

“ENSLAVED TO SERIOUS RESPONSIBILITIES”:  
GENDER, LABOR, AND RIGHTS ANXIETIES IN MEN’S RIGHTS MEDIA  
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## ABSTRACT

The men’s rights movement posits men as victims who have been denied their rights by a feminist “gynocracy.” Drawing on critical theories (namely historical materialism and feminism), this dissertation investigates a discursive nexus of anxieties around men’s perceived lack of rights, as men, via their socio-economic exploitation or financial status. In other words, men’s rights activists often frame men’s apparent victimhood, *qua* men, in terms of their economic obligations and opportunities. Using discourse analysis of print and digital archives, as well as ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with men’s rights activists, I find that socio-economic concerns and experiences are often leveraged to espouse a misogynist worldview in which women are oppressive, exploitative, manipulative, and parasitical. Moreover, this discursive nexus of anxieties has been present since the movement’s nascency and persists today. Ultimately, I argue that we cannot combat contemporary misogyny by focusing solely on digital platform policy; we must consider both the tenacity and flexibility of misogynist discourses, across time and media, to persuade audiences of men’s apparent victimhood.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: Who Cares About Male Tears?	1
Research Focus and Chapter Outline	7
CHAPTER 1: Who Goes There? A Reflection on Theory and Method	11
Epistemologies	15
A Whole Way of Life	15
Groupuscularity	21
Collective Action vs. Connective Action	24
Methodology	26
Methods	29
Archival Research and Discourse Analysis	29
Interviews and Ethnography	33
CHAPTER 2: A Brief History of the Men’s Rights Movement	36
Early Rumblings: Men’s Rights from 1850 – 1900	41
The First Wave: Antifeminism in the 1920s	45
Second Waves: Men’s Rights from the 1960s – 1990s	50
From Print to Digital: Into the 1990s	59
CHAPTER 3: Men’s Rights Come Online	64
Context for the Data Set	67
Analysis	72
Meta-Talk	72
Rights & Equality	77
Special Treatment	82
Responsibilities	88
The Weaker (Privileged) Sex	95
Feminazi State Capture	104
Gendered Roles and Work	108
CHAPTER 4: Men’s Rights Today	114
Methods	122
Analysis	123
Meta-Talk	123
Choice, Responsibility, and Infantilization	128
Divisions of Labor: Privileged Women and Enslaved Men	133
Families, Fatherlessness, and Single Mothers	138
Evolutionary Psychology	144
Gynocentrism	148
The West	152
Race Rhetoric	160
CONCLUSION: Male Tears and Capitalism	170
Paradoxes of the Men’s Rights Movement	174

Race and Civilization	178
Final Reflections	182
BIBLIOGRAPHY	190
APPENDICES	210
A. Glossary of Key Terms	210
B. List of Interviewees	214

## FIGURES

1. A cut-and-mail membership form for the National Congress for Men and Children, Inc. in the January 1992 edition of *Aladdin's Window*
2. A header for a section of the April 1994 edition of *The Backlash!* containing news and short editorials from men's rights organizations across North America.
3. A resource list of local men's groups (with locations, meeting times, and contact details) published in the April 1993 edition of *Chesapeake Men's Exchange*.
4. An advertisement for a men's civil rights computer bulletin board in the Spring 1993 edition of N.O.M.'s newsletter.
5. An advertisement for the Northwest Center for Men's Studies bulletin board in the June 1994 edition of *The Backlash!*
6. Sotomayor (third from the left) reacts, rolling his eyes, leaning back in his seat, and laughing as Schmidt (far left) explains that sometimes things don't "work out." [Image taken from YouTube]
7. Martinez (second from the left) hunches his shoulders, pulling his legs closer together. He looks visibly uncomfortable as Schmidt discusses her own daughter's decision to have a child out of wedlock. [Image taken from YouTube]
8. Martinez and Sotomayor react as Schmidt argues that binding men and women financially is not going to work. [Image taken from YouTube]
9. Martinez and Sotomayor share a look and are barely holding back their giggles as Schmidt talks about not wanting to be beholden to someone else. [Image taken from YouTube]
10. A tweet from Jill Filipovic responding to *Jacobin's* article.
11. Other Twitter users responding to Greenwald's tweet about underlying causes.

## INTRODUCTION

### Who Cares About Male Tears?<sup>1</sup>

[T]hese young men have just shaken off the bonds of parental restraint and are let loose in a deeply troubled society of shrinking job prospects and Darwinian competitiveness, which still expects them to be successful professionals and family breadwinners — or else. . . . Young men . . . need hope: they need meaningful work which often simply isn't there, they need male bonding with their fathers and with other males to help them feel good about being men (the men's movement can help here); and they need to know that, if they have to compete with more and more women in the workforce, society will support them if they want to 'compete' with women as parents.

