Why do men join the men's rights movement in Malta?

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Abstract

This article explores the reasons why men join the Men's Rights Movement (MRM) in Malta, the southernmost and smallest member state of the European Union. In particular, reference is made to the Association for Men's Rights (AMR).

For this purpose, a qualitative research method has been adopted, whereby activists within AMR were interviewed to discuss their experiences and the reasons why they joined the organisation. The Weberian concept of verstehen *is therefore the main methodological inspiration of this study.*

Contextualisation

The Maltese political context is dominated by two political parties (Labour and Nationalist) and an influential Catholic Church. At the same time, non-mainstream political forces and civil society have been increasing their influence amid new windows of opportunity such as Malta's EU accession and multi-level governance (Briguglio 2016).

In matters related to family life and gender, Angela Abela (2016) argues that in the 1990s men still exercised considerable privilege, that household chores were commonly very traditional, and that as recently as the 1980s women who did not marry were subjected to derogatory remarks (28).

More recently, a 'gender re-shifting' and a changing social construction of what it is to be male or female are taking place (ibid 2016, 23). This has been accompanied by legal reforms which favoured more gender equality.

These included Malta's ratification of international conventions on equal pay for women and men and against all forms of discrimination against women in 1988 and 1991 respectively. In 1993 Malta's civil code removed discrimination against women in marriage and in 2004 a National Commission for the Promotion of Equality for Men and Women was set up. Domestic violence became criminalized through the 2006 Domestic Violence Act, and in 2014 Malta ratified the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence. In 2011 divorce was in introduced in Malta (Abela 2016; Baldacchino et al 2016).

Despite these developments, various current issues remain characterised by gender inequality. These include violence, poverty, pensions, media portrayal, body politics and female participation in politics (Baldacchino et al 2016, 159-162).

Though Malta never had a mainstream women's movement, various groups were set up from 1944 onwards. There are mixed views on their impacts on Maltese society, though one can safely say that they helped raise awareness on gender-related issues (Baldacchino et al 2016).

By the turn of the century, LGBTIQ movement organisations were also set up, and Malta's EU accession in 2004 as well as movement pressure resulted in the outlawing of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in the new Employment and Industrial Relations Act. Following the election of a Labour government in 2013, Malta introduced a wave of progressive legislation such as civil unions; right to adopt; gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics; as well as outlawing gay conversion therapy, through which the country was ranked first in Europe by the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association. Just a few years before, Malta was a European laggard in LGBTIQ rights (Baldacchino et al, 2016, 167; Agius & Dalli 2016, 359-361).

Why study men joining the men's rights movement?

Despite the existence of gender inequalities in Malta, this does not mean that there are no men who are experiencing difficulties in their life. Michael A. Messner emphasizes that even though 'men, as a group, enjoy institutional privileges at the expense of women, as a group' (2000, p. 5), they also 'tend to pay heavy costs – in the form of shallow relationships, poor health, and early death – for conformity with the narrow definitions of masculinity that promise to bring them status and privilege' (2000, p. 6). He adds that 'Men share very unequally in the fruits of patriarchy; hegemonic (white, middle- and upper-class, and heterosexual) masculinity is constructed in relation to femininities and to various (racial, sexual and class) subordinated masculinities' (2000, p. 8).

The existence of the (small) Association for Men's Rights (AMR) is in itself of sociological interest in this regard. Could this be related to what some sociologists are referring to as the 'crisis of masculinity' (Barker 2012, Real 2013) and to men's 'silence' (Addis 2011) with respect to negative experiences they face in their life, including violence, marriage breakdown, suicide and substance abuse? For example in Malta, police figures between 2009 and 2013 showed that 120 out of 131, or 91.6 per cent of suicide victims were male, and the same goes for 52.8 per cent of patients diagnosed with intentional self-injury between 2010 and 2012 (Diacono 2014). Is Anthony Giddens (1992, 59) correct when he states that 'in Western culture at least, today is the first period in which men are finding themselves to be men, that is, as possessing a problematic "masculinity"'?

