repudiation of feminism. Traditional understandings of gender are, therefore, problematic insofar, as they not only distance women from the feminist movements, but also create real social stigmatization and resurgence of patriarchal norms. Heteronormativity in the post-feminist era works, firstly, through the negative depiction and stereotyping of feminists as explained above, and secondly, through the strengthening of gender norms.

The determined defence of femininity expressed by the formula “yes, but” and the rejection of unfeminine stereotypes explained above, goes in parallel with a resurgent need for the protection of masculinity (Faludi, 1991).

According to Faludi, a crisis of masculinity seems to have erupted in the backlash period of the 1970s and 1980s. The early symptoms of this trend are visible in the results of polls and surveys during the 80s, where men’s opinions clearly leaned towards a conservative and anti-feminist view. Various studies examining male attitudes toward the women’s movement suggest, in fact, that the most substantial share of the growth in men’s support for feminism may have occurred in the first half of the ‘70s, and after that period, this support slowed or ceased (Faludi, 1991).

According to Anthony Astrachan, author of a seven-year study on American male attitudes in the 1980s, no more than 5 to 10 percent of the men surveyed genuinely supported women’s demands for independence and equality (Astrachan, 1986). In 1988, moreover, the American Male Opinion Index, a poll of three thousand men conducted for *Gentlemen’s Quarterly*, found that less than one fourth of men supported the women’s movement, while the majority favoured traditional roles for women. Sixty percent affirmed that wives with young children should stay home. Again in 1989, while a majority of women in the New York Times poll believed American society had not changed enough to grant women equality, only a minority of men agreed. A majority of men were claiming, on the contrary, that the women’s movement had “made things harder for men at home” (Faludi, 1991: 74).

According to those results, it really seems, as expressed by Margaret Mead more than seventy years ago, that “maleness in America is absolutely not defined; it has to be kept and re-earned every day, and one essential element in the definition is beating women in every game that both sexes play” (Mead, 1949). Faludi claims that a proof of Mead’s theory can be found in the ‘80s, when males rebelled in response to the “decline in American manhood” which had become the obsession of male clergy, writers, politicians, and scholars across the political spectrum. During those years, a new men’s movement drew thousands of followers to “all-male retreats”, where they rooted out feminized tendencies and roused “the wild man within”. In the press, male columnists lamented the rise of the sensitive man, where the adjective sensitive has a feminine, negative connotation (Faludi, 1991). This movement can be considered as the precursor of a particular form of

anti-feminism which has been at work in more recent years; specifically, masculinism. Its discourse revolves mostly around the claim that men are in crisis because of the feminization of society and the issues that are central to this thought belong to the interests of men and fathers in matrimonial life, such as divorce laws, alimony, child custody, and violence

In 2012 Blais and Dupuis-Déri wrote an article focusing especially on masculinism in Canada, United Kingdom and the USA (Blais and Dupuis-Déri, 2012). Their work intends to shed light on the poorly understood anti-feminist phenomenon and, in particular, to masculinism. The authors examine two alternative explanations of the masculinist phenomenon, the first stating that masculinist men scapegoat women and feminists instead of targeting the true reasons of their real problems, such as the transformation of the labour market; the second asserting that masculinism is openly opposed to feminism and thus works through countermovement dynamics.

The essay applies the theory of counter-movements in order to provide a better understanding of the oppositional relationship between the two political forces of feminism and masculinism (Blais and Dupuis-Déri, 2012).

Masculinism, say the authors, proclaims that since men are suffering because of women and feminists in particular, the solution to their problems involves reducing the influence of feminism and re-boosting masculinity. The writers acknowledge that masculinism and the men's movement are made up of disparate and autonomous components, not all motivated by anti-feminism. Nonetheless, this does not invalidate the proposition that the masculinist component of the anti-feminist countermovement impacts on the feminist movement and women in general (Blais and Dupuis-Déri, 2012: 22).

Masculinism is recognized as one of several constituents of anti-feminism, including religious, conservative and nationalist politics, and other currents. In its purest form, it focuses primarily on masculinity and the place of white heterosexual men in North American and European societies. But it is also concerned with the supposed ramifications of feminism and the alleged domination of women in both the public and private spheres. Indeed, a basic assumption of the spokesmen for masculinism is that women's values in general, and those of feminists in particular, dominate men and contemporary society (Blais and Dupuis-Déri, 2012:23). Men, seen as coping with an identity crisis, are depicted by masculinist advocates as the victims of feminist struggles, which have resulted in the replacing of patriarchy by matriarchy. The supporters of masculinism call upon men to rally and act

in defence of a masculine identity that has been rejected. Some of the main arguments proposed by masculinists suggest, for instance, that there is a lack of funds for men in need because assistance and rights advocacy networks for women and feminist institutions receive too much public funding (Blais and Dupuis-Déri, 2012: 23).

Masculinists also lament the high level of suicide among men and criticise the concealment of the widespread phenomenon of male victims of domestic violence, contending that there is symmetry of violence between the sexes. Following the scapegoat thesis proposed by the authors, masculinist men developed the feeling of being cheated or threatened by feminism because of their worsening socio-economic situation. Women's success in the public sphere, they believe, expels men from what they assume to be their rightful place. The authors stress the importance and regularity throughout history of the connection between women's achievements and men's feelings of deprivation of power. The so-called crisis of masculinity, they claim, appears repeatedly at critical historical moments marked by economic, social, and political upheavals. Anti-feminism, like racism, interacts with other social, economic and political dynamics, which amplify its virulence (Blais and Dupuis-Déri, 2012: 24).

Interestingly, the contemporary masculinist movement made its appearance in western countries during the 1980s, at a time when the labour market was shrinking, aggravating the living conditions of numerous workers, and conservatism spread vigorously (with Margaret Thatcher in UK, Ronald Reagan in the USA and Brian Mulroney in Canada); now, in these more recent years of economic and financial crisis and resurgent neoliberal politics, it seems to be reappearing.

Blais and Dupuis-Déri picture the men's movement as a new force within the anti-feminist social movement. Specifically, they describe this force as a countermovement. While feminist movements have been carefully studied, they claim less research has been made to analyse the counter-movements that arise against feminisms. These counter-movements stand in opposition to feminist movements and engage in activities affecting their mobilization (Banaszak and Ondercin, 2016: 1). The demands and goals of counter-movements are intended to dismantle specific policy achievements made by the feminist movements. Social theorists have proposed the term "countermovement" to label a movement that reacts, usually through conservative or retrograde lines, against a previous movement. For theorists

with an ideological approach, such as Alain Touraine, social movements are synonymous with progressive actions seeking emancipation (the labour movement, for instance), whereas counter-movements are associated with the dominant and oppressive forces of society.

Mottl (1980: 621) observes that counter-movements are often directed against challenges which express a “resistance to the loss of advantages”. Counter-movements are the consequence of social divisions resulting from socio-economic decline that threaten the position of those who mobilize. Reflecting on the notion of countermovement, Blais and Dupuis-Déri arrive at a hybrid conception of what defines a countermovement: at once a mechanistic and an ideological reaction. The mechanical aspect is manifested through the dynamics of conflict between a first movement (feminism) and a second, reactive movement (masculinism). In other words, from the mechanical standpoint, a countermovement is simply a movement that arises and acts in response and opposition to a previous movement. The mechanistic approach to counter-movements is frequently applied to the analysis of the relationship between feminist movements and their adversaries, focusing on discourses, structures of political opportunity, mobilization of resources, actions of organizations involved in conflicts, and collective identities (Blais and Dupuis-Déri, 2012: 29). This approach also stresses the importance of studying the interactions between movements as well as the position of dependency in which counter-movements find themselves. Although this approach has been considered by the authors, they also affirm that power relationships such as those that exist between social movements and counter-movements cannot be ideologically neutral. The political logic intrinsic to a countermovement such as masculinism should not be overlooked. Hence, as an ideological countermovement, masculinism is reactionary with regard to power politics and the social order, that is, it mobilizes on behalf of or in the interest of a dominant class and in opposition to forces of dissent (Blais and Dupuis-Déri, 2012: 29). Therefore, masculinism can be legitimately identified as a trend within the anti-feminist countermovement mobilized not only in a mechanical reaction against the feminist movement, but also for the protection of a non-egalitarian social and political system, that is to say, patriarchy.

From the literature on backlash social movements, masculinists can be viewed as activists working for the restoration of a dominant group and a dominant masculinity supposedly in crisis. Masculinism therefore con-

stitutes a countermovement in the service of patriarchy and of men as a class, whose goal is to resist and reverse the feminist movement (Blais and Dupuis-Déri, 2012: 31).

Chafetz and Dworkin provide a cultural theory of anti-feminist movements involving the reaction of vested-interest groups in response to material threats posed by feminist movements (Chafetz and Dworkin, 1987: 34). Vested-interest groups constitute the dominant elite against whom the feminist social movement battles, and are therefore identified by the authors as mainly men; these groups are already established and have benefited from the disadvantages of the members of the social movement they oppose. Men see their position in the political economy as threatened by the growing success of the feminist social movement. Vested-interest groups are dominated by men and make up the core of society's economic, political, religious, and educational institutions. Their threat is mainly class based, but derives also from their *pater familias* status. They are usually organized as non-governmental institutions predating the women's movements, which come to perceive the demands of these new movements as antithetical to their interests (Chafetz and Dworkin, 1987: 37).

Masculinist organizations can establish support groups, committees, websites, and are as a rule independent of each other, but could be part of a national or international network (Blais and Dupuis-Déri, 2012: 26).

3. Men's rights activism

As an example of the contemporary masculinist reaction to feminist movements we can take the fathers' rights groups. They intend to respond to a perceived crisis of masculinity through a problematic politics of fatherhood, aimed at reasserting control over women and children. The UK-based pressure group Fathers-4-Justice (F4J) is today one of the most militant masculinist organizations, with committees in UK, Canada, the USA, and elsewhere. Separated or divorced fathers' groups make up the most militant section of the movement. A qualitative case study has been conducted by Jordan to explore critically the gender politics of fathers' rights and to analyse the gendered and heteronormative logic underpinning fathers' rights perspectives.

In Jordan's study the Fathers-4-Justice group is categorised as a pressure group arising from a social movement. F4J exhibits characteristics typical of pressure groups in three aspects. First, the group works within the political system, aiming to achieve narrow objectives relating to a single issue. Second, the group is primarily state oriented. Finally, the group is a vested-interest group in that there is a direct concern in promoting the cause of post-separation fathers.

Fathers' Rights Groups claim that fathers are disadvantaged by a family law system that favours mothers over fathers in child contact disputes.

According to Jordan, the new masculinist "politics of fatherhood" has seen the identity of the father become a public site of contestation over rights. Globally, debates surrounding fatherhood, including paternity leave, absent fathers and fathers' rights, have provoked a renewed attention from the media, politicians and policy makers. Among the masculinist groups fighting for fathers' rights, F4J has been one of the most visible and the most contentious for its imaginative direct-action methods. In common with other fathers' rights groups, F4J argues that fathers are discriminated against in the family courts.

The charges against the family law system are that it is financially punitive for those engaged in contact disputes, and that it frequently does not award fathers contact or it fails to enforce contact orders. Fathers' Rights Groups claim that the state and society are dominated by a feminist agenda that marginalises men and men's rights.

As well as being situated within the broader men's movement, F4J is part of a transnational fathers' rights movement. Similar Fathers' Rights Groups exist in Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the UK and the US. This new politics of fatherhood is connected to the supposedly "new" politics of masculinity, said to constitute a response to the changing social world (Faludi, 1991). Masculinity is defined by Jordan as: "simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices" (Jordan, 2014: 86).

Jordan's examination is based on in-depth interviews conducted with members of the group. The interviewees had reconstructed multiple masculinities: bourgeois-rational masculinity, new man/new father masculinity and hyper-masculinity. Overall, Jordan argued that each of the masculini-

ty frames can be problematic, as they reinforce existing gendered binaries which position the feminine as inferior (Jordan, 2014: 83).

Using the direct-action methods associated with hyper-masculinity was integral to all the masculinities recognized and to the interviewees' understandings of themselves as actively fighting for their cause rather than staying passive, and as agents (masculine) rather than as victims (feminine). The new man/new father frame, while blurring masculine/feminine symbolic boundaries in part, remains premised on a heteronormative vision where a male father is essential to raising a child successfully in complementarity with a female mother. The bourgeois-rationalist model is premised on a notion of a rational, autonomous individual which is argued to be problematic by feminist theorists as it excludes the "feminine" relational self (Jordan, 2014: 87).

The hyper-masculine excludes the feminine by valorising displays of masculine strength and in some cases being used to justify violent behaviour. Despite making explicit demands for men's equality, the interviewees denied that those issues were gendered. However, the claim for gender neutrality, far from representing an impartial view, obscures importantly gendered aspects of the issue. This "equality" perspective is blind to the fact that women undertake the vast majority of primary caretaking roles, that women with children are disadvantaged in post-separation situations and to the reality that the single biggest factor in fathers not gaining access to their children after separation is their relationship with the child prior to separation.

All of these facts are the result of broader, unequal gender relations in society and a gendered division of parenting labour. The gender-neutral approach was manifested in the interviews carried out by Jordan by the suggestion that F4J was not about fathers' rights at all; rather, the group's aims are beneficial to women, grandparents and children. There was an eagerness to assert support from these groups in order to emphasise the universal scope of their objectives (Jordan, 2014: 88).

Fathers' Rights Groups such as F4R belong to the "Men's Rights" strand of the broader "Men's Movement" (Jordan, 2014: 84). Common features of men's movements are that they organise around the identity of being "men"; the assumption that there are distinctive men's issues/interests; and finally, that all take a position, whether hostile or benign, on feminism and its impact. The men's rights strand is defined by a starting point of antipathy towards feminist movements, claiming that men, not women, are un-

derprivileged in society and that this is a result of the excesses of feminism (Jordan, 2014: 85). The Men's Rights Movement (MRM) also sometimes known as the Men's Human Rights Movement (MHRM) is a pluralistic movement of men and women who have identified certain problems facing men and boys. Individuals within the MRM are sometimes known as Men's Rights Activists or Men's Rights Advocates (Brockway, 2015).