— Peter Raeside, *The Backlash!* (October 1993)

That's the whole reason I was able to destroy myself all the time. I was spending two to three hundred dollars on alcohol a month and I was buying the cheap stuff and I smoked a pack a day and I was trying to kill myself. My crime was a suicide. Then, in prison I was like, wow, my life is really bad because it's actually better in here.

— Matt, interview (September 2019)

Something is happening to men. At least, that's what any number of academic studies and mainstream news articles will tell you; this claim is no longer the sole territory of men's rights activists and disgruntled misogynists. In the last three decades, in particular, shifts in labor and education suggest that women, on average, are “doing better” than men. Since the 1990s, men and boys have fallen behind in education across a range of measures, with girls and women out-enrolling and out-graduating men at both the high school and college level (Bleuer & Walz, 2002; Clark, Lee, Goodman, & Yacco, 2008; Conger & Long, 2010; Fine, 2001; Lopez &

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<sup>1</sup> “Male tears” is a phrase used in contemporary feminist circles, often as a reaction to men talking about misandry (sexism against men). The term seems to have been iconized by feminist writer Jessica Valenti in 2014; in response to men's rights' activists “hurl[ing] insults” at her on Twitter, she posted a picture of herself wearing a t-shirt with the slogan “I DRINK MALE TEARS” (Hess, 2014). The phrase is often used ironically or sardonically “as an elaborate joke, a rhetorical weapon, a model for resistance to patriarchy, and as a survival strategy” (Horowitz, 2013). Its popularization has also resulted in a cottage industry of t-shirts, mugs, water bottles, embroidery, needlepoint, and crocheted items, and even beauty products like lip gloss and nail varnish.

Gonzalez-Barrera, 2014; Semeuls, 2017; Whitmire 2010). While explanations vary — suggestions include boys’ poorer literacy rates, video game addiction, and the correlation between “academic excellence” and “feminine” modes of learning — the results are palpable. A recent study proposes that declining heterosexual marriage rates in the United States are at least partially attributable to the decrease in numbers of “marriageable” men: a problem, in particular, for highly-educated women who face the choice to either remain unmarried or “marry down” (Lichter, Price, & Swigert, 2019). The Pew Research Center echoes this finding, noting that the number of American adults who have never been married is at an all-time high, with men more likely to have never been married than women (Parker, Wang, & Rohal, 2014). While the authors note that Americans’ attitudes towards marriage are changing, they also highlight the declining number of young men in the labor force and their falling median wages. Roughly 78% of never-married women indicate that “having a steady job” is an important factor in selecting a spouse, as opposed to only 46% of never-married men surveyed (p. 21). Women, the authors thus suggest, still “place a premium” on finding a financially-stable partner (p. 7). Again, women’s increasing levels of educational attainment since the 1960s are cited as an explanation for the “mismatch” between men and women (p. 10). Even accounting for ethnic differences, these trends in education and “marriageability” hold true across ethnic groups in the U.S.

Furthermore, broader changes in the economy and labor market may contribute to or exacerbate some of these trends. As mentioned above, men’s labor force participation rates<sup>2</sup> in the U.S. have been in decline; this has been the case since the 1960s, with more dramatic decreases in participation occurring from the mid-1990s (Himes, 2018; Tüzeman, 2018). Overall, the participation rate for “prime-age men” (those who are 24 to 54 years old, and theoretically at

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<sup>2</sup> The Bureau of Labor Statistics defines labor force participation as not only those adults who are working, but also those *looking* for work (see Himes, 2018).



the prime of their earnings potential) dropped from 91.8% in 1996 to 88.6% in 2016 (Tüzeman, 2018, p. 5). Meanwhile, men 55 and over (including those past the traditional “age of retirement”) have increased their labor force participation over the last decade (United States Department of Labor, 2019b). Race mitigates these effects to some extent — non-Hispanic white and Asian men seem to fare better than their African-American counterparts, whereas Hispanic men are leading in terms of participation rates (ibid.) — but, overall, men in the United States are working less and seeking work less. Furthermore, men with only moderate education (i.e. high school education, some college experience, or an associate’s degree) have been the hardest hit in terms of labor force participation over the last two decades. One explanation for these trends is that technological advancements, automation, and “job polarization” have “decreased the demand for middle-skill workers while increasing the demand for both lower skilled and higher skilled workers” (Himes, 2018, para. 5; also see Kurer & Gallego, 2019; Peugny, 2019). Across the board, men’s full-time median incomes have declined since 2000, and especially after the Great Recession of 2007-2008; again, non-Hispanic white men and those with college degrees still come out on top, but even these groups have experienced declines in income alongside their non-white and less-educated peers (*American Incomes*, 2016).