This article does not aim to deconstruct feminist research, nor does it aim to provide a masculinist dismissal of injustice and repression against women, for example in cases of domestic violence. To the contrary, it aims to show that discourses on gender and social movements may have many dimensions,

including those of men experiencing difficulties in their lives. As Addis puts it, it is important to see why men's silence and invisibility exist, particularly when we treat them as normal, rather than seeing them for what they are: major social problems that can be remedied if we understand where they come from and take the right steps to change them (Addis 2011 n/p).

Literature on the Men's Rights Movement

In order to proceed it is imperative to briefly present an overview of sociological literature on the men's rights movement. In this regard Messner (2000) proposes a 'terrain of the politics of masculinities' (p. 12). This includes a model of eight different types of men's movement organisations, namely men's liberationists, men's rights advocates, radical feminist men, social feminist men, men of colour, gay male liberationists, Promise Keepers, and the mythopoetic men's movement.

Messner dubs the Mythopoetic Men's Movements and the Christian Promise Keepers as engaging in 'essentialist retreats' (2000, p. 16). They oppose the 'feminization' or men and propose the recapturing of 'true manhood' (2000, pp.16-17).

The Mythopoetic Men's Movement is anti-intellectual and anti-political, attracting relatively privileged males who forms spiritual and therapeutic bonds between them (2000, pp. 21-23). The Promise Keepers, on the other hand fear feminization and call for men to take up a leadership role in their families, in line with a fundamentalism Christian 'biblical essentialism' (2000, p. 30) that prioritizes tradition and a god-given division of labour.

On the other hand the Men's Liberation Movement is concerned with how boys and men were socialized into being competitive, thus prohibiting them from expressing themselves emotionally (2000, p. 37). Most notably, back in the 1970s Warren Farrell (1974) had said that whereas women were being construed as 'sex objects', men were being construed as 'success objects'.

Men's Rights Advocates argue that men are facing disproportionate hurdles and costs on their masculinity (Messner, 2000, p. 41). During the 1970s and 1980s they referred to men as being the true victims of divorce settlements, false rape accusations, domestic violence and other experiences. In this regard, Farrell shifted from a men's liberationist to a men's rights advocate when in 1993 he published his often-quoted 'The Myth of Male Power'.

Men's Rights movement organisations who adopt this standpoint are therefore active to fight for men's rights vis-à-vis women through grieviances such as 'father's rights' in matters such as child custody and post-divorce settlements (2000, p. 44).

At the other end of the ideological spectrum, radical feminist men's organisations have attempted to create a politics of 'antisexist practice' (2000, p. 52) by linking up with feminist organisations active against men's violence, pornography and sexual abuse. On a similar wavelength, socialist feminist

men's organisations focused on structural causes of inequality such as class, gender and patriarchy, thus resulting in plural masculinities, including men who are oppressed at work and powerful within family life (2000, pp.57-59).

Racialized masculinity politics, on the other hand, focuses on manhood within a broader racial political narrative (2000, p. 54). Advocates within this approach include those who believe that men from racial minorities need to assert their (patriarchal) manhood, and, on conversely, those who believe that men and women should work together against racial and class oppression (2000, p. 72).

Finally, gay male liberation owes its roots to the gay liberation movement that took off in the 1970s in the USA, but which now has shifted towards a more liberal and individualistic discourse that is assimilated into a 'commercial, capitalist order' (Messner, 2000, p.81).

More recently, men's rights organisations were also categorized into three broad categories, namely men's rights, mythopoetic and profeminist men's movements (Fox 2004). In this regard, the profeminist men's movements recognise what they consider to be male dominance (ibid, 2). The men's rights movement can be conceptualised as having two wings: One (the 'gender reconciliation wing') which considers itself to be compatible with certain forms of feminism with respect to equal opportunities and responsibilities, and another (the 'backlash wing') which sees itself as anti-feminist and pro-traditional masculinity (ibid, 3). Finally, the mythopoetic men's movement which is largely a self-help or quasi-religious movement (ibid, 3).