One of the most popular online sites within the movement is "A Voice for Men". The head of the social media for "A Voice for Men", Bloomfield, calls herself an anti-feminist first and a men's rights activist second. In addition to fighting for men's rights, A Voice for Men preaches anti-feminism, calling feminists a "social malignancy" akin to the Ku Klux Klan. In an article presenting the Men's Rights Movements, Brockway explains that its activists: "reject many of the claims espoused by the modern feminist movement, such as that women cannot be sexist to men, a belief that men have systematically oppressed women for thousands of years through the use of violence or that domestic violence impacts women far more than men" (Brockway, 2015).

As a whole, the masculinist movement is surely growing, increasingly challenging the feminist conversation and building momentum to overthrow the movement's biggest victories, particularly progressive rape shield and child support legislation.

Already, its members have played a role in the most successful anti-feminist campaigns of recent years, including the battle to weaken, or eliminate, women-friendly university policies on sexual assault. Masculinism is an influential current of the anti-feminist social movement whose members share common ideas and values, notwithstanding their disparate tactical goals, internal diversity embodied in different tendencies displaying varying degrees of radicalism, and a lack of consensus on the most appropriate name for their movement.

Clearly, the objectives of the masculinist movement's encompass the social relations between men and women, and more specifically, the consolidation of male privileges and power over women. Masculinism can effectively be described as a countermovement, since it is conservative, reactionary, and opposed to the progressive feminist movement. Under the guise of an egalitarian discourse advocating true equality between men and women, the masculinist movement actually attempts to block or reverse certain gains of the feminist movement (Blais and Dupuis-Déri, 2012: 33).

CHAPTER III

Anti-feminist groups and the institutional anti-feminism

Following an analysis of anti-feminism developed mainly at the cultural level in the post-feminist years, I move to an examination of the ways in which the current anti-feminist climate can also be reflected in public policies.

Starting from the concept of state feminism, I will explain how its opposite — i.e. state anti-feminism — can be observed at the institutional level. Anti-feminist institutional rhetoric seems to be reinvigorated by right-wing policies, which promote a neoliberal economic vision, reduced public intervention in the state economy, a strengthened traditional ideology of the patriarchal family, a strong conservatism with regard to sexuality and women's reproductive rights, and an alarming war on the so-called gender theory.

Specifically, I will analyze the Polish case to report a concrete example of anti-feminism at the institutional level. From a general analysis of the institutions that operate or should operate to promote gender equality in Poland, I will move to more specific recurring themes in the contemporary Polish political scene: the backlash on sexual and reproductive rights, the war on gender mainstreaming and the role of masculinist groups. I argue that the combination of these elements results in a growing and alarming anti-feminist discourse at the political level.

1. Institutional anti-feminism

“State feminism” is a concept that refers to the integration of feminists and feminist issues into the state apparatus (Dupuis-Deri, 2016: 21). According to Kantola and Outshoorn, “state feminism” denotes the efforts by women's policy machineries to pursue social and economic policies beneficial to women. This work is carried out in special state units charged with promoting women's rights including offices, commissions, agencies, ministries, committees, secretaries, or advisers for the status of women (Kantola and Outshoorn, 2007: 2).

Analysts began turning toward the state as a potential arena for feminist action in the early 1980s, seeking a response to the decline of the new women's movements in Europe, North America, and Australia (Mazur and McBride, 2007: 502). Feminist theorists, especially in the United Kingdom and continental Europe, blamed the decline of feminist movements on what they condemned as a patriarchal state systemically opposed to the feminist project.

Helga Hernes is usually credited with coining the term "state feminism" in 1987 to denote the integration of feminist issues into state institutions. The notion of "state feminism" in its positive connotations was intended by Hernes as a description relating mainly to the Nordic countries, where feminist movements and their antisystem stances were less prevalent and where feminists were willing to engage with the state through political parties, trade unions and parliament (Mazur and McBride, 2007: 503). Not only was the state seen as an important location of social justice that can produce redistributive welfare policies, but state-society relations also followed a corporatist model, where sectional interests were represented through consultations among the state, labour sector and management to produce extensive social policies. From the Nordic context, characterized by active social policies where women were both clients and practitioners, Hernes identified state feminism as both a product and a driver of a woman-centred approach to state-society relations that produced a model of how states could be feminist in terms of actions and impact. Hernes defined state feminism as:

a variety of public policies and organizational measures designed partly to solve general social and economic problems, partly to respond to women's demands (Hernes, 1987: 27).

The concept implied not only state-based actions; it also covered the outcomes of a process of interplay between agitation from below and integration from above. The consequences derived from the combined pressure that feminists exert on the state from below (women's movements) and from above (feminists in the state) are thought to result in women-friendly welfare policies in the Nordic countries (Hernes, 1987). Building from the notion of state feminism as the activities of individual women in the public space, Australian scholars in the early 1990s developed a new conception of state feminism which put into question the notion of a monolithic patriarchal state, by defining the state as a set of arenas divided by policy sector, level of

government, and functional role. These theorists argued that feminist actors had the potential to enter and operate from within these different arenas.

These assumptions set the stage for identifying not just individuals who could promote a feminist agenda but also arenas within the state, where the patriarchal processes and policies of the state could be challenged and perhaps eradicated.

The Nordic research together with the Australian connotation laid the foundations for the current use of the term which focuses on two aspects: the interactions between individual feminists inside and outside of the state and their connection to feminist policy; state agencies and their ability to promote the ideas of gender equality (Mazur and McBride, 2007: 504). The work of the Nordic and Australian scholars led to a positive view of the state among feminist scholars as an arena for feminist action. A growing international community of researchers interested in gender, politics and the state turned their attention to these women's policy agencies as the prime object of analysis for state feminism.

A renewed interest in feminist institutional agencies began to develop: during the 1990s, under the push of supranational institutions such as the United Nations, more and more states started establishing women's policy agencies. The UN describes these as bodies recognized by the government as institutions dealing with the promotion of the status of women (UN, 1993). More specifically, the UN uses the language of "national machineries in promoting women-specific issues", as outlined in the Beijing Platform for Action of 1995 (Kantola and Outshoorn, 2007: 3).

Since the first Women's World Conference in 1975, the UN had been a fundamental guide in the establishment of women's policy offices in many member states; by the end of the 1990s, 127 member-states had set up women's policy agencies at the national level. The mid-1990s, in fact, saw the peak of worldwide mobilization around the United Nations women's policy process through the International Women's Policy Conferences to produce plans of action on women's rights and gender equality for member states.

The 1995 Women's Conference in Beijing marked a major focal point for feminist mobilization at all levels: local, subnational, and transnational. Given the unprecedented interest in the central role of women's policy agencies in the development of a transnational women's movement around the UN's efforts in 1995, feminist researchers turned their attention to these

agencies, and state feminism became a central topic of their analysis (Mazur and McBride, 2007: 506).

Since 1995, however, there have been dramatic changes in the political context, such as globalization, regionalization, welfare state restructuring, privatization and the rise of right-wing constituencies (Kantola and Outshoorn, 2007: 10).

As a result, both the notion of *state* and of *feminism* have changed, leading necessarily to a reflection on how those institutions devoted to the improvement of women's status have changed. Have they been able to reinforce their position and continue addressing women's demands, or have they been forced to reduce their activities and forgo their original mission?

To evaluate whether forms of institutional anti-feminism are emerging, one must ask if contemporary public women's institutions are maintaining a high level of interest in feminist issues, or generally disengaging with those commitments at both the local and the international level. Assessing the effectiveness of women's policy agencies within the state, and the compliance of the state with international agreements, it becomes possible to gauge the importance given by states to the question as they advance or resist the goals of women's movements in their policymaking processes.

State reticence in promoting feminist policies has been studied and considered by some scholars as an emergent form of anti-feminist backlash. According to Van Wormer, for instance, two forms of backlash against women are in action today (Van Wormer, 2009: 325). One is the war against women that operates at the more personal level, fostered by culture, media and social stereotypes that have been described previously in this study. The other is the institutional or politically based backlash against women, originating most frequently in Western society from conservative, nationalist, right-wing parties feeling resentful at and threatened by the advancements made by women in the legislative area. This type of backlash constitutes the subject of this chapter.

In Van Wormer's view, institutional or political backlash is a phenomenon that occurs when a progress-oriented movement is countered by resistance from institutional forces that fear change of the status quo. In line with Faludi's connotations of backlash, van Wormer argues that institutional anti-feminist backlash has been set off not by women's achievement of full equality, but by the increased possibility that they might obtain it. Once women's pursuit of equal rights had started to gain success with extensive

affirmative state action programs; once women had increased their chances of joining the ranks of the male dominated and most prestigious professions; once laws had been promulgated for the protection of rape victims and battered women: that is when (almost predictably) an anti-feminist resistance set in.

Embedded in the emerging institutional anti-feminism, van Wormer recognizes two inter-locking themes. The first is the anti-social welfare backlash, which includes the highly coercive social welfare policies aimed at denying the principle that the state has an obligation to provide for economic and social needs. The other is a more specific anti-feminist backlash, typified by attempts to women's reproductive freedom, to traditional patriarchal family life.

The ideology of privatism and private morality are the main element of this anti-feminist push which has provided the critical link between sexual politics and traditional economic and social conservatism. I will now take a more detailed look at these two inter-connected types of backlash currently taking place in an increasing number of Western countries.

2. The anti-social welfare backlash

Kantola and Outshoorn correlate the anti-social welfare backlash with the shift of responsibility from state to non-state actors. This, to them, can take the form of welfare state reforms, privatization, outsourcing, all manifestations of the trend towards neoliberalism (Kantola and Outshoorn, 2007: 12). Whereas under Keynesian welfarism the state provision of goods and services was considered a means of guaranteeing social well-being, neoliberalism is associated with the preference for a minimalist state. Markets are understood to be a better way of organizing economic activity because they are associated with competition, economic efficiency and choice. Together with the general move toward the neoliberal canons, deregulation and privatization have become central themes in debates over welfare state restructuring (Kantola and Outshoorn, 2007: 12). Deregulation and privatization transfer power away from democratically elected governments with a mandate to guarantee universal service provision, and toward private capital. Thus, neoliberalism is a form of economic governance that encourages both institutions and individuals to conform to the norms of the market. Welfare agencies are to be governed not directly from above, but through technolo-

gies such as budget disciplines, accountancy and audit, competition and the consumer (Kantola and Outshoorn, 2007: 12).

Welfare state reforms create significant challenges to women's policy agencies. Their impact can be gendered, raising a number of issues for women's policy agencies representing women's concerns at the state level. According to a United Nations' study, the state's diminishing role in welfare provision has an impact on women's lives as service providers and workers in the public sector and as clients of welfare state services (UN, 2005: 13). The tendency toward diminishing resources may lead ultimately to a complete dismantling of women's policy agencies. This signifies that the gains made in state feminism and women's policy agencies may well be reversible. The principles of neoliberalism can be antithetical to those of women's policy agencies. For example, social justice goals can become undermined by a corporate management style that privileges efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and other values central to neoliberalism (Kantola and Outshoorn, 2007: 13). The impact of market-driven capitalist measures can be to reduce female-oriented social services through cut-backs, privatization of services, and the de-professionalization of workers.

Whilst both left- and right-wing parties in many countries have in the last two decades embraced neoliberal ideologies and the need to make cuts to the welfare state, one development closely related to the welfare state reform is the rise of the political right and what Marian Sawer, referring to the Austrian case, calls "backlash politics": the rise of the men's rights movements and anti-feminist women's groups and the declining financial engagement of the state in women's projects (Kantola and Outshoorn, 2007: 59). As some scholars confirm, women's policy agencies tend to have been more successful under left-wing than right-wing governments. Research has also shown that left-wing parties tend to have more women as candidates and elected representatives than the right-wing ones and they have been more willing to include gender-related rules, such as internal or electoral quotas, in their structures (Kantola, Outshoorn 2007: 13). Norris found that left-wing power had contributed to the decrease of the horizontal and vertical segregation of the labour market, whereas right-wing power tended to increase it (Norris, 1987).

It is therefore interesting to examine whether a combination of welfare state reform and right-wing party power are detrimental to women's policy agencies. In an anti-social welfare climate, the opportunity can, in fact,

be seized by right-wing constituents to reduce funding for feminist-based social services. The anti-feminist backlash is disguised by right-wing governments through code words such as “equality” and “family values”. In the writing of new laws related to women’s reproductive functions, the patriarchy can easily join with conservative politicians to reinforce class, gender, and race privilege.

Elomaki and Kantola have recently analysed the challenges that the convergence of neoliberalism, conservatism, and nationalism in the post-feminist years poses for gender equality and feminism (Elomaki and Kantola, 2018). Since the economic recession in 2008, they observe that the European Union and a number of member states have opted for strict austerity politics to tackle the crisis.

Such politics have caused the intensification of previous neoliberal policies, including cutting down welfare services and public sector jobs. To the authors, the implications of austerity programs have been gendered, but despite commitments to gender mainstreaming, neither the EU nor its member states have evaluated the gendered impacts of the policies, much less changed them to a more gender equal direction. Instead, due to the new priority given to the economy and austerity, feminist analyses and debates have found it difficult to enter the public and political agenda and to have an impact on the adopted policies.

Together with restrictive financial measures due to the crisis, the authors outline how the increasing popularity of conservative and right-wing populist parties promoting “family values” and traditional understandings of gender as well as the emergence of a broader “anti-gender” movement, has further side-lined gender equality as a political goal. In many countries, the neo-liberalisation of economic and social policies has been accompanied by the strengthening of their conservative aspects, for instance through maternalist family policies or restriction of abortion rights (Elomaki and Kantola, 2018: 338). An increasing anti-feminism has also been noted in public discourses, linked to the policies of the emerging right-wing populist parties.

3. The backlash on sexual and reproductive rights

The opposition to programs against domestic violence, to sponsored family planning programs or birth control for teenagers, to public resourc-

es supporting gay or lesbian activity or women's studies, are typically an expression of the backlash on sexual rights enacted by conservative social groups who feel their "way of life" threatened. To put in action their restorative, conservative programs, backlash movements always require an aggressively moralistic stance.

They need to invoke systems of "good and evil" that transcend the political or social process. The connotations of good and evil depend on the particular historical moment and on a conjunction of material and social forces that bring specific social conflicts to the surface.