Then there are the stories of the “deaths of despair” reported in mainstream news outlets like *Time*, *The Economist* and National Public Radio (NPR). First proposed by economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton in 2015, “deaths of despair” refers to the rise in deaths by suicide or by substance-abuse and its related health conditions, particularly among middle-aged, non-Hispanic white Americans with a high-school education or less, between 1999 and 2013. Case and Deaton note that although “the epidemic of pain, suicide, and drug overdoses preceded the financial crisis, ties to economic insecurity are possible” (2015, p. 15081). Their interpretation of the data

faces some noteworthy criticisms, however — namely, that morbidity rates among white Americans are still substantially lower than those of black Americans, and that the increase in morbidity in this population is more pronounced in women than men, which may “cast some doubt on the male-dominated labor market-related despair explanations” (Diez Roux, 2017, p. 1567). Nonetheless, a 2018 report from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) indicates that suicide rates in the U.S. have risen in all states but one since 1999, with an increase of more than 30% in half of states (2018). Moreover, men make up the large majority of suicides: 69% of suicides among those with known mental health conditions (more likely to be white), and 84% of suicides among those with no known mental health conditions (more likely to belong to an ethnic minority) (Stone et al., 2018). Even accounting for the “gender paradox” of suicide — i.e. in Western countries, women have higher rates of suicidal ideation and nonfatal suicidal behaviors, but men have higher rates of mortality from suicide (Canetto & Sakinofsky, 1998) — we can still find these statistics disconcerting.

But is it all bad news for men and only men? According to the *American Incomes* study (2016) cited above, women’s incomes were growing before the Great Recession, but have essentially stagnated since then; in fact, the “gains women had been making masked the long-term decline in men’s incomes,” and “[a]s the rise in women’s incomes came to a halt, household incomes fell and have yet to recover” (p. 201). Like men, white women fare better than their Black and Hispanic counterparts but, overall, women’s median incomes have also decreased since 2007 (p. 206). The number of women who hold multiple jobs is slightly higher than that of men (5.5% and 4.5% respectively), and yet in 2015 more women than men live below the official poverty level (United States Department of Labor, 2017; see also *American Incomes*, 2016). While the number of people living in poverty has increased across the U.S., female-

headed families account for the majority of poor families (*American Incomes*, 2016). Furthermore, on average, women are likely to do more housework and childcare than men, even when they are employed full-time; women also spend less time engaged in leisure or recreational activities (United States Department of Labor, 2008; United States Department of Labor, 2019a). And then there's the infamous wage gap: on average, women earn about 82% of what men earn, "even after adjusting for differences in education and work experience" (Leith, 2014). Where women are the "breadwinners" for their households, they still earn less than male breadwinners with commensurate education, occupations, and hours worked (Kowalewska & Vitali, 2021). When we start to rack up the data, the picture of what's happening to men *and* women appears more complex. While men's economic prospects are in decline, so too are women's; furthermore, accounting for race and education levels further complicates this picture. However, racking up the data in this way may also begin to feel like racking up points in a tit-for-tat game of "Oppression Olympics."<sup>3</sup> As the men's rights activists are likely to ask, why can't we simply acknowledge that men are struggling too? Can we care about male tears on their own terms?

This is the quagmire in which I find myself as a researcher of the men's rights movement. The terrain here is treacherous, not because I believe that men are the new oppressed class *or* because I believe that men are universally an oppressor class. Rather, as Patricia Hill Collins (1993) posits, the very notion of oppression is full of contradictions:

Once we realize that there are few pure victims or oppressors, and that each one of us derives varying amounts of penalty and privilege from the multiple systems

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<sup>3</sup>The "Oppression Olympics" has become a colloquial term in popular culture and has been adopted by many men's rights activists, although it has also been theorized by scholars. The term originates from a 1993 article by Elizabeth Martinez, and refers to the "fight over the mantle of the most oppressed in order to gain recognition" — usually among marginalized groups (Hankivsky & Dhamoon, 2013). Ange-Marie Hancock (2011) argues that the Oppression Olympics approach "thwarts rather than facilitates democratic deliberation and political solidarity" (p. 4), and can devolve into arguing "empirically with a host of statistics" (p. 8). By focusing on "who is more oppressed," Hancock argues, we "are using the wrong lens and asking the wrong questions" (p. 8).

of oppression that frame our lives, then we will be in a position to see the need for new ways of thought and action. (p. 26)

It is the paradoxical nature of oppression that drives my in-depth engagement with the men's rights movement and its discourses. However, acknowledging the complexity of this movement does not mean that I refrain from critique. When I began this research roughly six years ago, I was fascinated by how men's rights activists leverage the concept of "rights" to address a range of issues experienced by men: from circumcision and child custody to men's mental health and representations of men in the media. If these activists are demanding rights for men, which rights exactly do they believe they been denied *as men*? While it may be easy to dismiss this question — "obviously men have rights; these men's rights activists are just women-hating whiners!" — I wanted to engage earnestly with this problem to understand why so many men and women are drawn to this movement. Nonetheless, understanding why people form complex social groupings is not the same as endorsing them or accepting their claims at face value.