Hence, whilst not all men's organizations are antifeminist, others do propagate this approach (Blais and Dupuis-Déri 2012, 22). Messner (1998) says that Warren Farrell is the best-known example of the antifeminist approach, despite his 1970s stance in favour of men's liberation. Indeed, by the 1990s, Farell spoke of 'the myth of male power' and man as 'the disposable gender', taking men's rights discourse to a new level, now claiming that, in fact, women have the power and men are powerless (Messner, 1998, 269).

Despite their differences however, what unites these different strands of the men's organisations is their 'masculinity politics'… where … 'the meaning of the masculine gender is at issue, and with it, men's position in gender relations. In such politics masculinity is made a principal theme, not taken for granted as background' (Connell 2005 p. 205).

In hindsight, the study of such movement organisations is perhaps even more timely today, when 'the era of unquestioned and unchallenged male entitlement is over' (Kimmell 2013 pp. xi-xii) but where a lot of 'angry white men' exist, in view of 'aggrieved entitlement because of the past; they want to restore what they *once had*. Their entitlement is not aspirational; it's nostalgic' (p. 63). The rise of populist politics which fuels such sentiments is particularly telling in this regard. The next part of this article will analyse the motivations for joining social movements in general and men's rights movements in particular.

Why do people join social movements, and why join a movement for men's rights?

One main reason why people join movements has to do with biographical availability (Goodwin and Jasper, 2003). One's individual circumstances can help develop consciousness and membership of a movement organisation. This may have to do with experiences of inequality, oppression, discrimination, and so forth (McCarthy & Zald 1973, McAdam 1986, as cited in Goodwin and Jasper 2003, p. 51).

Another reason for joining a movement may have to do with belief in its ideology. Collective identity may be shared through cultural beliefs and shared ideology (Goodwin and Jasper, 2003), encouraging people to devote their time and effort to disseminate the goals of the movement (Melucci 1996, as cited in Goodwin & Jasper 2003).

One may also join a movement through social networks, for example if one already knows members of a movement or if one aims to develop new relationships. (Snow, Zurcher & Ekland-Olson 1980, as cited in Goodwin & Jasper 2003). Indeed, social networks are seen as 'predictors of individual participation' (Della Porta and Diani 2006, 339) and 'a precondition for the emergence of a movement as well as the explanation for who was recruited' (Goodwin and Jasper 2003, 51). In this regard, Mario Diani claim that networks encourage individuals to become involved, and strengthen activists' attempts to put forward their aims, which in turn can have an impact on their sense of social well-being (Della Porta and Diani 2006).

Within the field of men's rights movements, Blais and Dupuis-Déri (2012) observe that men's rights activists may be recruited by movement leaders to take part in actions, trials and forms of solidarity towards men considered to be wronged for their actions. Another form of recruitment may result from conscientization of organic intellectuals of masculinity.

Research on reasons for activism within the men's rights organizations shows a variety of motives.

One main motivation is that men's rights organizations represent a collective identity. Blais and Dupuis-Déri (2012, 26) relate this to men who see themselves as victims of women and feminism. In this regard, they consider the men's rights movement to be a countermovement due to its masculinist reaction to the feminist movement (ibid, 32)

Messner (1998, 268), on the other hand states that the most successful rallying point of such organizations has been fathers' rights. At the same time, however, Messner (ibid, 255) agrees with Blais and Dupuis-Déri that the men's rights movement has adopted an anti-feminist stance, which contrasts with its earlier 'men's liberation' stance that was in place in the early to mid-1970s. This position is also shared by Clatterbaugh (2000, 890), who refers to the 'restoration of traditional masculinity' as the movement's main goal, thus contradicting the previous promise to do away with traditional masculinity.

As Blais and Dupuis-Déri (2012, 25) put it,

> Masculinists not only scapegoat women and feminists for the problems men face, for instance, because of transformations in the job market; they also mobilize to defend male privileges (such as those related to the gender-based division of labour) and to oppose the real advances achieved by women, since these force men to share power and give up certain prerogatives. The masculinist movement is grounded in political, economic, and social power relations between men as a class and women as a class. It combats feminism and the progress women have achieved with the help of feminists, just as neo-Nazism strives for the domination of one group (the Aryans) over another (essentially the Jews), or as the white supremacist movement fights against the legal and social gains accomplished by the descendents of Afro-American slaves, which entail a loss of advantages for whites.