If the embodiment of evil for the earlier Western generation of the Right was international communism, the Left, and labour movements (especially in the United States), more recently it has been feminism and homosexuality which represent major threats for patriarchal forms of family and society and for heteronormativity. McRobbie (2018) recognizes dangerous convergences of interests from the Catholic Church, the far right, to the mainstream parties of the right, while also finding some common ground within the left and within strains of liberal feminism.

They all seem to converge on a specific vocabulary which sees new feminisms and LGBTQ politics as embodying serious threats to national culture and to social reproduction. This shift is not surprising given the weakness of the Left and labour movements at the present time; it is the women's liberation movement which, since the 1970s, had become the most dynamic force for social change, the one most directly threatening to conservative values and interests.

Of all feminist demands, the right to abortion is the one which appears most hostile to traditional sexual and social values (Petchesky, 1981: 207).

Anti-feminist and antiabortion forces have been bolstered by a strong right-wing religiously oriented crusade. The antiabortion movement, which began in the Catholic Church and remained an essentially religious movement, has been the main vehicle through which the Right has developed both its mass base and its mass ideology. Regardless of how one analyses the causes of the recent right-wing electoral victories in many Western states, it is undeniable that a key element in the Right's strategy has been to use the support of Catholic Church and particularly of the "pro-life" movement as an organizational model and base able to provide a sense of moral righteousness and a moral cause. To absorb different groups devoted to preservation of the traditional social roles of the family into a single co-

alition, the Right has leveraged on four main pillars: “pro-life”, “pro-family”, “pro-moral” and “pro-nationalism” (Petchesky, 1981: 208). The Right found in the Catholic antiabortion movement not only an efficient organizational network, but also the source of its ideological coherence and legitimacy.

As suggested previously, the abortion issue includes many social and political meanings (about family, sexuality, and the position of women in society) that go beyond the status of the foetus; accordingly, the organized opposition to abortion has never in fact been a “single-issue” movement. In her book “The Aftermath of Feminism” McRobbie explains how abortion is, in effect, not simply an aspect of social welfare; it is above all a condition of women’s liberation which by the turn of the seventies had become recognized as deeply symbolic of feminist aspirations for sexual autonomy, as a paradigmatic feminist demand.

The issues originating from abortion politics have more to do with heterosexuality, family structure, the relationship between men and women and parents and children, and women’s employment, than with the foetus itself (McRobbie, 2009). That is why the fight against the right of abortion, with attempts to ban and criminalise it, represents a deliberate attack on the feminist movement on the part of conservative institutions, which must be understood as central to the Right’s drive for power.

The Council of Europe has recently expressed concern about the significant backlash that women’s sexual freedoms are witnessing in Europe, despite the fundamental role that states should have in granting them: “Sexual and reproductive rights, including the right to sexual and reproductive health, are intrinsic elements of the human rights framework and effective state action to guarantee sexual and reproductive health and rights is imperative” (Council of Europe, 2017).

The Council of Europe explains that women in Europe continue to face widespread denials and infringements of their sexual and reproductive health and rights. In an Issue Paper of December 2017, the Council clearly refers to institutional backlash, highlighting how laws, policies and agencies in Europe keep restraining and undermining women’s sexual and reproductive health, autonomy, dignity, integrity and decision-making in serious ways. Moreover, the Council notes that, in recent years, resurgent threats to women’s sexual and reproductive health and rights have emerged

in some parts of the Union. These have sought to call into question old commitments to gender equality and the universality of women's rights.

In some member states, laws and policies have sought to roll back existing protections for women's sexual and reproductive health and rights, in particular through the introduction of retrogressive restrictions on access to abortion and contraception. For instance, a small number of states retain highly restrictive laws that prohibit abortion except in strictly defined, exceptional circumstances.

The Council refers to "legislative retrogression", describing backlash in some European governments over recent years, where conservative threats have extended beyond rhetoric, with the adoption of laws and policies limiting existing protection for women's sexual and reproductive health and rights. The Council mentions laws introducing new preconditions that women must fulfil before they can obtain legal abortion services, like mandatory waiting periods and biased counselling requirements, which represent common examples of these newly imposed, retrogressive procedural barriers that undermine women's health and human rights.

However, resistance to feminism and to women's bid for equality is to be found worldwide, not only in European countries. Religious fundamentalism and accusations by conservatives that feminism is promoting antifamily ideologies liable to threaten the well-being of children and communities are widespread. Internationally, the American Right to Life movement has been successful in preventing ratification of human rights conventions because of the refusal of international bodies to protect the rights of children "born and unborn", as well as in jeopardizing the funding of family planning programs worldwide. In Canada, a backlash against sex assault victims and battered women due to lobbying by fathers' rights groups is making significant progress. Capitalizing on anti-feminist sentiment, as analysed in the previous chapter, men's rights movements are reshaping domestic violence and family law policies across the Western world (van Wormer, 2009: 326).

Arguments from these movements based on the importance of fathers in the family are undermining support for women victims in Canada, the USA and other countries. A related issue concerns child custody cases: accusations of "malicious mother syndrome" or "parental alienation syndrome" are being used in France and North America by men to gain custody in cases where mothers claim that their husbands are violent.

Part of this backlash picture is also the growing “anti-genderist” discourse. Right-wing conservatism and populism feed not only on economic instability, but also on anxieties around gender relations, (homo)sexuality and reproduction. In many countries, critiques of what conservatives (especially Catholics) term “gender” or “genderism” have helped to mobilize men as well as women.

In this conservative assault, gender is not used to discuss sex difference, gender equality policies, sex education, LGBTQ and reproductive rights, or to analyse the construction of masculinity and femininity. Rather, gender is presented as an international conspiracy, stemming from the sexual revolution and/or communist-style enforced gender equality (van Wormer, 2009: 327). Supported by transnational bodies such as the UN and global capital, genderists supposedly aim to promote abortion, moral decadence and perversion, as well as rising individualism which destroys communities and traditional families. Enforcing arbitrary sex-change on children is alleged to be one of the movement’s goals; the concept of gender is consistently associated with the abolition of sex difference as well as chaos in the realm of sexuality, which leads to de-population in some parts of the world (Graff and Korolezuk, 2019). Anti-gender proponents display a sense of imminent danger from liberal elites, including feminists, who are portrayed as dangerous and powerful. Opponents of gender equality and gay rights claim to represent common people, designated as hardworking and devoted to their families.

Moreover, genderists are viewed as well-funded and well-connected to global elites, while common people are viewed as paying the price of globalization. This interconnected cultural and economic dynamic is clearly reflected in anti-genderism’s preferred discursive strategy: the use of a conservative version of an anti-colonial frame. Genderism is, in fact, presented as a foreign imposition, equated with colonization (Graff and Korolezuk, 2019).

According to Gutierrez Rodriguez and Winkel, the backlash against feminism in many Western countries in the last five years has been carried on through anti-gender attacks addressing feminists as members of an imagined white heterosexual female community, failing in “their duty” of guaranteeing the reproduction of the white nation. On another level, anti-genderism has been seen to be a reaction to the increasing public awareness of non-normative gender relations and the implementation of

gender equality in public and private institutions (Gutierrez Rodriguez and Winkel, 2018: 140).

Accusing gender equality's state regulations and implementations, this approach works together with the masculinist movement to fight a fictional discrimination against white middle class men. What this backlash has in common across all the contexts of its emergence is the reinforcement of the imaginary of a white, ethnically homogeneous, heteronormative nation.

Since, as explained previously, the feminist movement must regularly contend with an anti-feminist countermovement, it is worth considering whether there has been a "state anti-feminism" recently emerging, and how this presence is affecting efforts by feminist organizations to address the needs of women and advance women's equality at the institutional level (Dupuis-Déri, 2016: 26).

Because the anti-feminist countermovement is particularly powerful when it takes on political dimensions, it seems legitimate to ask whether state anti-feminism is actively engaged today in opposing feminism.

While the patriarchal state is about male domination in general, state anti-feminism is a political and institutional reaction to feminist efforts to advance women's conditions. Although in Western liberal states there are currently no political agencies whose specific mandate is to work against women and feminists, particular decisions and policies can have negative impacts on these categories and can originate anti-feminist ideologies.

If anti-feminism can be defined, in general terms, as any collective or individual action whose effect is to push back feminism, then state anti-feminism refers to the actions of agents or agencies of the state to push back the mobilizations of the feminist movement. Blais (2012: 133) notes that it is fairly easy to identify tendencies or forms of anti-feminism in conservative, religious and nationalist countries, especially if dominated by masculinism and a general tendency to lament the male identity crisis. As outlined by Dupuis-Déri, right-wing conservative and neo-liberal governments are broadly seen as inimical to the interests of women and they endeavour to curtail the influence of feminists by imposing different setbacks (Dupuis-Déri, 2016: 27).

The Polish case provides a significant example of these anti-feminist institutional setbacks.

4. The Polish case

The current dominant narrative on women's rights in Poland is one of backlash and retreat. Classified 51st globally in the World Economic Forum's 2015 gender gap report (WEF 2015), Poland is marked by serious gender inequalities. In addition to highly horizontally and vertically gender-segregated employment, deep wage differentials, high levels of men's violence against women and low representation of women in the Parliament, Poland also has one of the most restrictive anti-abortion laws in the European Union (Wojnicka, 2016: 36). In the governmental institutional contexts, the promoted models of masculinity and femininity correspond to traditional and conservative concepts of male and female gender roles, consistent with the ideas of hegemonic masculinity and subordinated femininity.

This is especially evident in governmental discourse on women's reproductive rights, education reform, the role of women in politics and recent discussions about the so-called dangerous rise of "gender ideology" (Wojnicka, 2016: 36).

The currently ruling Polish right-wing political party *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (PiS, Law and Justice) began, in 2016, building what has been considered by some scholars as an illiberal democracy, a regime combining some democratic procedures such as general elections and a multi-party system with a neglect for constitutional limits to power and a crescent disregard for human rights and liberties (Grzebalska and Zacharenko, 2018: 82). The party has so far managed to consolidate power in the executive and legislative branches and is still leading the polls despite controversial laws dismantling the rule of law. From attempts to further restrict reproductive rights in 2016, to the defunding of several women's rights NGOs, it has become clear that anti-feminist politics is one of the key tenets of the post-2016 illiberal transformation (Grzebalska and Zacharenko, 2018: 83). All illiberal right-wing political forces in the country openly denounce feminism and the liberal equality paradigm.

In the following paragraphs, Polish institutional anti-feminism is going to be analysed through four macro-areas: from a general assessment of the institutional framework, I will move to more the specific areas of sexual and reproductive rights, anti-genderism ideology and men's rights groups' activism.

4.1. The anti-feminist institutional framework

Research affirms that the promotion of equal opportunities for women and men in employment and public life in Poland has not been a government priority since EU accession. A clear backlash regarding related values and approaches occurred after the change of government in 2015. According to the Study commissioned by the European Parliament's Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs, the recent changes at the Polish institutional level are a visible expression of the downgrading of the issue of gender equality (Juhasz and Pap, 2018: 51). In terms of gender equality issues, in fact, the approach is determined by the fact that the Government's declared priority is "the pronatalist traditional family policy", leading to negative changes in the women's rights agenda.

In 1986, the Governmental Plenipotentiary for Women was established, the first of its kind in the communist bloc. It was designed to introduce gender equality policy in every sphere of life, and to shape policy towards family, youth and children. However, in 1997, after parliamentary elections and new coalition coming to power, the word "women" disappeared from the name of the office, and policies towards the family became a priority. In 2001, when SLD (the Alliance of Democratic Left - Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej) was a major party in Parliament, the Prime Minister established the Government Plenipotentiary for the Equal Status of Women and Men. The office's actions were aimed at monitoring gender equality in different spheres of life, reflecting and referring to the idea of gender mainstreaming.

In the following elections of 2005, two new parties (the League of Polish Families - Liga Polskich Rodzin, LPR and Self-Defense - Samoobrona) had their representatives elected and formed the new government with the Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS). The name and status of the office was changed again: it was nominated Plenipotentiary for Women, Family and Counteracting Discrimination. The Office was very active in organising several national campaigns mainly aimed at promoting women's economic and professional activity (Szelewa, 2011: 4). The issue focus of the national machinery for gender equality was further widened in 2008: The Government Plenipotentiary for Equal Treatment became the main institution on the issue of gender equality, responsible for acting on the grounds of a number of forms of discrimination. NGOs claim that these changes contributed to a serious gender equality backlash in 2008-2011 caused by

the then Plenipotentiary, who did not sufficiently deal with gender issues. The UN CEDAW Committee, in its concluding observations in 2014, expressed concern that since 2006 there has been no separate government authority for gender equality policies. It is also concerned about the lack of resources and separate budget for the Plenipotentiary (Juhasz and Pap, 2018: 51).

After the change of government in 2015, the scope of the Plenipotentiary was further expanded: the new position became the Government Plenipotentiary for Civil Society and Equal Treatment and the office of the Plenipotentiary for Equal Treatment was closed. It was reported that the new Plenipotentiary had no record of equal treatment issues and was unknown by relevant NGOs. Furthermore, he publicly admitted that gender equality was not among his priorities. He stated in a speech at the session of UN Commission on the Status of Women in 2015 that the government has started to widely promote the new concept of family mainstreaming and that this concept goes far beyond gender mainstreaming. His successor also did not have a record on gender equality issues: the Commissioner for Human Rights was not aware of the Plenipotentiary's strong engagement in combating gender discrimination or violence against women.

The Commissioner for Human Rights is also relevant for gender equality and women's rights issues, since one of the deputy commissioners is responsible for equal treatment. This institution was also affected by the new government's approach: the budget of the commissioner was cut in 2016 to the level of 2011, and the draft budget for 2017 was less than requested.

Up to now, Poland does not have a specific law on gender equality. The legislative framework features a wider equal treatment focus. EU accession played an important role in progress, although legal harmonization has been delayed, and is reported to be still fragmentary. The Equal Treatment Act, for instance, introduced in 2010, is a comprehensive norm that addresses several grounds of discrimination, including sex. According to NGOs, however, the act is not satisfactory and is rather minimalistic, protecting against gender discrimination only around employment and access to goods and services. Also, it does not address intersectional discrimination (Juhasz and Pap, 2018: 53).