Given the data I provide above, it is not difficult to recognize that *something* is indeed happening to men, and to empathize with the feelings of frustration, hopelessness, and ennui many men's rights activists express. But their identification of what that "something" is and how they respond to it begs certain questions. As I demonstrate throughout this dissertation, legitimate concerns and experiences are often leveraged to espouse a misogynist worldview in which women are oppressive, exploitative, manipulative, and parasitical. If men have been denied their rights, it has been at the hands of a tyrannical cabal of feminists who have enabled women's worst impulses to run rampant throughout society (or so they would have us believe). Thus, while I am not interested in the wholesale dismissal of men's experiences of oppression (gendered experiences that should also be understood in relation to race, class, nationality and

citizen status, ability, etc.), I am also not interested in defending the men's rights movement as a coherent or productive response to these experiences.

## **Research Focus and Chapter Outline**

So, what are men's rights activists responding to, and how do they respond? After years of studying this movement, immersing myself in its culture, and interviewing its proponents, I have realized that it is impossible to answer these questions without situating the men's rights movement in its bigger context: capitalism. The data I provide above demonstrates the extent to which some of our most intimate relationships and life-changing decisions are deeply implicated in and influenced by a socio-economic system that limits our choices and shapes our possibilities. To say that men's rights activists are simply misogynists who resent women is to elide the ways in which capitalism produces and determines this resentment. In the broadest sense, then, I am interested in the relationship between capitalism and misogyny, and how this relationship is communicated in men's rights media. As I demonstrate throughout this dissertation, socio-economic anxieties underpin men's rights rhetoric from its nascency and persist today. Moreover, the mediation of these anxieties is often directly tied to the notion of rights.

As mentioned above, men's rights activists use the notion of rights both literally and discursively to legitimize their claims of victimhood and oppression.<sup>4</sup> Legal scholarship typically

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<sup>4</sup> For instance, literal (legal) rights are the focus of men's rights activism around issues like divorce and custody proceedings, crafting anti-circumcision policy, disputing Title IX policies as unfair against men, or trying to change legislation around the male-only draft in the U.S. Discursive uses of "rights" include issues like perceived disparities in relationships and dating, double standards in how men/boys and women/girls are treated, men's mental health and suicide rates, and derogatory depictions of men in media.

focuses on men’s rights activists who campaign for formal rights or changes to legislation (namely fathers’ and divorcés’ rights advocacy) and takes a feminist approach to men’s rights activism in these arenas (Boyd, 2004; Collier & Sheldon, 2006; Crowley, 2008; Halperin-Kaddari & Freeman, 2016). However, it is often difficult to parse out where literal and discursive rights begin or end: discourses are deployed strategically to bolster claims for legal rights or policy changes, and discrepancies in how men and women are treated under the law fuel feelings of discrimination in other “non-legal” areas of men’s lives. My research thus focuses on discursive trends in men’s rights media while remaining cognizant of the dialectical relationship<sup>5</sup> between these strategies and manifestations. In particular, I focus on a discursive nexus of anxieties around men’s perceived lack of rights *as men* via their socio-economic exploitation or financial status. I refer to this cluster of anxieties as the gender-labor-rights nexus throughout this dissertation. While my overarching interest is the relationship between capitalism and misogyny, focusing on the gender-labor-rights nexus — i.e. how men’s lack of rights as gendered subjects are mediated in socio-economic terms — provides an entry-point to this larger problem.

This framework initially emerged from my preliminary interviews with men’s rights activists; it is further confirmed by my ethnographic fieldwork and my analysis of men’s rights media across time. As I demonstrate throughout this dissertation, men’s rights activists’ sense of men as victims denied their rights is often concomitant with the notion that men, as a gendered demographic, are an economically-exploited class. To be clear: I am not suggesting that misogyny can be “explained away” by socio-economic anxiety, precarity, or experiences of exploitation. Nonetheless, it is worth investigating *how* these concerns are deployed, discursively, to persuade the public that men are victims who have been denied their rights.

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<sup>5</sup> I define and discuss dialectical reasoning in more detail in Chapter 1.

In Chapter 1, then, I lay the theoretical and methodological groundwork for my investigation of the gender-labor-rights nexus in men's rights media. By connecting my feminist and Marxist orientations, I justify my use of the term "men's rights movement" as a broad and amorphous coalition (as opposed to rigidly delineating who does or does not "belong" under this banner) and my historical approach to the movement in this light (i.e. I look for discursive trends across time and media, as opposed to focusing on one time period). Furthermore, I explain my use of multiple qualitative methods (textual analysis, interviews, and ethnography) to validate my findings and bolster my arguments.

In Chapter 2, I provide a history of the men's rights movement while simultaneously exploring the gender-labor-rights nexus apparent in my archival materials. As becomes evident, this cluster of anxieties has always underpinned men's rights activists' reactions to feminism and informed their sense of aggrievement. My work here is particularly important because, to date, there is no academic scholarship on the movement prior to the 1960s. I thus see this chapter as a first step towards uncovering this unstudied history and connecting the present of the movement to its past.