Thus divorce, child support and similar issues are used by men's rights organisations to attempt to retain male privilege, despite the achievements of feminist movements (ibid). Here, there are two types of activists: the 'leaders' who act as spokespersons and undertake legal and political actions; and the 'rank-and-file activists ... [who]... often join men's or fathers' groups in the hope of finding psychological and legal support' (Blais and Dupuis-Déri 2012, 25).

In this regard, some sociologists and psychologists have paid increased attention to what is sometimes referred to as the crisis of masculinity (Barker 2012, Real 2013) and to experiences of oppression which might not be recognized by society (Inckle 2014). The fact that many men, as individuals, keep 'silent' and 'invisible' (Addis 2011, 7) on their vulnerabilities in their relationships, employment and/or health, does not seem to help things.

Biddulph (1994) for example, takes a sympathetic view towards men in their experience of problems such as violence, health issues and suicide, as they are related to central sources of influence such as compulsive competition and emotional timidity. Faludi adds that

> the Second World War proved to be the 'last gasp' of the useful and dutiful male as the ideal of manhood.. [as]... the boy who had been told he was going to be the master of the universe and all that was in it found himself master of nothing (Faludi, 1999, as cited in Barker, 2012, p. 315).

Without attempting to downplay the antifeminist approach of various men's organisations, one should recognize that there are different men whose 'trouble' (Barker, 2012 p. 315) may be the main reason why they join men's organisations.

Malta's own Association for Men's Rights

In order to verify the reasons why persons joined the Association for Men's Rights – Malta (AMR), it is important to present a brief profile of the organisation.

AMR was founded in 1990 (Association for Men's Rights (Malta) n/d). Its proclaimed aims include the promotion of liberties and freedoms highlighted in the European Convention and helping in cases related to marriage breakdown, to serve as a pressure group with respect to anomalies in family law and for more private hearings during court sittings (ibid). This was a time when men's rights movements elsewhere were gaining prominence elsewhere.

The website of one of its founding members, family lawyer Emy Bezzina, states that the AMR

> campaigned against the impediment of departure[1] used against men in separation/annulment cases and won on 1st October 1995 when a law was passed through the Maltese Parliament for the removal of the impediment of departure. We have introduced in Malta the International Men's Day on 7th February of every year like it is done in most countries of the world. We have campaigned for the introduction of a Family Court in Malta and more discreet hearings and that the Family Court be placed outside the Court Building as family matters should not be handled as criminal sittings. We have also campaigned for the introduction of a Divorce Law for Malta. Malta is the only country in Europe and one of three countries in the World that do not have a Divorce Law. Malta is dominated by the Catholic Church and Catholic Fundamentalism. We have protested to the Council of Europe, written to the United States President and U.S. State Department. We also protested at the Malta Courts against the Malta Catholic Church and the Vatican about the Marriage Law imposed on Malta by the religious fundamentalists on Maltese who are not members of the Catholic Church. We publish our own newsletter MALE ORDER (http://www.emmybezzina.org/mensra.html)

AMR was one of the first organisations to proclaim itself in favour of the introduction of divorce in Malta – something that was eventually done in 2011. It also believes that male victims of domestic violence and other injustices are neglected, and thus provides legal, social and financial assistance in this regard. AMR adds that it comprises different sections, including a youth section which focuses on counselling, a reconciled couples section and a women's section, the latter comprising women who support their sons during marriage breakdown. The association also has children's rights section which focuses on custody issues (ibid).

AMR's small size may be related to what Turner (2008) considers to be men's

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[1]   Men were being prevented from going abroad if the Court of Justice considered this as being risky in relation to the provision of maintenance to their respective wives.

shyness to find help, especially in cases of separations. The organisation is also popularly referred to as '*Għaqda tal-Irġiel Imsawwta',* (ibid) which, in English, is translated as 'organisation for beaten up men', which may reflect a social trend of making fun persons who are perceived to be weak.