In the policy framework the last specific policy document to address gender equality was the National Action Plan for Women for the period 2003 – 2005. After an eight-year gap, the National Action Plan for Equal

Treatment 2013 – 2016 was introduced with a wide issue focus. Although the government claimed that the gender criterion is properly considered, and that actions have been taken to prevent gender-based discrimination, according to the Commissioner for Human Rights it has a limited government policy impact. Similarly, the CEDAW Committee was concerned that the National Action Plan did not sufficiently address women's rights and their protection from discrimination.

Moreover, the CEDAW Committee in 2014 noted the inadequate funding of NGOs for women's rights and their limited involvement in the development and evaluation of the National Action Plan. Other sources noted that NGOs working on the elimination of violence against women have to limit their services due to lack of funding. However, NGO reports that civil society organisations that support government policies get significant state funding. From 2016 onwards, concerns were raised about the space for civil society in Poland, including campaigns targeting NGOs, aiming to deteriorate their credibility and legitimacy. Measures directed at restricting the right to assembly in 2016, the centralisation of funding for NGOs, and limiting access to funds for certain organizations raise crescent concerns, since these measures have affected women's rights NGOs in particular. With the mobilization against gender ideology, NGOs working on gender issues collaborating with schools and authorities became considered political, antipatriotic and diffusing western ideology.

In 2017 the Ministry of Justice discontinued funding for organizations which provide specialized support for women victims of domestic violence. The Women's Rights Centre, with a long operating history and significant recognition, was affected by this action. The Ministry explained the decision by claiming that the assistance they provided was addressed solely to a specific group of victims (i.e. women victims of domestic violence); the activities were thus discriminatory by not supporting every victim. It was reported that the Plenipotentiary did not take any related action. In the meantime, it was noted that funding was transferred to a Catholic organization and an organization that supports families in their natural function (Juhasz and Pap, 2018: 54).

4.2. Backlash on reproductive rights

Legal in Poland since 1956, abortion became a highly debated political issue after the fall of state-socialism. In 1932, Poland was the second country in the world after the Soviet Union to legalise abortion in cases of danger to the life or health of the woman, incest or rape. The law was then expanded in 1956 to include medical and social reasons, including “difficult living conditions”. In practice, the decision was left to the woman, who could access services in public or private settings to conduct the procedure. At the beginning of the 1990s, abortion legislation became extremely controversial, rising to the top of the political agenda. The abortion debate was pushed by the Roman Catholic Church and originated an unexpected side-effect of the democratic transformation of Poland. With the election of a non-communist government, increasingly stringent requirements were put into place for women trying to obtain an abortion.

In 1989 the Women’s Commission of *Solidarność* was created to research women’s issues, increase their gender consciousness and professional qualifications and fight against discrimination in the labour market (Wojnicka, 2016: 40).

Demands for the restoration of sexual freedom, equality and justice along with the respect for human rights encouraged women to advance feminist legislative initiatives. However, feminist activities were marginalised, and women encouraged to remain in traditional female positions (Wojnicka, 2016: 39). Male members of the political establishment who participated in *Solidarność* considered “women’s issues” as minor and negligible, and eventually the movement turn into an attempt to promote “Polishness”, Catholicism and traditional gender relations.

Therefore, feminist activity became strongly undesirable and Women Commissions’ members ended up dealing only with labour market issues. The cause of the final separation of feminists and male unionists was the resolution made by the Polish Parliament, dominated by male *Solidarność* members, for an absolute ban on abortion. The draft proposed also a three-year imprisonment both for a woman undergoing or self-inducing an abortion and the doctor or any other person helping her (Wojnicka, 2016: 40). In 1989 the first draft of a new abortion law was introduced in the Parliament, and in 1990 the Ministry of Health rendered effective some restrictions on the previous law. A debate about restriction versus liberalisation of the law began. In 1992, together with pro-feminist Members of the Parliament,

feminists started to create social committees with the aim of carrying out a national referendum on abortion. By January 1993 they managed to collect 130 thousand signatures to hold a referendum on the issue. However, the Prime Minister Suchocka and President Wałęsa refused to hold the referendum due to its too high costs and followed by the argumentation that it was morally wrong to decide on important issues such as abortion on the basis of a public consultation. Finally, the so-called Anti-Abortion Act (the Act on Family Planning, Human Embryo Protection, and Conditions for Legal Pregnancy Termination) was passed in January 1993 and came into force in March of the same year (Wojnicka, 2016: 39).

The right to legal abortion for social reasons was, thus, banned in 1993 and deemed unconstitutional in 1997 (Bonvin, 2011). Since then, abortion can be performed only under three occasions:

1. when a woman's health or life are in danger
2. when the foetus is deformed
3. when pregnancy is the result of a criminal act

In 2015, a combination of church and civilian forces directed a new attack against the narrow possibilities for abortion, with the proposition of an almost total ban. The Catholic Church and the Stop Abortion Network collected enough signatures to have the proposal presented in Parliament. Leading politicians, among which the Prime Minister, declared that they would support the ban. An unprecedented counter-mobilisation emerged, growing beyond the usual support for feminist activism, and a liberalisation draft law named "Save Women" was proposed.

Parliament debated the two draft bills together, finally dropping Save Women and sending Stop Abortion on to further readings. In response, Polish feminists organised the "Black Monday" or Women's Strike for 2016 October 3, when demonstrators dressed in black protested in numerous cities, towns and villages around Poland. Two days later, the proposed ban was withdrawn. This first proposition was followed by a second one, and in 2018 the Stop Abortion bill projected to delete the third justification for legal termination: irreversible damage to the foetus. The Black protest was repeated, this time on a Friday, on the 23rd of March 2018 (Juhasz and Pap, 2018: 58).

Contemporary Poland has one the most restrictive anti-abortion laws in the European Union, paradoxically presented in official discourses as a

“compromise” between pro-life and pro-choice activists. As outlined above, abortion is only possible in public hospitals when the woman’s health or life are threatened, when prenatal examinations prove serious incurable deformity of the foetus or when pregnancy is a result of a criminal act (but only if it has been reported to the police).

The law does not specify border duration of gestation until which it is possible to perform an abortion, except for the case of rape, in which it is limited to the first twelve weeks of pregnancy. The law further stipulates that anyone who “kills a conceived child” could face two-year imprisonment.

Even when abortion is allowed, many women in Poland have problems in receiving the medical treatment. With around 365 cases of legal abortion yearly and over 80 thousand illegal procedures performed in the “abortion underground” over the last 15 years, Polish women’s lives and health are seriously put at risk.

Despite this, feminist organisations’ continuous efforts to change abortion law have met with resistance from Catholic Church authorities, medical industry, state officials and women involved in religious groups (Bonvin, 2011).

The Alicja Tysi c case is a dramatic example of Poland’s failure to provide abortion rights even in legal circumstances. In 2000, the woman pregnant with her third child, was advised by several doctors that she had a serious vision defect and that maintaining the pregnancy and giving birth could cause her complete blindness. However, she had been refused by her oculist a certificate stating the pregnancy was dangerous for her health. After receiving the certificate from a general practitioner, the gynaecologist decided that there was no medical justification for an abortion. The woman finally gave birth, with a consequent significant deterioration of her health conditions. Alicja Tysi c sought redress through the courts. The Polish Court rejected her charge against the gynaecologist. However, in 2007, the European Court of Human Rights awarded her the highest compensation in the history of Polish cases. The woman claimed before the Court that her privacy and family life (Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights) as well as her right to equal treatment (Article 14 of the Convention) had been violated. In March 2007 the European Court of Human Rights announced that Poland harmed Alicja’s privacy and her family life (Wojnicka, 2016: 39). Moreover, the Court released an opinion according to which Polish law does not “contain any effective mechanism capable of determining whether

the conditions for obtaining a lawful abortion had been met". The case did not change the practice of blocking legal abortions, as documented in subsequent court rulings. In 2008 a 14-year-old girl named Agata became pregnant because of a criminal act.

Despite receiving a certificate from the prosecutor authorising her to receive a legal abortion, several hospitals refused citing the so-called "conscience clause".

Moreover, the staff from one of the hospitals made her meet with a Catholic priest who tried to persuade her to maintain the pregnancy. Eventually, after intervention of the Health Minister, Agata had an abortion. Her parents won a case against Poland at the European Court of Human Rights. Agata's case shows publicly that even in cases allowed by law, an abortion in Poland is virtually unattainable for women (Wojnicka, 2016: 40).

As these situations demonstrate, the type of anti-feminism represented by the medical and court establishments in their opposition to women's legal right to abortion in cases of medical necessity or rape, draws on a combination of fundamentalism and functionalism which prioritises political contingencies over women's rights.

Another case deserves attention, being it demonstrative not only of Polish women's difficulty of access to legal abortions, but also of the trivialization of rape still existing in Polish culture.

In the case *P. and S. v. Poland*, the European Court of Human Rights considered the harmful health implications and serious human rights violations caused by the stigma around abortion in a country with such a restrictive abortion law. The Court held that the rights to privacy and bodily integrity under Articles 3 and 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights were violated as a result of repeated failures by the Polish authorities to ensure that the applicant, victim of rape, could access legal abortion services to which she was entitled under domestic law.

In fact, in this case, when the applicant contacted doctors and hospitals seeking abortion care, she faced several obstacles. From attempts to persuade her to maintaining the pregnancy from Catholic priests, to the suggestion of getting married by a physician, to the disclosure of confidential information regarding the pregnancy to Catholic priests on the part of the hospital officials, the experiences of the applicants in *P. and S. v. Poland* illustrate the very grave consequences that state' failures can have for women and girls (Council of Europe, 2017: 27).

Notably, a visible backlash regarding reproductive rights is occurring in the country. As Wanda Nowicka politician, activist and founder of the pro-choice Federation for Women and Family Planning claimed, more than thirty years of legal abortion in Poland (1959-1993) were immediately compromised as political liberation from the totalitarian communist regime came into sight. The birth of democracy in Poland, therefore, went hand in hand with a reduction in women's reproductive rights (Juhasz and Pap, 2018: 57). Abortion rights are not the only component of an ongoing political struggle on sexual freedoms; this includes the issues of contraception and sexual education at schools, object of a crescent anti-gender mobilisation.

4.3. Anti-genderism

Gender equality issues and agendas have been targeted by a campaign against so-called "gender ideology" over the last decade. Since 2015 government rhetoric has referred to the concept as a major threat to society and Catholic family values, and challenges gender equality issues within this framework. The Catholic-right since 2012 has begun orchestrating a ferocious war on gender ideology, demonising gender studies and gender equality advocates. Both PiS and the far-right Ruch Narodowy (RN, National Movement) have dedicated considerable space to oppose "gender ideology" and to restore the postulated "traditional gender order" in their programmes and centred much of their demands around supporting traditional family values. In both PiS and RN programmes from 2014 gender ideology is presented as a Western-imposed threat to national sovereignty and the well-being of families.

In 2012 Poland signed the European Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (the Istanbul Convention). This caused lively discussion among parliamentary members and civil society groups, dividing feminist NGOs and victims' organisations on the one hand, conservative and masculinist groups on the other (like the Masculinum Foundation). For three years a significant number of parliamentarians argued that the Convention could not be ratified because it was contrary not only to Polish values, but also to the Polish Constitution. In April 2012 the then Minister of Justice publicly opposed the ratification of the Convention, calling it a "carrier of gender ideology". According to the Minister the document was dangerous because it promoted "feminist

ideology” and had as its goals the “suppression of the traditional role of the family and promotion of the homosexual relationship” (Juhasz and Pap, 2018: 57).

Finally, the Convention was ratified on 27 April 2015 without reservation, and entered into force on 1 August of the same year. However, Poland issued a declaration that it “will apply the Convention in accordance with the principles and the provisions of the Constitution”. The governing party, after coming to power, initiated preparations for the withdrawal of ratification. The withdrawal was announced by the President several times, and in December 2016 the Minister of Social Affairs, Labour and Family publicly renounced Poland’s commitment to the convention. In addition, the Ministry of Justice initiated a draft bill to withdraw from the convention. Although this proposal was rescinded in 2017, thanks to the reaction of women’s groups, some member of the Parliament continues calling for a withdrawal from the Convention (Juhasz and Pap, 2018: 57).

The level of controversy that the Convention has raised among the Polish establishment is evidence of the existence of significant opposition to feminist values and women’s rights. This is paradoxical, in a country where each year 800 thousand women are victims of physical or sexual violence and 150 are mortal victims of violence conducted by family members.

In January 2014 the Polish Parliament established the so-called Stop Gender Ideology Parliamentary Committee. Its official goals are to defend the sex identity of a human being and work towards the establishment of legislation changes which will protect traditional families and support pro-family politics; develop solutions regarding possibilities of combating the negative influence of gender ideology on children’s education. The existence of the Committee demonstrates that a significant number from the political establishment are agents of a national anti-feminist crusade.

The so-called “war on gender” has extended also to the educational field. In a study requested by the FEMM Committee on the backlash in gender equality in Europe, it was found that the Polish education system has not been successfully responsive to education for gender equality, and that textbooks contain gender stereotypes. According to this study, the Ministry of Education did not prepare specific standards for non-discrimination in textbooks, and textbook reviewers have not provided specific guidance. It was also reported that institutions providing education about gender equality are experiencing harassment and hostility from local authorities.

According to Grzebalska (2018), gender has played a crucial role in establishing this new Polish illiberal type of governance by acting as a “symbolic glue”. Firstly, the war on gender ideology has allowed right-wing actors to build broad alliances between groups that would have not necessarily joined forces otherwise, such as mainstream conservatives and far-right activists. Secondly, using the concept of gender ideology as an enemy figure has allowed illiberal actors to gather against issues attributed to the liberal equality paradigm and to present them as part of a global conspiracy. Gender ideology has thus become the metaphor for all the failures of the neoliberal order: crisis of representation, supremacy of identity politics over material injustice, or growing insecurity. Thirdly, the demonization and rejection of gender ideology has allowed the right to build a new positive counter-proposal to the liberal order. This proposal stems from the real failures of the neoliberal project and its unfulfilled promise of emancipation and offers security and community to a clearly delineated collective of those who share the same national, religious and family values (Grzebalska and Zacharenko, 2018: 84).