Similarly, in Chapter 3, my analysis of a men's rights newsgroup reveals the gender-labor-rights nexus in a heretofore unexplored online community established in the early 1990s. Using a unique data set, I unpack specific discourses that illustrate how gender, rights, and men's socio-economic status are evoked simultaneously to "prove" men's status as second-class citizens. Moreover, while gender-labor-rights anxieties are presaged in prior decades, discourses during this period respond to historical shifts in language and policy (namely affirmative action, welfare/workfare, and notions of personal responsibility).

In Chapter 4, I analyze another data set of posts from a contemporary men's rights website, *A Voice for Men*. As a flagship website for the present-day men's rights movement, my analysis demonstrates how men's rights activists today draw on the same gender-labor-rights anxieties to legitimize claims about men's oppression. Nonetheless, as with Chapter 3, these discourses take on new forms in response to our socio-political milieu — namely, co-opting the language of racial justice while also perpetuating discourses about the decline of western civilization (a white nationalist trope).

My conclusion synthesizes my analyses by discussing the simultaneous persistence and malleability of men's rights discourses around gender, labor, and rights across time and media. I argue that we need to consider the discursive appeals of the men's rights movement in the context of capitalism without reducing misogyny to simply a manifestation of economic anxiety. Ultimately, the discourses I explicate in this dissertation are part of a “structure of feeling” (Williams, 1977) in which capitalism (and its attendant pressures, precarities, and anxieties) shape the ways in which men's rights activists understand, perceive, and express their experiences of gendered oppression at the hands of exploitative and conniving women.



## CHAPTER 1

### Who Goes There? A Reflection on Theory and Method

If contemporary gender politics is bewildering to those of us who study it, how might it appear then to those who do not and in particular to young men who have no knowledge of its complex backstories?

— Debbie Ging (2019b, p. 52)

I think that's why feminism is really crappy today. And just like the left in general, 'cause they don't focus on class. They just focus on identity. So it's like white people are bad, men are bad, straight people are bad. It's like, how can you really unite people if you hold onto those positions?

— Lisa, interview (October 2018)

When did I become a feminist? Was it as a child, when I began to realize that boys and girls were treated differently? Was it as a teenager, when my first inklings of political consciousness led me to question the “War on Terror” and the leveraging of “women’s rights” to justify imperialist warmongering? Was it in my first year of college, when I became involved in feminist activism after a woman was gang raped on campus and people questioned her culpability? Was it in my mid-twenties, when my own experience of sexual harassment forced me to reckon with the limitations of legal rights and judicial institutions to adequately address gender-based violence?

The fact is that I cannot pinpoint one defining moment when I became a feminist, or even define what kind of feminist I am. Instead, for me at least, feminism has been a whole way of life<sup>6</sup> — a totality of experiences and ideas that is more than the sum of its parts. Prior to my PhD coursework, I had, in fact, never taken a university class on “feminism,” although I encountered feminist theories and participated in feminist activism. Thus, some might ask how I can launch a

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<sup>6</sup> I discuss this term further below.

feminist critique of the men's rights movement without a clear definition of feminism, especially when so much of the movement aims to debunk and denigrate feminism.

But feminism itself is a nebulous thing with a rich and complex history, multiple strands, and internal disagreements. There are liberal feminisms, intersectional feminisms, Marxist feminisms, Black and Chicana feminisms, African feminisms, indigenous feminisms, transfeminisms, materialist feminisms, radical feminisms, ecofeminisms, “lean-in” and post-feminisms, and then some. As Debbie Ging indicates in the epigraph to this chapter, gender politics can be confusing and difficult for those of us who are ostensibly experts in the field. To make matters worse, however, she also suggests that the public's “substantive knowledge gap” about feminism(s), in conjunction with “exposure to postfeminism's wildly exaggerated claims about female power,” has created a fertile environment for anti-feminism to thrive (2019b, p. 52). Similarly, Angela McRobbie (2004) and Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) have critiqued the ways in which post-feminism or “popular feminism”<sup>7</sup> reconfigure notions of empowerment in service of capitalism — i.e. feminism is invoked as a kind of individual lifestyle, consumer choice, and personal brand, but stripped of any substantive critique or structural analysis. As McRobbie explains, if feminism has given women the right to choose, they must choose wisely: women must be “the kind of subject[s] who can make the right choices” (p. 261). In other words, within a post-feminist paradigm, women must choose to be empowered, but only in the “right” ways.

Roxanne Gay echoes this sentiment in her reflection on the “essential feminism” that exists in the minds of the public and even self-identified feminists, where being a “real” feminist necessitates “anger, humorlessness, militancy, unwavering principles, and a prescribed set of

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<sup>7</sup> To be clear, Banet-Weiser distinguishes popular feminism from post-feminism by arguing that the former still recognizes the inequalities that women and girls face. Nonetheless, both popular and post-feminisms emerge from a neoliberal capitalist context, share structural similarities, and, in fact, may be mutually sustaining (p. 20).

rules for how to be a proper feminist woman” (2012, n.p.). For Gay, to embrace herself as a “bad feminist” — to enjoy rap music that degrades women, to unironically love pink and *Vogue* magazine, to want both independence and to be taken care of, and to still care deeply about gender equality — is to eschew the prescribed choices of “essential feminism” and embrace being both a feminist and person “full of contradictions” (n.p.). As she explicates:

The most significant problem with essential feminism is how it doesn’t allow for the complexities of human experience or individuality. There seems to be little room for multiple or discordant points of view. (n.p.)