The Men's Rights Association was dissolved in 2010. Co-founder John Zammit said that this was due to 'a lack of interest by Maltese men and financial problems' related to lack of state assistance and tax matters (www.timesofmalta.com).

By this time Malta was different to what it was in the 1990s. Malta was an EU member state, there was increased awareness of women's and LGBT issues, and divorce was about to be introduced. Incidentally, AMR participated in Malta's first ever gay pride in 2004 (http://www.maltagayrights.org/pridezone.php)

In the meantime two of the movement's co-founders, Zammit and Bezzina, were active elsewhere both together and separately, most prominently in small political parties which failed abysmally in elections.

This study will now proceed to analyse what motivated its small number of members to join its ranks.

Research method

This research made use of semi-structured, open-ended face-to-face interviews, with the specific purpose to 'gather information' (Berg 2009 101). Qualitative interviewing was essential as it served to obtain face-to-face information which otherwise would have been very difficult to obtain. Each interview was an important 'encounter'' (Goffman 1967, as cited in Berg 2009, 103) and a 'social interaction' (Fontana & Frey 1998, as cited in Berg 2009, 103).

Each interviewee opened up in the respective interviews, enabling an in-depth look at the interviewees' lives (Newman 2011), thus providing first-hand life histories on why such people joined the Association of Men's Rights in Malta.

The interviews were carried out in accordance to the highest ethical standards possible. The research proposal was approved the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Malta.

Interviews were carried out by Christabelle Caruana at the ARM's office in Valletta. Michael Briguglio's acquaintance with a leading activist facilitated this process, thus enabling trust and respect.

Respondents were male members of AMR who were prepared to express their personal experiences. It was not easy to find respondents, especially due to the small size of the organisation. Eventually, seven respondents were found, most of whom chose to remain anonymous. One notable respondent who did not opt for anonymity was Emanuel Bezzina, the legal advisor of the movement and a vociferous opinionist on political issues in Malta.

Findings

The following table summarizes the salient characteristics of the participants of this study:

Participant	Status	Reason for Joining AMR
Activist 1	Civilly annulled	● Negative experience with wife. ● Perceived injustice by the Court of Justice.
Activist 2	Single	● Sharing the ideology of the movement.
Activist 3	De facto separated	● Perceived injustice by the Court of Justice.
Activist 4	Legally separated	● Negative experience with wife. ● Perceived injustice by the Court of Justice.
Activist 5	Single	● Sharing the ideology of the movement. ● Friendship with other committee member.
Activist 6	De facto separated	● Negative experience with wife. ● Perceived injustice by the Court of Justice.
Activist 7	N/A	● Professional legal experience on family cases.

The Men's Rights Movement in the eyes of participants

Participants of this study hold that a main characteristic of AMR is its activism against discrimination of males.

An example of this was its activism concerning the impediment of departure. Activist 1 said that this practice was ironic when certain men had to work abroad in order to be able to pay the respective maintenance.

> We had members who used to work in Libya, for example, and on ships as radio officers. However, they could not do so because of the impediment of departure.

Activist 3 said:

> The court had not informed me that I was subject to the impediment of departure. So I planned to go on holiday, not to escape from Malta. However, when I got on the plane, they treated me like a criminal.

Another example referred to by respondents is related to the separation processes. References were made to experiences when males are ordered to leave the household.

Participants also referred to the supporting role of the Movement towards its members. This includes legal advice and emotional support.

Participants also held that even though the Movement defends men's interests, it indirectly also promotes the rights of women. One example in this regard was the Movement's lobbying for the introduction of a Family Court as being distinct from law courts focusing on criminal cases. AMR was also one of the first organisations to speak in favour of the introduction of divorce, years before the national referendum campaign which led to the introduction of divorce in 2011.

Personal experiences of participants who joined the Men's Rights Movement

One main finding of this research is that most respondents joined the Men's Rights Movement because of personal experiences.