4.4 Men’s rights groups

Since 1989, the Polish public discourse has been strongly dominated by an anti-feminist rhetoric and anti-feminist men’s groups’ activism and discourse have contributed to bring this rhetoric into the mainstream. As a recent study by Wojnicka demonstrates, anti-feminist masculinist rhetoric is part of a constellation of forces that hinder efforts to secure a satisfactory level of equality for women in Poland. Wojnicka’s paper draws on qualitative social research with men’s groups conducted between 2009 and 2011. Focusing on laws and policies governing abortion, violence against women and rape, it demonstrates that the hard-line wing of fathers’ rights movements, religious men’s groups and NGO masculinism aid efforts by political agents to resist and turn back feminist reforms.

As noted in the previous chapter, an international scholarship identifies masculinist groups as key actors in advancing essentialist definitions of social roles and in promoting traditional gender divisions across Western societies. The findings of Wojnicka’s research show that the Polish counterparts are very similar and serve as special aids to institutional anti-feminism. Together with Western European, American and Australian groups

and organisations, Polish anti-feminist groups are situated within a wider masculinist movement and discourse. The most visible and well-known masculinist contingent in Poland is a hard-line wing of the fathers' rights movement (Wojnicka, 2016: 40). Founded in the 1980s, it consists of dozens of informal groups and associations. As for fathers' rights organisations across Western jurisdictions, its main concern is the divorced single father, defined as victim of a pro-feminist designed social system. In Poland, its main forms of activity include picketing, demonstrations and counselling.

In the interviews conducted for the aims of the study, in line with the international literature on men's rights activism, fathers' rights activists contend that men as a social group are discriminated against due to the dominance or hegemony of feminist ideology. The type of anti-feminism captured in the author's interviews with hard-line fathers' rights group members can be characterised as both biological and fundamental. In the opinions of the fathers' rights group affiliates interviewed, women and men are deemed as ontologically different human beings, and therefore they are supposed to be situated in different social positions.

Though secular men's rights groups are prominent in Poland, at the forefront of the Polish masculinist movement is the Catholic men's group *Mężczyźni św Józefa*, which has existed since 2005. Members of this group deepen their faith through participation in meetings with other men in which they attempt to develop a male identity based on Christian values (Wojnicka, 2016: 42). Those values include the empowering roles of fathers, husbands and leaders of local religious communities. *Mężczyźni św Józefa* seeks to rebuild the male community and to re-masculinise society, which it sees as dominated by female values.

Rebuilding Christian male identity is focused on inner activities, which supply an atmosphere of community and create strong emotional bonds between group members. The majority of the activists interviewed believe that only traditional, patriarchal gender roles should be promoted in society. They voiced the belief that men and women, as God's creations, are essentially different human beings, and that therefore efforts to advance gender equality and women's emancipation are pointless (Wojnicka, 2016: 42).

The most resent type of masculinist discourse is marked by an ingenuous commitment to gender equality, evidenced in the website postings of the new *Masculinum Foundation*. This organisation was formed in Warsaw at the beginning of 2013 with the goal of promoting equality for both women

and men. However, this aim translates into protecting men's rights, which Masculinum argues are clearly omitted from the general societal discussion about gender equality. Masculinum claims that men are victims of discrimination at least as much as women, and that therefore a special governmental unit or special committee or sub-department is needed to protect men's rights. Although there are no explicit anti-feminist statements on Masculinum's website, and while the term "gender equality" is used many times, the style of argumentation is typical of what Wojnicka describes as an "angry men's movement" discourse (Wojnicka, 2016: 43). Masculinum's founders use the rhetoric of a "gender war" and indirectly accuse women and feminists of diminishing men's social position, identity and well-being.

Despite the significant presence of men's rights groups in the Polish context in promoting resistance to feminist-influenced efforts, they still play a secondary role compared to their counterparts in Western Europe, North America and Australia. This is connected to the fact that the Polish political scene and public discourse are strongly dominated by men with patriarchal, anti-feminist attitudes who do not feel very threatened by feminist "enemies". As a matter of fact, the institutional climate in Poland remains favourable to patriarchal men's interests. Consequently, even though individual complaints exist, especially in the case of child custody, personal protests are not commonly interpreted as matters that require the development of a strong movement and wide social activity.

Even though men's groups opposing feminism and women's rights are not among the strongest social movements in Poland, they should not be underestimated.

The research demonstrates that men's groups' participants are enthusiastic supporters of anti-feminist legislation and discourse. From the interviews carried out by Wojnicka, members affiliated with the hard-line wing of the fathers' rights movement, together with members of the *Mężczyźni św Józefa* group, voiced strong support for anti-abortion legislation, and espoused the belief that the decision about pregnancy termination or continuation should not be up to women.

In the opinion of hard-line fathers' rights activists, the father should have at least an equal voice regarding the future of the pregnancy and, according to *Mężczyźni św Józefa* members, abortion should be completely banned as it stands in contrast to the Catholic Church's ideology. Moreover, these masculinist groups opposed the Istanbul Convention's ratification, and both

took an active part in the public debate on this. They expressed the opinion that the Convention promotes the decline of the traditional family and discriminates against men by naming them as perpetrators and not victims of domestic violence. As men's groups in other jurisdictions, they claim that the number of violent acts in intimate relationships perpetrated by women against men is at least as high as those perpetrated by men against their female partners, and that domestic violence "does not have gender" (Wojnicka, 2016: 44).

Polish men's rights groups contribute also to the spreading of the trivialisation of rape, one of the key features of the masculinist, anti-feminist rhetoric. In particular, hard-line fathers' rights groups in Poland argue that a large number of rape accusations are fake, and that women make false representations to destroy men. The anti-feminist character of the above examples is reflected in interviewees' common portrayal of feminism as the "enemy" of men, of the traditional family and of fathers in particular. In addition to situating feminists as opposed to fathers' or men's rights, they describe feminists, and more generally women, as mean, manipulative and evil. This is exemplified in the author's interview with fathers' rights member Radosław, who expressed against the Women's Rights Centre, one of Poland's oldest and most well-known feminist NGOs:

The Women's Rights Centre has a whole list of activities which aim to destroy and financially oppress men. In other words, WRC and other organisations like them act against the family and teach women how they can destroy their husbands. Even if a normal woman comes in, she leaves as a totally different person with a strong anti-men attitude. In father's rights organisations family is seen as sanctity and among feminists it is totally opposite.

Masculinist Polish groups are a potent force in forging resistance to feminist reforms in the areas of abortion law, domestic violence, sexual assault law and gender equality. They contribute to a patriarchal and heteronormative vision of society supporting traditional, hegemonic definitions of masculinity and femininity and thus the reestablishment or defence of patriarchal gender relations. Masculinist groups play a strong role in fostering resistance to feminist-influenced efforts to advance the autonomy and equality of women in Poland, where the strong influence of the Polish Catholic Church continues to shape attitudes and actions in professional, governmental and civil society spheres.

Although different types of masculinist groups have been present on the Polish public scene since the 1980s, to this day they don't represent the main promoters of anti-feminist ideology in Poland. Rather, the main agents of anti-feminism are to be found among actors representing institutionalised rather than non-institutionalised politics (Kaase 2007; Offe 1985).

Therefore, the masculinist movement can be better identified as an ally in the struggle against gender equality in Poland, which is primarily promoted by political forces that influence Polish legislation. Institutionalised anti-abortion and anti-gender equality politics, together with a resurgent influence of the Catholic Church and the reduction of welfare policies with the observed gendered consequences are the actors playing the major role in contrasting feminist values and feminist-oriented legislation in contemporary Poland.

CHAPTER IV

Against the Backlash, towards New Solidarities

As explained in the previous chapter, gender is once again a highly contested area in many societies and cultures. Feminisms face a massive backlash by neo-conservative, fundamentalist religious, and right-wing populist forces. These controversies need feminist responses and require the re-politicisation of feminist issues and new solidarities across the diversity of feminisms and their growing fragmentation (Wichterich, 2016). Obviously, women are not all lined up behind the same cause: the types of subjugation that women live under are different and depend on their geographical provenance, on their occupation, culture and so on. What can unite women is the marginalization that all experience or have experienced in their lives. This same marginalization could create a strong foundation for a new feminism to emerge.

A focus on the sense of marginalization that everyone experiences, in different ways, could give feminisms the ability to create new solidarities among their own ranks and with other social groups too. Feminisms have plenty of potential and experience to forge alliances thanks to their rights and justice-oriented concepts, connections between practical needs and strategic interests, emancipatory objectives and transformative perspectives, and concepts of autonomous spaces and transversal dialogues (Wichterich, 2016).

This conception of feminist solidarity is well expressed by the activities and ideologies of the recently-born feminist movement *Ni una Meno* (Not One Less) that I will present in this chapter, and which I propose as a clarion call for a return to the feminist community of the past and as an effective strategy for tackling the anti-feminisms of our time. Through this movement, feminism is winning back meanings and terminologies that appeared to be lost. A re-appropriation of feminist language and meaning is essential if we are to dismantle the false representations of feminism that have occurred throughout the post-feminist age.

The feminism proposed by the movement seems to be back on track, directing its actions towards the cardinal points of the struggle against patriarchy and masculinism, the eradication of femicide, the condemnation

of gender violence, the fight for the right to abortion and the overturning of the status quo. Moreover, it is a feminism that intends to dialogue with all women, not only with a privileged portion of society. Not by chance, it is a grassroots movement that comes from the “south” of the world.

Community and the exchange of ideas, commitment to a radical change of society, revolutionary aims, rollback of heteronormative, patriarchal and masculinist norms, recognition of multiple levels of inequalities and of their interconnection, all of these are central themes of a strong feminist movement that wants to engage in the opposition to the backlash. These elements can be found in the Argentine-based movement, which I argue represents one of the main revolutionary-oriented feminist movements of our time. I dedicate the following pages to its analysis.

1. The antidote for misogyny is sorority: the Ni Una Menos movement

The protest movement Ni Una Menos (Not One Less) started as a reaction to the murder of 14-year-old Chiara Paez in Argentina in 2015. Her death was the latest in a series of widely publicized femicides in Latin America, which saw young women murdered by their partners or close male relatives.

Femicide is broadly defined as the killing of females by males because they are females by Radford and Russell, early pioneers of the term (Radford and Russell, 1992). The human and women’s rights movement of Ni Una Menos applies a concept of femicide as an action carried out by a person in order to punish and psychically destroy a woman considered to be someone’s property. The movement sees this as an act of mass murder perpetrated on humanity, providing a concept of femicide directly linked to that of genocide. It was only after the genocide of Rwanda that rape was recognized in the context of genocide, thus constituting a crime against humanity as indicated in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. Despite the fact that Argentina ratified the Statute, and even after the Argentinian Criminal Code was reformed in 1999, endorsing a woman’s individual right to sexual integrity, investigating magistrates in Argentina continued to have problems prosecuting crimes of sexual violence outside the framework of torture because cases of intended rape are often considered a private matter (Abrego, 2017). Ni Una Menos feminists insist that when sexuality is considered to be a private matter, the political and war-like character of

the actions is negated (Abrego, 2017). During the speeches delivered at the protest of June 3rd, 2015 outside Congress in Buenos Aires, one of the documents, read by the humorist Maitena, said:

We need to add commitments to change a culture that tends to think of women as objects of consumption (...). The word “femicide” is a political category, it is the word that denounces the way in which society makes something natural that is not natural: macho violence.

One of the most interesting aspects of this group mobilization is the emphasis placed on discursive legitimization: the explicit defense of the use of the terms femicide and gender violence to characterize the increase in the crimes against women in Argentina. This, according to Gergen, is an act of reality production: “Our discourses do not derive from the facts but, once adopted, create what is considered the factual world” (Gergen, 1991: 132). To sustain that the crime of Chiara Páez, as well as the other crimes mentioned, constitute “femicide” implies pressuring the Justice to judge them as such within the available laws and, above all, to raise awareness about a fact that is not private, but an act of social violence for which the whole community is to some extent responsible. Chiara’s femicide dominated media coverage for weeks and generated a widespread reaction on social media (Martensson, 2016: 7). The source of the uprising was a tweet in which Marcela Ojeda, a radio journalist, challenged women across Argentina with a phrase that became historic: “They are killing us: Aren’t we going to do anything?”

The hashtag #NiUnaMenos spread on social media and women all over Argentina called for change and collective action. The protest on June 3rd of 2015 was organized by a group of journalists, artists and activists, and an estimated number of three hundred thousand people gathered outside the National Congress building in Buenos Aires.

The movement grew to include broader sections of society as NGOs, political parties, schools, trade unions and militants joined the demand to stop gender violence (Martensson, 2016: 17).

The central messages of Ni Una Menos have been to call on the government to toughen penalties against perpetrators and expand women’s safety (Terzian, 2017). The protesters demanded justice for the victims of femicides and more governmental actions to eradicate violence against women. Political pressure and strong re-politicization of feminist demands are at the

base of the movement's intents. In Argentina, Ni Una Menos has placed emphasis on stronger enforcement of existing laws, primarily Ley 26.485, which was signed into law in 2009 but has not seen full implementation. It is considered one of the most significant laws regarding violence against women. Its predecessor was Ley 24417, which defined domestic violence as "injury or physical or psychological abuse" inflicted upon an individual by family members (Romary, 2017: 16).

It allows for perpetrators of this violence to be evicted from the family home if found guilty, requires mandatory reporting of instances of domestic violence by public servants and health care professionals for cases in which the victim was a minor, elderly, or incapacitated, and also allows for judges to recommend rehabilitation to both the survivor and the perpetrator in certain instances (Romary, 2017: 16). Ley 26.485 extends these parameters significantly. It extended the initial definition of domestic violence to include "different types of abuse and methods of carrying out said abuses" (physical, emotional/psychological, economical, sexual, etc.) (Article 5). It also calls for more severe sentencing of perpetrators. While this law is a big step in the right direction for more protections against domestic violence and feminicides, there is still a large lack of political will to fully implement and enforce the laws in order to make them actually useful. A major goal of Ni Una Menos is to pressure the government to enforce this law through increased training of the police, health workers, and public servants as well as public education about the law and other resources. In addition, Ni Una Menos set other initial demands for the Congress in order to increase enforcement of the existing laws as well as to set other laws that challenged the "machismo" that exists in Argentine laws and culture. In the summer of 2015, the organization released a contract of five promises to be made by electoral candidates during the elections. These demands were posted on Twitter and Facebook along with the hashtag #DeLaFotoDeLaFirma (a picture of your signature) in order to confirm that the candidates had read what was demanded and were going to adhere to it.