Feminism’s complexity and indefinability, then, need not be a problem to be solved. Making room for multiple entry-points and viewpoints is vital, even as we critique those aspects of feminism we find problematic, limited, or “unfeminist.” bell hooks, for instance, notes that while many early feminist scholars and activists were predominantly white women with class privilege whose feminism thus reflected *their* specific experiences of sexism, the feminist movement as a whole has provided an “intellectual environment” for “sustained dialectical critique and exchange” (xiv). She thus argues that “[j]ust as our lives are not fixed or static but always changing, our theory must remain fluid, open, responsive to new information” (ibid.). Similarly, Banet-Weiser maintains that it is unproductive to simply dismiss popular feminism or “try to determine the authenticity of certain feminisms over others” (2018, pp. x - xi). Instead, she argues, critique is a form of hope, a “recuperative project,” and a means of asking what we want our scholarship to *do* and then historicizing the practices under investigation “in a way that interrogates and challenges relations of power and history, even in small and seemingly insignificant ways” (2013, pp. 230 - 232). Feminism is never one fixed identity, movement, or politics. It is a whole way of life that encourages us to ask certain questions, challenge certain

assumptions, and make room for complexity even as we strive to create a coherent critique of gendered inequalities.

Identifying as a feminist, then, is more than simply acting or thinking in prescribed ways about gender politics. It is about acknowledging the multiplicity of our political project, its strengths and weaknesses, moments of power and powerlessness, and committing to equality despite our contradictions and shortcomings. In this chapter, then, I resist defining feminism and instead address some of the feminisms and theories that have influenced my work of historicizing and analyzing the men's rights movement. As a historical materialist, I see my feminist commitments as part of a larger dialectic, i.e. entering into relations with other theoretical and methodological considerations that have, in turn, influenced my feminism. Thus, I aim to integrate and weave together the various theoretical and methodological strands that have informed my dissertation work and my approach to the men's rights movement.

Drawing on Sandra Harding's (1987) discussion about the "method question" in feminist research, I organize this chapter into three sections: epistemologies, methodology, and method. Epistemologies are theories of knowledge that inform the research process, methodologies are "theories and analyses of how research should proceed and how evidence should be gathered" (Jagger, 2008, p. x), and methods are simply the "techniques for gathering evidence" (Harding, 1987, p. 23). Thus, in the epistemological section, I discuss the theoretical frameworks that inform my understanding of gender and my inquiry into the men's rights movement. In the methodology section, I address the philosophical assumptions that underpin my research and selection of methods, and reflect on my process as a qualitative researcher. Finally, in the methods section, I detail the specific steps I took to gather my data via interviews, ethnography, and extensive analysis of different texts.

## Epistemologies

### *A Whole Way of Life*

First, Marxism and Marxist feminism have played a vital role in my investigation. This is fairly obvious in my preoccupation with men's rights discourses around labor, employment, and socio-economic anxiety. However, the influence of these fields goes beyond mere subject matter and informs my understanding of gender, economy, and the relations between them. In particular, I see significant overlap in Marx and Engels' notion of a "mode of life" (1846/1978, p. 150), Raymond Williams' "whole way of life" (1958/2002, p. 93) and "whole social process" (1977, p. 80), and Marxist feminists' social reproduction theory (Bhattacharya, 2017; Bryson, 2004; Ferguson, 1999 & n.d.). Despite charges of economic reductionism and vulgar materialism, these Marxist and Marxist feminist frameworks conceptualize life as a *totality*. In effect, there are no divisions between economy/materiality and culture/ideology, and capitalism is more than simply a system of economic production. For convenience or clarity's sake, we must sometimes talk about these areas as analytically distinct; however, we must also remain cognizant that our "lived experience" of the world is not one of neat analytical categories. The implication is that gender (along with race, class, nationality, sexuality, ability, religion, etc.) is not a stand-alone object for inquiry or a separable sphere of human experience; rather, gender *produces* and *is produced by* capitalism. In other words, while gender-based oppression and exploitation existed before the advent of capitalism, we cannot understand contemporary misogyny (or, for that matter, racism, classism, xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia, etc.) without locating it in the context of capitalism and analyzing the specific ways in which misogyny is both produced by and produces

our whole way of life.<sup>8</sup> Although I focus on gender in relation to rights and labor discourses in this dissertation, I try to signal the ways in which class, race/ethnicity, and other aspects of our lives are also implicated in these discourses. At the same time, I recognize that a dissertation simply cannot capture the totality of human experience suggested by these theoretical frameworks. By necessity, I must choose to focus on specific discourses, manifestations, and expressions of gendered anxiety in the men's rights movement.