When interviewed, activists of AMR expressed personal experiences which they underwent. One participant referred to the sense of guilt he felt during the separation process with his wife. Emotional and physical abuse were also referred to. In the words of a respondent,

> I was physically abused by my wife, and I am not shy of talking about this. She used to hit me with a funnel and a frying pan. Even though I was physically stronger than her, I have never hit her, because if I used to, I could kill her, and

the Court surely does not see this as self-defence.

Activist 1 said that his relationship with his wife lacked reciprocity and that he was unfairly treated by the Courts of Justice as regards maintenance and custody of children. Subsequently, his relationship with his children disappeared, as they did not want to see him but he found no support from the Courts. This participant said that if he were a woman he would have had more favourable treatment. In his words:

> About two months, but not more than three months after my case, when the judge told me that he cannot do anything about my case, there was a similar case, but the roles were reversed. This means that the mother left the house with her partner, and she left her children with their father. So, the court gave the custody to the father with an access to the mother. However, the children didn't want to see her, especially when she is with her partner. Like me, she petitioned the court. In this case, the judge, instead of telling her that he cannot do anything, told the father that if the children don't want to see their mother, they will have to be placed in a care centre. So in my case, he couldn't find a solution, but in hers, he did.

Activist 1 added that he eventually founded the movement together with Activist 6.

> I had written some articles in the *Times of Malta* about injustice on men, and about the fact that we had to organize ourselves to change things. Then, [Activist 6] had written to me, and we met in a particular place. On that day, we decided to found an organization. I had a particular advocate, and he accepted to be our legal advisor. We started to organize meetings, discussions, and so forth, and we started receiving applications from members.

Activist 6 had just passed through a negative experience when his marriage broke down. As he put it,

> I had the right to see my children, but do you know what this was? Only one hour on Sundays, and in that hour I had to prepare them food, and one hour passes so quickly. On a particular day, she put one of my sons in a children's care centre at [Malta's sister island] Gozo, and thus, to see him, I had to go to Gozo even in winters when the weather is not so good; otherwise, I couldn't see him. Those were the rights of men, and you couldn't do anything about it.

This activist also faced verbal abuse from colleagues at work. There was no support group at the time (during the 1980s), and he resorted to psychiatric help.

> However, today, when I look back, I have satisfaction that I didn't give up. It is as if the lack of encouragement I faced, encouraged me even more.

Activist 3 said that he experienced 'torture' when the Court of Justice applied the impediment of departure when separating from his wife. When he read about MRM in a newspaper, he decided to join it.

> When you work with a group, you are showing that we, as men, exist. Instead of being me alone, we are a group, and have a right to speak as a pressure group. From my experience, it difficult to speak up alone, as no-one takes notice.

Activist 4 said that 'I used to work abroad for the family, and my [ex-] wife was a pleasure-seeker, and she betrayed me. That's my story!'

However he attributed his friendship to Activist 6 as a main reason why he joined AMR. Once again, social networks influenced one's membership in the movement. Malta's small size presumably facilitated this process.

Another activist, Activist 7 also joined the movement out of personal experience, but this time it was due to the fact that was an advocate who specialized in family cases. His biographical availability was therefore tied to his profession and not to life circumstances.

Other activists did not join the movement due to personal experiences or networks, but due to ideological belief. For example, Activist 2 said that he couldn't stand the labelling of men as abusers, when male victims of abuse also existed. 'We need to take care of the two extremes for true equality'.

For other activists, ideology and social networks were both important factors that influenced their membership within the movement. This was surely the case for Activist 5, who, like other members, knew Activist 6, who, seemed to act as a nodal point for prospective members.

Attitudes of significant others on participants' membership of the movement

This study also looked into the reactions of participants' significant others when they joined MRM.

Activist 1 had favourable feedback, especially from his elder sister, as 'she was very progressive and was aware of the contradiction that exists in society'.

On the other hand, other participants had negative feedback. Activist 3 said that when he joined MRM he was not even invited to a family wedding. Activists 5 and 6 said that they experienced exclusion from family members, though in the case of Activist 5, his family later on caught up with his 'progressive' ideas.