They asked candidates to support programs that would focus on ending violence against women, guaranteeing swifter and fairer justice to victims of violence, establishing a national registry for victims of femicide, providing adequate equal education among genders, and protecting victims of gender violence (Romary, 2017: 17). Immediately after March of 2015, Supreme Court Judge Elena Highton announced that the Supreme Court would es-

establish a registry of feminicides in Argentina, a resource that had not existed before. She stated that this registry would make this data more readily available and easier to organize, so that hopefully the causes of the problem can be more properly identified and handled. In 2016, the movement garnered international attention and has succeeded in initiating government action through the announced “Plan for the Prevention, Assistance and Eradication of Violence Against Women”. This plan makes up a package of 69 measures and 137 forms of action along with the coordination and cooperation of 50 organizations to carry them out.

These measures and actions include more gender focused teaching in schools, the provision of microcredit to give women more autonomy, and rehabilitation programs for men who commit acts of violence against women. While these results have yet to come into full effect, the movement has made huge strides in a short amount of time (Romary, 2017: 19).

The collective protest of the Ni Una Menos movement initially defined a focus and specific calls to oppose feminicides in Argentina and Latin America as a whole. Up to today, femicide remains a terrible problem in Argentina: figures collected by activists show that between January and November 2017, 254 feminicides were registered, which means that a femicide was registered every thirty hours (Thomson, 2017), and given the absence of official reporting on femicide, this number is likely to be just the tip of the iceberg. The plague of femicide is closely related to a culture that the movement recognizes as “machismo”, central to the reproduction of gender inequalities in Latin America and strictly linked to the masculinist ideology mentioned previously. Martensson broadly defines machismo as the domination and privilege that men exercise over women in political, judicial, economic, psychological and cultural spheres. Machismo is a kind of masculinity, a psycho-social phenomenon intimately related to paternity (Reyna and Cadena, 2006: 7).

The term ‘macho’ corresponds to the ideal male in the Hispano-American culture and society, and is admired for his sexual power, orientation to action (physical and verbal) and aggressiveness; he is openly self-confident, conscious of his internal power and inclined to bet everything on his self-confidence. Lagarde (1990), considers machismo a characteristic of the patriarchy, a cultural phenomenon based on masculine power, on the inferiority and discrimination of women, on the exaltation of oppressive

virility and oppressive femininity, constituted in duties and compulsory and inescapable identities for men and women (Reyna and Cadena, 2006: 7).

Machismo is, therefore, closely connected with patriarchal structures and contributes to discrimination against women. In a society marked by machismo, men are expected to be strong, independent, active and polygamous. They are also supposed to be the “protectors” of their wife and family. In a macho-oriented culture, men expect certain attributes and behaviors from women reflecting the concept of “marianismo”, another element to which Ni Una Menos is strongly opposed (Martensson, 2018: 16). Marianismo derives from the Catholic beliefs of Mary as a virgin and mother of Jesus. The submission of women to men is a key component in the concept and it represents a supposed ideal of “true femininity”. Women are expected to be faithful, passive, submissive and affectionate; girls are taught that they must be good mothers and wives, and dependent on men. Core female values of marianismo include motherhood, chastity, care-taking and self-sacrifice (Martensson, 2018: 17).

The combination of these two cultures in society produces a double standard, in which women are placed either in the category of good mothers and wives or in the category of bad, sexually available women. This hierarchical structure holds up systems of discrimination, violence, sexual harassment and economic manipulation of women, which the feminist movement of Ni Una Menos intends to pull apart.

The kind of violence that the movement seeks to eradicate is therefore multi-dimensional. One of the founders and activists of the movement, professor of Latin American Literary Studies and Studies and Policies of Gender Cecilia Palmeiro, referring to the ongoing work of Ni Una Menos, recently described economic and social forces against women as “less visible, but not less dramatic” than physical force. According to the professor, the roots of gender violence are to be found not least in the economic and social structures of inequality:

Deregulation of economic flows and labour, the dismantling of programs of protection, prevention, and sexual education, the limitation of access to reproductive rights and healthcare... Each of these factors affect women in a very sensitive way (Palmeiro, 2017).

Violence against women is recognized by the movement as being rooted in the broader map of social inequalities and discrimination, which rein-

forces practices of exclusion. By contrast, the feminism of Ni Una Menos promotes inclusive practices, a “feminism of the 99 percent”, consciously engaging in opposition to the ruling elites worldwide that represent 1% of the population.

The significance of race, gender, age, and the many different components of a person’s identity in the subjugation he/she endures is countered by Ni Una Menos with an inclusive and intersectional feminism.

Because of our alliance with black feminism, indigenous feminism, queer feminism, [and] popular feminism, we are building together a new feminism of the 99 percent (Palmeiro, 2017).

2. Intersectional and transnational feminism

The term “Intersectionality” was coined in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw, professor and theoretician of Black feminism, as: the view that women experience oppression in varying configurations and in varying degrees of intensity. Cultural patterns of oppression are not only interrelated but are bound together and influenced by the intersectional systems of society. Examples of this include race, gender, class, ability, and ethnicity” (Crenshaw 1989).

Crenshaw considers that “intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects”. Intersectionality is a theoretical and analytical concept that helps to understand the complexity and interaction of different regimes of power and oppression, such as class/caste, gender, race, age in various contexts (Wichterich, 2016). An intersectional perspective could be an effective strategy with which to tackle both the growing sense of individualism that has corrupted the collective aims of the feminist movements, and the increasing spread of right-wing governments with the multiple levels of discrimination they create.

Based on a contextualised analysis that considers the multiple identities and subjectivities of actors, intersectionality is a useful tool in the struggle for multi-level justice and transformation. These struggles are inclusive, going beyond single identities and linking resistances against various forms of hierarchies, privileges, and subordination.

Intersectional approaches rearticulate the social category of gender through other categories of inequality and power, such as ethnicity and colour. This is an appropriate starting point for strategic alliances between feminists and a broad range of actors, and reflects a quote by Audre Lorde “There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives” (Lorde, 1984). Intersectionality involves transversal dialogues between and across identities, religions, and nations respecting differences and feelings of belonging but taking care not to essentialize and generalize them.

Feminisms have always created spaces and opportunities for emancipation that connect practical needs and strategic interests, realizing that to achieve social transformation, both the self and societal structures have to be changed. This kind of experience is also relevant to other movements, including anti-capitalist, environmental, peace, and anti-racist struggles. Following the theory of intersectionality, feminisms can articulate and re-politicise themselves through these other movements.

In 2010, the African Feminist Forum stressed the need to reconnect communities, to overcome fragmentation and divisions. The feeling is widespread that over time, feminisms lost their holistic thinking and overview involving the intersectionality of power systems and local-global relations. With right-wing populism, neo-conservatism, and religious fundamentalisms stressing gender and gender relations as centrepieces of the social, cultural, religious, and value orders of societies, a re-politicisation of feminist issues is needed today. Rights and justice-based feminisms have great potential to challenge undemocratic and anti-liberal forces. In addition, if they articulate themselves in strategic alliances and new solidarities, they could regain legitimacy and strength (Wichterich, 2016).

The case of the *Ni Una Menos* movement demonstrates the effectiveness of the intersectional approach and shows how small actions can grow into a “hydra of a thousand heads” (Lopez, 2018). The way in which the movement has grown has effectively allowed women to express disdain at the growing feminicide in South America, but also account the many micro-aggressions that are prevalent, and give agency to women based on their own experiences. Here too, a common vulnerability comes to bind women together while recognising their different experiences through lenses of gender, class, race, age, and sexual identity.

This increasingly intersectional and inclusive feminism is one of the biggest changes that *Ni Una Menos* has undergone during its first years of

existence. This inclusivism has also embraced a global dimension. Palmeiro describes this process as “radicalization by inclusion”. Rather than competition between women, which is, according to Palmeiro, what the patriarchy wants, Ni Una Menos encourages the recognition of every woman in the world as “a compañera” (female comrade). The aim of contrasting each force of inequality with an equal and opposite pressure is eloquently phrased in Palmeiro’s assertion that “the antidote against misogyny is sorority”. This sense of sorority is also expressed by the definition that the Professor gives to the collective as a “part of a broader network of feminist organizations around the world”.

The Ni Una Menos slogan has produced a global movement, linking the uprisings against patriarchal violence in which women have been protagonists worldwide. The history of this movement, therefore, is transnational.

From Argentina, it reached Poland, where on October 3rd of 2016 women went on strike against the bill to prohibit abortion. 150,000 women in fifty cities, towns and villages in Poland demanded their rights in demonstrations, strikes and online. The women’s “Black Protests”, as they were called after the colour of the clothes worn to express resistance to patriarchal rule, inspired further movements and mobilisations in other parts of the globe. The call to the Women’s Strike was first announced by Krystyna Janda, the famous Polish actress. Women around Poland and abroad started to organise into groups and actions for 3rd October. Women declared that they would not go to work and/or do housework, affective labour or other forms of reproductive labour. A similar protest took place on 23rd March 2018, after another proposal to legally ban abortion completely. The government stepped back both in 2016 and in 2018.

The protests of women held in South Korea, Argentina, Mexico and Italy in October and November 2016 were directly inspired by the demonstrations and strikes in Poland (Rudan, 2018).

Later, the International Women’s Strike was invented, uniting women from all over the world in their fight against patriarchal structures and misogyny. The protests against President Trump’s sexist declarations and politics, against domestic violence in Latin America and Southern Europe, against the restrictions of reproductive rights in Nicaragua, Poland, Ireland, South Korea, countries in North Africa and the Middle East, were all expressed in unison on 8th March 2017, in the International Women’s Strike.

The first International Women's Strike, which took place on 8th March 2017, and in which Ni Una Menos played a central part, is testament to this network of sorority as women from fifty-five countries around the world participated (Thomson, 2017).

According to Palmeiro, the initiative has received different responses from different political organizations. While left-wing and centre-left politicians have demonstrated interest and support, the centre-right government of Cambiemos has repressed and criminalized the protests violently. After the rally on 8th March, twenty-five people were illegally detained. Eight women were detained the night before while promoting the strike. The government officials, while publicly expressing their alleged "support," orchestrated a very aggressive repression to the feminist struggle.

On 8th March 2018 women declared and conducted the strike in sixty countries in the world. The repetition of the strike has broken the ritual of International Women's Day, turning it into a moment of visibility and signaling the onset of a planetary social movement.

Using an instrument of class struggle, women have crossed the boundaries of the "female question", showing that sexual oppression provides the leverage with which the overall reorganization of labour relations and social reproduction is enforced — and on a transnational scale. Everywhere in the world, cuts and privatization of welfare have the effect of forcing women back home, heaping on their shoulders the burden of activities that are no longer provided by the State (Rudan, 2018).

Through a transnational feminist theory and commitment, the Ni Una Menos movement recognizes differences and borders while building solidarity and transcending those borders. It critiques Western mainstream feminism for using itself as a referent for other communities, and calls for a decentring from hegemonic Western discourse. Anti-globalization and anti-capitalism are central components of this transnational project.

The feminist strike, as a transnational tool, has made it clear that the so-called wage gap is not merely one imperfection of an otherwise fair system, but the effect of an international organization of labour that produces and reproduces hierarchies to intensify exploitation. Globally, women are resorting to strike action, something that decades of precariousness and neoliberal policies seemed to have neutralized, and giving it a new meaning and power, bringing the fight against male violence to the workplaces, to the streets and squares, with impressive mass demonstrations.

This means that the strike is no longer a trade union monopoly; it has now become a feminist practice and therefore a weapon also available to many other subjects like precarious and migrant workers, no longer willing to accept being impoverished and oppressed. The feminist strike has established an evident discontinuity with the past: those who take part are not there simply to claim equal rights or to invoke equal policies aimed at redressing a position of disadvantage, because they know that this disadvantage is not a defect of society, but a natural reflection of how society works. The movement of the feminist strike aspires to a radical transformation, to overthrow sexist roles and oppressive social hierarchies, to enjoy a wealth and collective freedom that would otherwise be denied (Rudan, 2018).

In short, the strike has become a feminist project, the opportunity to voice a grievance in every area of society, namely the refusal to be victims of patriarchal violence. The feminist strike is now an open challenge to the violent attack of the neoconservative Right against women and migrants, an attack that in the United States and in Brazil, in Italy and in Hungary, in Argentina and in Poland accompanies and supports those neoliberal policies that bring about the impoverishment of workers and other sectors.

The strike organized by *Ni Una Menos* stresses the relevance of feminist movements for the achievement of societal and institutional changes. Feminist movements are one of the primary forms in which a group of women can express and articulate their concerns and claims. By engaging in different forms of collective action, such as street protests and demonstrations, feminist movements can demand change. By increasing government responsiveness and pressing for the inclusion of new actors in the policy debate, feminist movements can have great influence and promote democratization (Martensson, 2018: 6).

Studying a women's movement is interesting from a democratization perspective since gender equality is an important aspect of both democratization and development. Less developed countries tend to have a more patriarchal structure and culture and also a higher rate of gender-based violence, including femicide (Martensson, 2018: 9). Over the past 30 years, the international community has increasingly recognized violence against women as a public health problem, a violation of human rights, and a barrier to economic development. Movements and organizations protesting against gender-based violence and supporting women's rights as human rights can

be argued to influence policies and reform, thus leading a country towards becoming more developed and/or democratized (UN, 2006).

Through the activities of feminist movements and mobilization, demands can be given direction, and the collective action acts as an arena for claiming rights and justice. Collective action can work as a way of showing support or denouncing certain issues. Feminist movements can have a democratizing impact and increase political participation if their (democratic) claims are developed into public policy. This is why and how the anti-feminist backlash should be combated through a return to forms of social struggle and activism.

3. “Why I am not a feminist” (Jessica Crispin)

In her recent publication “Why I Am Not a Feminist” (2018), Crispin deals with the concept of “universal feminism” to indicate the moment in which, in the path towards female liberation, feminism has undergone a sort of “restyling”.

Instead of creating a philosophy based on fairness, community and the exchange of ideas, at some point along its path, when feminism came up against popular culture, it had to make itself more appealing to the contemporary public, both male and female.