That said, dialectical reasoning is another important means for Marxists and Marxist feminists to articulate the monism of our life-world. Bertell Ollman explains that the term "dialectics" is often misconstrued: it is not a formula or a determining force; it "explains nothing, proves nothing, predicts nothing, and causes nothing to happen" (2003, p. 12). Rather, dialectical analysis is a "way of thinking that brings into focus the full range of changes and interactions that occur in the world" (ibid.). Dialectical materialism (also known as historical materialism) is thus a method that tries to account for the complexity of our "whole way of life" (ibid., p. 11). As mentioned above, my theoretical framework posits that the "categories" of economy, ideology, class, race, gender, and so on are not really separable things. Dialectical materialism, then, is the method for investigating how they are inseparable; instead of things, we look at our objects of inquiry as dynamic *processes* and *relations* that are always undergoing change, whether subtle or extreme (p. 13). As Ollman explains, the dialectical project is not looking

for why something starts to change (as if it were not already changing) but for the various forms this change assumes and why it may *appear* to have stopped. Likewise, it is never for how a relation gets established (as if there were no relation there before), but again for the different forms it takes and why aspects of an already existing relation may *appear* to be independent. (p. 14)

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<sup>8</sup> Although they may not explicitly identify as "Marxist feminists," this is also likely why authors like Banet-Weiser, Ging, and McRobbie have paid so much attention to the ways in which popular and post-feminisms are deeply embedded in and produce the logics of neoliberal capitalism.

Thus, as I discuss further below, I am often less concerned with how to define the men's rights movement as a thing that was "established" and more interested in the forms it takes and the changes it has undergone over time. By taking a historical approach to the men's rights movement and tracking adherents' leveraging of gender-labor-rights anxieties over time, I demonstrate that men's rights discourses both persist (there are consistent themes and talking points that continue to circulate throughout the movement's history) *and* that new discourses emerge in relation to the socio-political milieu in which men's rights activists are writing.

Second, I would be remiss not to acknowledge that at least some of my explanation above dovetails with the work of intersectional feminists. While Marxism, Marxist feminism, and intersectionality are not synonymous, there are clear overlaps in their theoretical tenets and activist commitments (Bohrer, 2019). Akin to Marxism and Marxist feminism, intersectionality is often accused of being reductionist in its approach to "identity" — i.e. that it reifies and stabilizes identity categories into separable, fixed axes of oppression or experience (Bohrer, 2019; King, 2015). However, intersectionality's project is similar to Marxism and Marxist feminism. It too addresses our whole way of life by focusing on the ways in which "various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other" (Steinmetz, 2020, n.p.). Again, for convenience's sake, we may talk about the identity "categories" listed above (gender, race, class, etc.) as separable objects, but intersectionality reminds us that they are inextricable from one another and interact with each other to shape how inequality and oppression affect people in different ways.

Furthermore, as Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw clarifies, people often mistakenly think of intersectionality as "multiple identities" (2016, n.p.). But, for Crenshaw and other intersectional

feminists, “intersectionality is not primarily about identity; it’s about how structures make certain identities the consequence of and the vehicle for vulnerability so . . . you gotta look at the context” (ibid.). To me, then, intersectionality can be read and used in dialectical ways: it is concerned with processes, relations, and interactions as opposed to neat hierarchies or classifications. Moreover, I have found the work of Crenshaw and Dean Spade particularly useful for thinking about the possibilities and limitations of legal rights frameworks for addressing inequalities (see Crenshaw, 1991 & 2011; Spade, 2009, 2011 & 2013) — something that has become increasingly important in my research as I discovered that men’s rights discourses around gender and the economy are inseparable from their discourses around rights.

Nonetheless, I also need to acknowledge ongoing debates about who intersectionality is for and how it is often leveraged in public and academic spaces. Cameron Glover (2017), for instance, argues that intersectionality is “not for white women” because when intersectionality is “used universally to speak for everyone’s experiences,” it erases the specific oppressions faced by Black women and co-opts a community-specific term (n.p.). Attentive to Glover’s critique, my own experience is that intersectionality has become a shibboleth that often allows white, middle-class women in the academy to preemptively “atone” for their race and class status without fundamentally challenging the structures that produce privilege in the first place. I am not the only scholar to note this. Discussing the mainstreaming of “intersectionality” in public discourse, Ian Seerung (2019) argues that evoking intersectionality affords cultural and symbolic capital to white bourgeois feminists, allowing them to perform allyship and proclaim intersectionality as an identity (pp. 50 - 51) without having to do the “messy” work of “building coalitions . . . of solidarity with those most oppressed in our society” (p. 53). Similarly, Jamie Utt (2017) contends that we (mostly white feminists in academic spaces) often treat intersectionality



as “simply a way to understand our differences” instead of a theory of oppression (n.p.). For the purposes of this dissertation, I am not going to unpack debates about who can and cannot use intersectional theory in detail here. But it is worth acknowledging that my understanding of intersectionality, akin to the Marxist and Marxist feminist theories I employ, is not about applying it universally to further reify identity categories or simply acknowledge difference. Rather, as one of many epistemologies that informs my work, I see intersectionality as another expression of a whole way of life, an all-encompassing “context,” in which some people face oppression, vulnerability, exploitation, and discrimination in ways that are often invisible to us.