Yet Activist 6 is still experiencing exclusion from family members. His sister experienced verbal abuse at work because of his activism. In his words,

> My mother and my siblings say that I ridiculed them. My sister, especially, believed that she resigned from work and ended up in a depression because of me as her colleagues used to abuse her verbally. In fact, today my family is still not talking to me. Only my father inspired me, but unfortunately today, he is dead.

Activist 2 was not excluded by significant others, but his mother warned him to leave the movement as soon as possible 'because it is all in vain'. And Activist 4 did not inform his family members about his membership, adding that other people's opinions do not bother him.

Impacts of the Men's Rights Movement on participants

AMR enabled some participants to strengthen their social networks by sharing experiences and building new friendships. Activist 1 said that such company kept him active and helped him defeat fear and loneliness. Activist 3 said that the movement enabled him to speak without feeling as sense of shame, and Activist 4 said that the sharing of experiences enabled a sense of belonging.

Activist 5 said that his membership enabled him to meet different people, thus increasing his sense of tolerance and understanding to different experiences. The movement also gave legal assistance to members.

Yet, not all was so positive. Activist 2 said that AMR could not help his personal situation. In actual fact, he joined to help others, but he was rather pessimistic on possible outcomes due to prevailing social attitudes.

The importance of the Men's Rights Movement

Participants in this research felt that the MRM had an important role to play in Maltese society.

Activist 1 said that the movement acts as a safeguard towards injustices by proposing equal rights. Activist 5 said that the movement is required so as to break down social taboos which need to be discussed.

Other activists expressed the need for more activists within the movement. Interestingly, this was expressed by Activist 6, who was instrumental in encouraging other members to join and who now had to stop being active himself. Could this be a main reason why AMR has ceased being publicly active?

Other activists, such as Activists 2 and 4 feel that their issue is a lost cause. Committee Member 4 expressed to the lack of activism from men who need support. 'I cannot understand how people can ignore an organisation that wants to help them'.

Discussion

The interviews carried out with AMR activists have resulted in a range of findings which convey commonalities and difference among the interviewees' perceptions on their activism within the movement organization.

One main finding is that the activists do not tend to proclaim a masculinist ideology of male dominance and patriarchy (Messner 1998, Blais and Dupuis-Déri 2012, Clatterbaugh 2000), but are more inclined within the gender reconciliation wing of the men's rights movement as identified by Fox (2004). Indeed, activists did not use patriarchal and antifeminist discourse, but tend to articulate men's interests within the context of anti-discrimination and social equality. They also valued AMR's scope to support males in difficult situations such as marriage breakdown. This viewpoint can be situated within conceptualizations of vulnerabilities and crises experienced by males (Addis 2011, Barker 2012, Real 2013). It can also be reconciled with the proclaimed aims AMR referred to earlier in this article.

Activists whose family experiences were a main source of influence with respect to their membership of AMR referred to experiences such as marriage breakdown, children's custody and abuse. Other activists referred to professional interests and friendships with AMR members as sources of influence with respect to their membership of AMR.

In this regard, personal experiences were the predominant motivation for membership within AMR, followed by ideology and social networks. Such motivations are also found among activists of other movements (Goodwin and Jasper 2003).

Most activists were in possession of biographical availability (Goodwin and Jasper 2003, 51) to join the organization. During the interviews activists opened up on their experiences and showed how they found a sense of belonging within AMR. Their rights as fathers (Messner 1998) and other negative experiences (Biddulph 1994, Barker 2012) were passionately spoken about during the interviews.

Ideological affinity was also given importance by some activists. In this regard, interviewees referred to their agreement with the core beliefs of the organization, which, again, is a source of membership among activists in other movements (Goodwin and Jasper 2003). And in some cases, ideology and social networks were considered to be interrelated (Della Porta and Diani 2006), where activists were encouraged to join AMR and thus put forward their aims and goals. In a Southern European small-island state like Malta, which has a population of 400,000, social networks are very important and the small size of the islands makes it easier to connect with like-minded persons. Social capital, and in particular, homophily (Lin 2001, Briguglio and Brown 2008) can explain this phenomenon, as 'interactions tend to occur among individual actors occupying similar or adjacent and slightly different positions' (Lin 2001, 39), with the intentions of getting returns, for example through activism.