Becoming a universal phenomenon, it has shown its most trivial, harmless and ineffective face. According to the author, when feminism became a trend, it lost all of its reformative potential. This, says Crispin, was the moment that the word “feminism” lost its meaning. Majewska (2018), strongly denouncing this consumerist drift, has affirmed that: “the only universalism we should be preoccupied with, is the universalism of the weak” (Majewska, 2018). I agree with Crispin in identifying the period of popular culture (the post-feminist years of the 1980s and 1990s) as marking one of the most significant challenges for the future of feminism, when feminism lost its orientation. Seduced by the capitalist market strategies that it historically rejected, it turned itself into a trendy, marketable commodity. However, it is not clear what is being sold, and what it is that one is supposed to do with the “commodity” of feminism once it has been taken home.

When feminism appears as a catchy label on a t-shirt, it loses its power and becomes its own antithesis. The feminism that Crispin rejects is, in oth-

er words, the exact opposite of the feminism of the so-called “second wave”. Instead of questioning and trying to overturn the status quo, this type of feminism that I have called “anti-feminism” throughout the first chapter, has drawn closer to the status quo in order to recruit as many followers as possible. She sees this process as attributable to a growing terror of radical change, a fear that does not allow feminism to express the full-on revolution it proposes.

Agreeing with the author, I argue that the only feminism worthy of the name should propose a total revolution of the concepts previously illustrated, such as patriarchy, masculinism and heteronormativity. It should engage in a revolution where women are not simply allowed to participate in the world as it already is. It is not a matter of making compromises with an inherently corrupt world permeated by patriarchal ideology, but of a revolutionary movement in which feminists take reformative action.

These are the reasons why I include under the label “anti-feminism” those kinds of feminism that focus on self-empowerment, on affirmation of the self, understood in a uniquely individualistic sense, a feminism that is ultimately “comfortable”, requiring neither reflection nor real changes. A feminism with which everyone feels at ease is a feminism in which everyone works for their own personal interest, rather than for the collective. While labeling oneself “feminist” has become fashionable, the concrete action to create a more equitable society is frowned upon. For feminism to be welcome to everyone, its objectives should not disturb anyone, but what kind of social movement does not create disturbances?

The reluctance to experience the discomforts of change and the rejection of radical feminist positions have led to “choice feminism”, the belief that anything a woman chooses, from lifestyle to family dynamics, makes it a feminist choice purely by virtue of having chosen something. Women who fight for a radical change in society are, in the post-feminism age I examine, considered nazi-feminists, denigrated not only by men but always by an increasing number of women who want nothing in common with the radical and extravagant feminists of the past.

Making feminism a universal movement like the popular culture of post-feminism has done might seem positive, but it actually perpetrates and even accelerates a deleterious process for feminism: the shift of attention from society to the individual. Furthermore, the attention is shifted onto a unique type of individual: the white, middle-class, Western woman. What

once was a collective action, a shared vision of the way women could live in the world, has now become identity politics, emphasis on individual results and an unwillingness to share space with people of different opinions, world views, and histories.

It has to be appreciated that feminism is a socio-political understanding of the pressures that women experience while trying to live their lives, and not a system of self-affirmation and self-improvement. The goal of feminism should not be to convince women that they will have a better life if they call themselves feminists; that is a marketing strategy. Feminism should lead women to ask themselves about the social context in which they live and to think about their problems in sociological terms.

These reflections inform my critique of a “fake”, façade feminism, a following that does not ask for any real reform of the system, and whose most common success indicators are the same as those of success in patriarchal capitalism: power and money. This kind of feminism does not question the multi-layered elements that make up gender inequality.

Crispin expresses this criticism perfectly:

We affirm that we've achieved gender equality basing our statements on the number of women who have become managing directors of big firms; on how many New York Times journalists are women; on the percentage of women graduated in med school (Crispin, 2018: 30).

This type of reasoning obviously excludes a proper reflection on the fringes of the poorer population and on cultures that still deny the most basic rights to women. Neither does it lead women to question their advantaged position over many other women in the world, or over women of different classes or religions. To quote Crispin again: “now that women grow up having access to power, we do not see a more egalitarian world; it's the exact same world, only with more women inside” (Crispin, 2018: 59). This phenomenon is what I referred to previously as the “post-feminist masquerade”: the woman personifying that masquerade is usually a white, educated, middle-class woman. The masquerade is the proof of how (anti)feminism and capitalism have become entrenched and introduced a unique element that focuses on the realization of this type of woman, on how she can achieve her dreams. Among those dreams there is surely the desire for independence. But this search for independence at all costs is nothing but the call to individualism on the part of capitalism. In the name of individualism,

Western women have come out from communities and families to become independent (solitary), individuals. In this process they did not take into consideration the need to create a social equivalent of the support system offered by communities and the family.

These are the reasons why, in this last part of this essay I have decided to focus on the need for women to rediscover the social and community spaces of feminism and find new solidarities that seem to have vanished with the growing importance of the individual, a product of the neoliberal capitalist ideology. As long as feminism is corrupted by economic determinism, that is, the idea that your position in life is determined by how virtuous you are, social structures will be continuously broken down, instead of creating new and more empathetic ones (Crispin, 2018: 38).

Western feminism initially had the fundamental role of creating collective awareness: issues that women thought to be personal could be shared and considered universal. This awareness, however, comes to nothing if the methods used to analyze the past do not apply to the future as well. What Western feminists should ask today is: how to create a better future for everyone and not just for ourselves? Once a certain degree of economic well-being has been achieved it becomes more advantageous to fight for one's own personal needs rather than to contribute to a system that offers equity for all. Paradoxically, as the ability of a woman to take care of herself increases (thanks to feminist efforts), the feminist goals for which she was willing to fight become less urgent.

It is not true that the majority of obstacles for women have now been removed. It is proof of how easily even the most important victories in the feminist field can be reversed. I argue that feminism must return to the most pressing women's rights: abortion and childcare, health insurance and medical care, protection from violence. And it must return to these issues in a spirit of community and solidarity.

What Crispin calls universal feminism or the feminism of choice, the feminism focused on "empowerment", the feminism that I identify as a form of anti-feminism of our time, will always be ineffective. A feminism that springs from personal interest and that offers easy access to power, will necessarily be part of the same system of oppression that it should dismantle and will therefore be of no use in guaranteeing fundamental human rights.

Feminism has shifted significantly since the first wave incited women around the world to demand equal political rights with men, which in

many countries has still not happened. The second and third waves have not really passed yet. We are now in a time made much more complicated by globalisation, capitalism, and environmental and social catastrophes. In this era, we need to consider the different situations that women are placed in — not only in the big picture but in our own local communities too — and how they are responding. Most of all, we need to create actions that address these multiple issues. It is evident that women face challenges in all spheres: in the home environment, in the work environment, in public space, and in digital space (public or private).

Patriarchal thinking continues to be an exacerbating factor under neoliberalism in that it reduces feminism to a measure of material equality rather than acknowledging it as a demarcated, complex movement against oppression of any kind.

What can be observed in this analysis of anti-feminist manifestations during the years of post-feminism is that through anti-feminist discourses, feminism has been redefined. In the common discourse, it has ceased to fight for equality of women and all genders; its comprehensive structural dimension has disappeared, giving place to the notion of “differential feminism” (de Benoist and Champetier, 2000), celebrating the differences between men and women, core differences that are biologically defined. For differential feminists, questioning gender and other forms of inequality is not an issue; quite the contrary: men and women need to respect the “natural order” of the position of the sexes.

In this scenario, the conservative/New Right feminist discourse is never seen as an ongoing political battle to create a more equal society; it presupposes that equality has already been achieved. Feminism is therefore regarded as an anachronist movement whose battle is over. Feminism is de-politicised and functions as a celebration of the status quo. Being a feminist is nothing more than a celebration of “who we are”. “we”, “our culture” as the civilised part of the world. The “other” and “their non-western culture” as a danger to the self-imagined gender equality in the West.

Feminism in these terms has become a functional diacritic to differentiate “us” from “them”. The idea is that ethnicities and nations have distinct cultures and that we should preserve these cultures. Differential feminism is connected to that other highly influential idea of ethno-differentialism. We are feminists only in our battle to preserve what we have. The New Right and conservative political actors embraced feminism in order to redefine it.

This battle was very successful as it aligned with the dominant societal shift toward a neoliberal and nationalist consensus. This redefinition not only resulted in the de-politicisation of mainstream feminism, creating a status quo; it also opened the gates for a more radical and explicit anti-feminism. We see the explicit re-emergence of conservative ideology and the biological binary conception of men and women and their “ideal roles” in society.

In this discourse, female-identifying people are told that their women's liberation triumphs resulted in the marginalisation of men. This in turn has created masculinist discourses of males oppressed by women. The widespread misogynistic voice of the male supremacist manosphere now has a (controversial) representative in the mainstream.

As an answer to these developments, we need re-politicised, inclusive feminism —occupying structures that depart from the principles of equality. Feminism cannot be individualist or focus on the celebration of differences. Moreover, we can never reach radical feminist goals without fighting structural battles and redefining the structures of society. Feminism should strive for equal access to sources of work, education, health care, work-life balance, safety, politics, political representation, and advocate a fundamental economic redistribution.

It will not work without redefining our current society in general and the economic structure in which it operated. This structural battle for equality is undoubtedly the precondition for achieving true equality and justice, meaning not only that socially critical feminists should fight for proportional representation in workplaces or in universities, but also that a fundamental redistribution of economic resources is required. The fight for equality and justice is an intersectional battle that recognises overlapping systems of oppression and discrimination faced by all sexes/genders, based not just on gender but on ethnicity, sexuality, economic background, age and ability. With regard to asylum- and migration-related intersectional feminisms, we should make alliances with other rights activists. Because of the rise of right-wing identity movements in Europe that (try to) make social inequality invisible and due to the attacks on inclusive feminism, more than ever we need intersectional feminism that is committed to the inclusion of all women and girls: migrant women, black women, refugee women, Muslim women, etc. This requires a collective battle against structural oppression. This contains solidarity between all human rights activists and especially

feminist activists who do not necessarily share the same practices but fight for the same goals: equal rights, justice and democracy (Arikoglu, 2018).

As long as the problems of women and girls continue to be underestimated, we will never be able to speak about a fair and respectful global system. From an organization based on listening among women and in neighbourhood assemblies, women are demonstrating to the whole world what this social and political movement is worth and what the rights of all women in the world are worth. The problem is that the traditional structures of politics (parties, trade unions) are becoming less and less effective in the current scenario. So how can we make the voice of women's movements audible?

4. Democratic structures and movements: when bodies disappear

It is evident, from the increase in absenteeism rates in election rounds, that the confidence of citizens in the electoral process has greatly diminished. However, it is difficult to think of new forms without defining the substance of policies, and above all without defining who the policies are addressed to. Let us begin, however, with the indisputable truth that the forms of organization of the working class that worked in the past (and which never completely worked for women, even if they sometimes favored a greater spread of welfare) have disappeared, or at any rate are no longer fit for purpose. Entities like the party and the trade union now have a lower profile within the state; they depend on it and are constitutive of it. Even innovative structures of workers' resistance within the factory, which in the 20th century succeeded in winning aggregative possibilities (basic committees etc.) no longer make sense today. In fact, the dominant and more widespread activity of "doing work" has come out of the factory, extended to the city and become strongly individualized, making it difficult to form basic aggregative structures based on belonging to a permanent work cycle.

Feminism, for its part, has produced virtuous phenomena such as the affirmation of principles and modification of power relations, even if these are not always measurable for everyone and everything. Starting from the recognition of the value held that lives in general — in particular sexed bodies and sexual conduct — for the maintenance and reproduction of the system itself, pathways of subjectification have been experimented which, although valuable in capitalist terms, have managed to block many of the

cogs in the heteronormative-familistic-socio-economic order and produced widespread conflict.

But this was not sufficient, because a horizon of change was not established. Even if it put an end to “that process of women’s emancipation supported by progressive politics that assimilated women to a disadvantaged and oppressed social group”. the powerful leverage of transformation has not built a credible perspective. The struggle has been carried on, and paid for even with bodies and lives in the use of illegal and irregular practices (e.g. issues concerning the lawfulness of contraception and IVG), but it has died out with the advent of new norms and new freedoms and been unable to go further.

In traditional politics, the element that creates most distrust is the disappearance of bodies: bodies are an inseparable mix of nature and culture, biology and history, individual and social, place and engine of relationships. This is why it is important to think about new democratic forms of political aggregation, revising the very concept of representation, since “to represent” means to “personify”, not merely to transmit a message or carry someone else’s word. What is made present through the representative action is an absentee, because the representative, authorized by those who have evoked or elected him, is free to take the decisions he thinks fit, since the represented subject has no reality, or political existence, other than that of being, in effect, represented. The existence of a general will is possible only through the operation that synthesizes it as the product of a legal fiction.

Representatives “entrust” themselves to someone who paradoxically, in representing them, expresses their will and makes their own decisions for a long period of time (the duration of a legislature). The bodies of the representatives disappear, as do their will, their needs, their social and relational conditions.

The disappearance of bodies, their invisibility in the process of forming the content of policies associated with extreme individual responsibility, pushing toward privatization in all senses, does not produce real identification but loneliness, isolation, crisis of social ties, drastic narrowing of the public sphere. Neoliberal ideology exalts the responsibilities of each and every individual in taking on life’s choices and risks. Today a good citizen is the one who does things himself (as reflected also in the privatization of services and resources that were previously public). The primacy of the individual over any form of social aggregation is extolled.

Most of the “doing work” that has changed from hierarchical and pyramidal (with control from above) to horizontal and relational (everyone on the same level with autonomous decision-making choices, even if with different wages, or with voluntary work or unpaid work experience) requires forms of self-control to ensure the quality of production.

This implies difficulty in organisation of the conflict and in its representation. When forms of current capitalism (neo-liberalism) impose an individualized employment relationship and bargaining is unlikely to result in a winning outcome, we find individuals bargaining only for themselves, and obviously with less hope of securing guarantees (or social rights, in practice).

The movements within the crisis have taken the conflict out of the normalized or precarious workplace, and into the whole quality of life, to the places, the cities, where life is subsumed in the productivity of the whole system. The structures that organize and circulate the conflict are changeable and unstable and often focused on a single objective or limited to a territory. In the pursuit of stability and a wider diffusion of the achievements and results obtained, the transition to representation is one of the practiced and possible forms of democratic government: however, it is a question of changing the relationship between structure and content, the path through which policies are formulated.