The interviews also expressed certain commonalities among activists with

respect to the impact of AMR on their wellbeing. For example, attitudes by their significant others with respect to their membership of the movement were mostly negative. In a way, this might be associated with silence and invisibility of males on negative experiences they may encounter (Turner 2008, Addis 2011). It may be the case that men's organizations are perceived as being associated with shame, which, once again, in a Southern European context of pride and honour, is not usually celebrated or propagated.

At the same time, however, most activists recounted positive impacts of ARM on their personal lives and wellbeing. Some felt a sense of belonging through social networks, which, in itself is of value in societies which are becoming increasingly liquid (Bauman 2000), less reliant on durable social bonds (Putnam 2000) and characterized by the manufacture of risk (Beck 1992).

In this regard, such activists valued what they defined as empowerment and support experienced through their membership of AMR. Once again, such empowerment is not the patriarchal, anti-feminine and authoritarian type of empowerment discussed by critics of masculinist men's organizations (Messner 1998, Blais and Dupuis-Déri 2012, Clatterbaugh 2000). It had more to do with a sense of belonging, a way how to break their silence, and to reclaim their lives amid situational factors in family life (Cheal 2002).

Finally, activists confirmed the small size of AMR when they referred to the need for more activists within the movement. Perhaps a critical evaluation of this fact is that such smallness best explains the moderate 'gender reconciliation' (Fox 2004) approach taken by activists, and that were the movement larger in size, it would have been encouraged the movement to adopt more of a 'backlash' anti-feminist position (ibid). Yet on the other hand, a larger movement might also have experienced institutionalization and cooption within state structures, leading to more moderate approaches (Goodwin and Jasper 2003), though such 'taming' does not always happen within civil society (Briguglio 2013).

It is important to contextualize the findings within then general Maltese social formation. Given that the interviewees are neither representative of men who suffering in silence nor of men in general, would it be valid to assume that replies can be transposed to Maltese society? This study would be over ambitious to assume that this is the case, and it would be wise to declare that the findings relate only to activists within the Men's Rights Association. Other studies using different research methods would be able to add both validity and reliability to the study.

Studies should also verify whether the Men's Rights Association earned respect from the Maltese public and policy makers. What were the outcomes of the movement on Maltese policy making? Was the movement considered to be a strange agglomeration of men who did not fit in mainstream society, or was it seen as representing a tip of the iceberg of men who suffer in silence?

The Men's Rights Association in Malta could be seen to be closest to the Men's Rights Movement in terms of its goals and aims. It focuses on greviances of

males who perceive an unfair deal in their relationships, for example in matters related to child custody, and settlements after marriage breakdown. It is not calling for a sexual revolution or for alternative communities. It is merely emphasising that males get a fair deal in their family life, albeit through traditionalist family settings.

Conclusion

This study concludes that there are different motivations to join AMR. These include biographical availability, social networks and ideological affinity.

In this regard, three participants did not perceive a crisis of masculinity in their personal life experiences; however they joined the movement as they believe that other men may be undergoing such experiences. Such activists tend to disagree with the feminist narrative of patriarchal males and repressed females, but this does not mean that they adopt masculinist narratives. What they did was overcome the problems of silence and invisibility (Addis 2011) and joined AMR.

Not all respondents were optimistic about the impacts of the organisation, but others felt a sense of belonging and affinity within it. Such affinity is itself a manifestation of social capital in an increasingly individualized social context, and may be a truer defining characteristic of Malta's men's rights movement than the 'masculinist' tag given by certain authors in the field.

Hopefully, this article can help motivate further research in the field of movements based on gender, wherein a spectrum of realities and experiences should not necessarily be seen in terms of a zero-sum binary that can actually reinforce gender stereotypes. In short, motivations to join an association for men's rights may not necessarily contradict one's beliefs for a fairer and more equal society.

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