So: can these movements be represented? And how can the profile of formal representation be used to give substance to representation? Politically and not only etymologically, this latter concept must be clarified: the passage from one kind of representation to another and vice versa should make clear the articulation of the proposals and the measure of their effectiveness, and make it difficult to disregard expectations.

5. Representing movements. An old/new issue

Since the movements are fluid, the labels attributed to them are often arbitrary. But compared to the past, the novelty of today is that movements “against” pose the problem of building alternative models, sustainable projects. Examples of “proactive” struggle are provided by ZAD - zone à défendre - in France, with even violent struggles, or the NO-TAV in Italy, offering alternative proposals to high speed rail, legal clinics, the spread of social housing, the committees for water as common good, the solidarity

purchase groups, not to mention the PAH housing rights organization in Barcelona. Feminism has expressed forms of self-organization on the issues of the body and life since the 1970s, which still remain today, such as anti-violence Centers, Women's Health Centers, the construction of spaces for reproduction, the organization of the reproduction of dependent people (self-managed kindergartens, caring cooperatives, etc.).

The development of tools for socialization of the costs of reproduction has made it possible to imagine an intermediate area between public and private that reintegrates bodies and their needs, bodies excluded from politics and formal democracy. But these are spontaneous sectorial structures, fluid, often dependent on voluntary work, even when forms of collaboration of plural instances that manage to network are structured.

As far as the reproduction of individuals is concerned, socialization is a reality that to a large extent must still be built; we can see only some elements of it, and the projects are on a limited scale, often motivated by the needs of survival. One of the objectives that can be achieved in these cases is the possibility of breaking the isolation in which the work of reproduction today is organized, an isolation that mainly concerns women and becomes dramatic in the presence of dependent people, children, old people, sick people.

While trying to avoid the emphasis on the practicability of extending the new forms of socialization of reproduction, and while bearing in mind the difficulties of inventing new relational forms for the reproduction of individuals, it can be seen how often a desire for community and a renewed production of social relationships and change is realized and consolidated in these first experiments.

But one cannot think that what is organized becomes an alternative structure by making up for institutional deficiencies and creating a socialization of poverty. What is shown and exemplified is the representation of desires, it is the will to show that a different way of dealing with problems can produce relationships and provide other solutions to the problems posed by the crisis.

What are the changes that can see us as protagonists in the sense of being personally involved and interested in building social bonds aimed at change? And above all, what can be the direction of change and the forms it can take if we follow an institutional path, the path of power (in the sense of trying to do things). Above all, it is a matter of experimenting the forms of direct and continuous confrontation between the struggles of movements

and the levels of power they face, which is the most immediate level, but which is in itself heterogeneous (women, gays, migrants, environmentalists, precarious people, etc.). And in the continuous confrontation find possible mediation. This means not being able to make abstraction from movements and struggles, but neither to think that someone can represent them. It seems to me necessary to implement an attempt of articulation, very mobile and even conflictual, between social and political, between movements and “public” space, without stopping at the autonomy of social struggles, far from the governability of conquests. And in the confrontation to bring out the sense of the possible.

Hence, the importance of reading the representation of the needs and relationships that make up the vision of a different way not only of facing the crisis, but of overcoming it through interventions that build a social reproduction free from the imposition of command and linked only by emotional choices. The representation, for the structures of vertical politics, becomes a signal, an indication of will and desire, a basis for comparison to activate solid democratic forms. These might only be built on content, not on forms.

6. Collective empowerment and institutional policies

What policies can be activated to address the demands and representations of movements? If the issue is the reproduction of individuals (care), that is, the physical, psychological, affective, material and relational well-being, the whole cycle of activities concerning the social and material constitution of the human being: we have before us a concrete basis from which to start. And the concrete basis is to think individuals with their bodies, to think ourselves/themselves as dependent people, escaping from the liberal abstraction of the autonomous individual (individual and not subject). None of us is ever autonomous in life, as a child, as an old man, as a sick person, as a male, as a female, as a worker, as an unemployed person. In fact, the reproduction of individuals is the paradigm of living together and taking it as the foundation of social, economic and political relations serves to revolutionize the current economic and political paradigm.

The problem is to understand what kind of society we want to live in and what are the forms of social and personal life for which we are willing to act,

and for this reason we have to think of ourselves as different and politically existing people only if we do so in relation to each other.

I therefore start from the need to deal with the existence of sexed bodies, and in particular with the struggles and practices of women. These struggles were not only about women, but about changing relationships in society. Feminism has expressed a thought of civilization that opens new perspectives. It is no longer enough for women to think about women, feminists talk about the world by placing themselves in the reality of lives and experiences. This means assuming the practice of a conflict that sees as central the re-appropriation of the value of life in its rawest materiality and complexity.

The need to activate a project of society starting from the real and concrete life of subjects and from the capacity for expression of all the needs articulated is now indissoluble, and a reflection of common sense. The process of extending rights to women has so far hardly ever involved a redefinition of rights, rather, it was women who adapted to the standard of existing rights, in a certain sense regardless of their bodies and relationships. In the vertical dimension of politics (representation, government), which has been created with the exclusion of women and the private sphere, women have been introduced as subjects capable of freeing themselves from bonds, from the body, from relationships: in a word, capable of adapting to the status quo (“becoming like men”, a sign of emancipation, not necessarily of female subjectivity and freedom).

The same is true for the generality of movements, when, for example, the demand is for work, and not income, in a phase of contemporary capitalism when there may be increases in wealth at the same time as increases in unemployment and poverty.

Building a relationship between politics and women’s freedom, where the horizontal dimension is that in which choices and decisions about common life — and more generally about what that life might be — should be made through face-to-face relationships, it is good that the dimension of the body and sex can only be crucial.

What does it mean to be in politics as women? Women are not an ethnic group or a social group. What do they have in common when they appear on the political stage? Gender, that is, a historically determined social construction, a complex of normative and cognitive elements, of roles and status.

What interests should they take on? Some of them are simple: implementation of social services, elimination of discrimination in the labour market, recognition and reduction of sexist violence, etc. But we know that women in politics are often much closer to the men of their political camp than to the women of the different political camp.

It is not a question of denying oneself as a woman in order to gain the status of individual-citizen or similarly to use femininity as an identity. It is about expressing an embodied and sexualized subjectivity.

The sexualized body criticizes the standard subject of rights and politics of liberalism and contractualism (a subject supposed to be neutral, autonomous, without ties and relationships, characterized only by its ability to choose rationally on the basis of a utilitarian cost-benefit calculation) and leads to a sexualized and bodily singularity where equality is understood as the full possibility of such singularities being free to unfold.

But to do this we need to start from imaginaries able to set in motion desires that materialize in specific projects with a different idea of the world.

There are many ways to deal with this. The most important thing is to reject a culture that first uses and then throws away people, their work, their lives. The planet is also used and thrown away. We are fed up with going from one economic shock to another, from one environmental disaster to the next, from one crisis to another. The prospect of living in a just and sustainable society is something that is becoming desirable for many. It is not a matter of talking about degrowth, an unfortunate and sad term, but of putting lives before goods.

This is the moment of honesty, the moment when things can change. But it takes a lot of people to take advantage of this opportunity. We must move from a culture of death to a culture of life. The word “life” has been abused by religious and antiabortion movements. We must re-appropriate it. We must give life back its rightful place.

In the crisis we are living through, where the middle classes are becoming impoverished, poverty is increasing disproportionately and where wealth is concentrated in the hands of the few with an increasingly unequal redistribution, how is it possible that we are told we work too little, we retire too early, we spend too much on care? That we accept spending reviews will mean cuts in health and education (areas with a high intensity of women’s work) rejecting much of the reproductive work in the private life of families? We do not really need work, we have far too much of it, or at least too

much of everything we do in search of a salary, to live decently, and enable our loved ones to live decently. Most days of the “self-employed”, the “precarious workers”, the unemployed (40% of young people in Italy) who are our children, are spent preparing projects that “perhaps” will be funded and translated ultimately into wages (and work), long after a large amount of effort has been expended.

And in this framework, we can see how today there is an appropriation of free labour by capital that allows a capillary control of the workforce and the enlarged constitution of the accumulation base. Work is more and more a form of social discipline and there is a marked hiatus between work necessary for subsistence (poorly paid work, also including voluntary work, or work rendered free on the promise of future salary), which we all do, and the so-called productive-salary work available to few or fewer people.

In neo-liberalism and in times of crisis, the idea that individual citizens have autonomy with respect to life choices and changes in the social fabric, originally aimed at democratizing the state, and empowering citizens, is used to legitimize the commodification and disintegration of the welfare state. Assuming the approaches represented by solidarity-based feminism, this trend can be modified: the crisis could make it possible to reconnect the dream of women’s liberation with the vision of a participatory society. In the first place, the false link between the critique of the “family wage” and what have become the current landing places of precarious labour capitalism should be broken, fighting for a form of life that does not focus on work exchange but values activities that produce value for use, including — but not limited to — care work. Secondly, drastically decoupling work from “rest of life” by decreeing in the national states and in the European Union the end of any model of workfare, already announced by women’s movements. The “right to life” in state policies becomes the right to the income of existence. For this reason we can recover the concept of participatory democracy as a means of strengthening the public powers necessary to bind productivity to justice, with finance policies conditioned by rights and needs and not the other way around.

The fact is that it has become necessary to call everything into question. Even apparent forms of emancipation, such as the right to paid work for some women, guaranteed by the underpaid care work of others, in a hierarchy built by migration. Also forms of reconciliation between waged work and family life, effectively only for women, present in many states and fa-

vored by the European Union, which only serve to fluidize and rationalize exploitation by lengthening the working day. The demand for an income of existence that emerges from movements can be a good thing if it is not limited to the affirmation of individual self-determination (for this it must be direct and indirect, i.e. made up of money, services and integration of care) and must propose forms of socialization that avoid new regulations of work and life. It is a question of reflecting on what changes can give a different sign to our lives and how it is possible to experiment with practical solutions together with forms of visible and winning conflict.

Conclusion

1. The maternalist agenda

In conclusion, but opening a new scenario to consider: to what extent has the feminist discourse been received, understood, and subsumed by the political discourse that has been dealing with gender equality since the 1990s?

In my opinion — which is not an original one, I believe — is that there has been a misunderstanding on this issue, and that the measure of maternalism rather than the one of feminism has been assumed in the policy making process since the 1990s, with the result that policies and practices of everyday life have been restricted to a “mother with child” level, preventing progress in the feminist discourse on freedom of choice.

This scenario has thwarted the discourse on the numbers of women in politics, first, because the maternalist discourse seems to be accepted even in places (Sweden for example) where the number of elected women is very high, and second, because the tendency to overlap the figure of the woman with the one of the mothers is pervasive, not least in the media system. In the global north as well as the south, what was implemented, especially in the Nineties, was a child-centred agenda (Jenson, 2009; Razavi, 2014).

This focus on the child has introduced a new maternalism that has written out claims for gender equality. With respect to the global North, some first-wave and many fewer second-wave feminists embraced maternalism, envisioning a state in which women displayed motherly qualities and also played active roles as electors, policymakers, bureaucrats and workers, within and outside the house.

In Latin America, claims made well into recent decades were grounded in “civic maternalism” with motherhood becoming the very basis on which women staked their claims to citizenship rights or in Marianism, with themes of sacrifice and pain. But many rejected such framing (Marques-Pereira, 2012). Feminists, since 2000, rarely invoke the “new” maternalism as part of their claims seeking new rights for and empowerment of women.

It is, rather, the discourse used by policy-makers who identify motherhood and good mothering as the foundation for economic development

and societal well-being, again in the global north as much as in the south (Jenson, 2017).

As Molyneux (2006) and then Saraceno (2015) evocatively put it, women became “mothers at the service of the new poverty agenda”. The focus on motherhood foregrounds children’s needs and rights and defines women primarily in terms of a maternal role, with policies that recognize and reward care as a female responsibility.

In Europe, reliance on non-parental care for pre-school children is proposed in order to allow women to successfully reconcile employment and motherhood, but without attention to whether working conditions and even pay are equal with those of men or other women hired to care. Gone from such policies are the “equal opportunities” themes of equal parenting and transformations of gender roles (Stratigaki, 2004).

In Latin America, cash transfers to mothers, conditional on them acting to ensure healthy pregnancy and early childhood as well as school attendance are labelled as “social investments.” But they are implemented, by left-wing as well as right-wing governments, without gender equality goals.

By paying the cash transfer to mothers and excluding (indeed disparaging) fathers, they reinforce the notion that only mothers matter for societal as well as child well-being. This is maternalism without gender equality (Molyneux, 2006; Nagels, 2011). Whether in the global North or South, the same “culprit” is blamed for this return to a limited representation of women’s roles and the writing out of gender equality, whether between women and men or among women: it is the social investment perspective that is remaking social welfare interventions (Jenson, 2009; Saraceno, 2015; Staab, 2012).

Might this shift to social policy that slides over gender inequalities and re- inscribes maternalism at the heart of policy design have been hindered by better representation of women in legislatures and executives?

Here the evidence is not promising. The study of gender and local government found that even at the local level of government, public policies continue to be seen as not having any gendering particularity or effects: the only field in which they consider policies specifically directed to women is generally in care of children, particularly very young children. It is thus mothers who are regarded as being concerned by policies in this field, not fathers (Gaspard and Heinen, 2004: 30).

In Latin America there is clear evidence that the move towards the social investment perspective was made with very little consultation of those parts of the administration responsible for gender equality and also frequently by female ministers (and at times presidents). But it is the Nordic countries, and particularly Sweden, which provide the most discouraging evidence that high levels of women in elected office and the public administration might have limited the effects of a powerful social investment perspective. Sweden has one of the highest rates of women in parliament and for years gender equality policy focused on inciting change within the family division of labor, as well as employment. Yet Sweden now has one of the highest wage gaps between men and women (only three OECD countries are larger) and the “price of motherhood” is also high.

Even when the Social Democratic Party continues to provide a strong diagnosis of gender inequalities, it remains focused on actions for activation and fighting unemployment, with only scarce mention of good jobs or overcoming heavily structured and long-standing gender segregation in the labor force (Jenson, 2015: 46-47). All of this suggests that, yet again, we observe that the transformative effects of feminism, including actions within the state, must depend upon vigilance and mobilization, alone and with allies, since the economic and political forces that seek other ends than the ultimate goal of freedom remain strong and dominant.

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