Finally, the field of masculinity studies and the scholarship of Raewyn Connell, in particular, has also shaped my understanding of gender and economy as a whole way of life. Connell is often revered as one of the founding figures of masculinity studies, and her conceptualization of “hegemonic masculinity” is central to the field. Put simply, hegemonic masculinity is “the pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allow[s] men’s dominance over women to continue” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832). At the same time that it legitimizes the domination of women, hegemonic masculinity subordinates other forms of masculinity (e.g. gay men, masculine women). Hegemonic masculinity is a useful theory for thinking about the ways in which men’s rights activists’ claim victimhood at the hands of women/feminists in order to reassert the primacy of men — specifically, a heteronormative concept of what it means to be a man in western societies.

Nonetheless, I find that academic debates around hegemonic masculinity often miss the forest for the trees. Most scholars who critique or expand on Connell’s work focus on how well certain examples fit (or don’t fit) into the scheme of hegemonic masculinity. The issue here is

that they gloss over or elide the dialectical/Marxist influences underlying Connell's work — i.e. her use of Gramsci's concept of hegemony and a broader tendency to look for relations and processes over objects and categories. In fact, in her earlier work, Connell herself distinguishes between two types of theory: categorical and generative. She argues that most sociological investigations of class fall into the categorical approach, where the “basic move is to find a systematic way of sorting people” and then stratify life into these categories, hierarchies, or grids (1977, p. 4).<sup>9</sup> Connell, however, points to Marx as an example of generative theory: “the stress here is on the processes producing social groupings, rather than the categories they produce; and on the activity of people, not merely their location in social space” (p. 5). Her approach thus resonates with the Marxist, Marxist feminist, dialectical materialist, and intersectional frameworks outlined above. Seeing Connell's conceptualization of hegemonic masculinities through this lens bolsters my theoretical commitment to approaching gender (and class, race, etc.) as parts of a larger process, a whole way of life, where the activity of people both produces and is produced by this context. If men's rights activists are trying to enforce or achieve some kind of normative hegemonic masculinity, it is certainly not a fixed masculinity and it is not monolithic or uniform across the movement. In other words, their definitions of masculinity are often fluid, contradictory, and relational.

Given my epistemological commitments, I am not interested in applying one specific theoretical framework (feminist or otherwise) to my data. Nor am I particularly concerned with how to define the men's rights movement in strict categorical terms — i.e. who belongs and who doesn't, or where the movement begins and ends. Other scholars have produced valuable

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<sup>9</sup> For instance, looking at income and stratifying people into working-class, middle-class, and upper-class. Or, as Connell makes clear, some self-identified Marxists even fall into categorical thinking when they stratify people into proletariat and bourgeoisie “along these rigid lines” (1977, p. 4).

histories, schemas, and taxonomies of the men’s rights movement and manosphere<sup>10</sup> in this way (see Clatterbaugh, 2000; Ging, 2019a; Messner, 1997; Rothermel, Kelly, & Jasser, 2022).

Furthermore, it is certainly useful to have the language to distinguish between men’s rights activists, pick-up artists, incels, Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW), Red Pillers, and others. To that end, I include a glossary of men’s rights terminology in Appendix A. But adding to this categorical work is not *my* project. Rather, I am interested in how this amorphous configuration we call the “men’s rights movement” fits into larger social practices and anxieties around gender and class, and how it mediates these practices and anxieties through its discourses.

### *Groupuscularity*

My definition of the men’s rights movement, then, is a catchall for a diverse range of groups and individuals who believe that the dignity and rights of men and boys are diminished, threatened, or non-existent (de Coning, 2020). Furthermore, men’s rights discourses often identify feminists in particular (and sometimes women in general) as the cause of their oppression, and the emergence and development of the men’s rights movement is, historically speaking, inextricably linked to the emergence and development of feminism (something I discuss further in Chapter 2). That said, my interviews with men’s rights activists revealed the ways in which anti-feminism was not necessarily the main impetus for them to enter into the movement, although anti-feminism is certainly a core discourse within the movement. Alex, for instance, stumbled across the movement while watching videos about atheism because YouTube’s recommendation algorithm then directed him to videos by Karen Straughan, a prominent woman men’s rights

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<sup>10</sup> See the Glossary of Key Terms in Appendix A for a more detailed description of the “manosphere.”

activist (who I saw at the International Conference on Men's Issues in 2019). Similarly, Daniel learned about the movement when a post about custody issues made it to Reddit's front page, and Adam found a copy of Paul Nathanson and Katherine Young's *Spreading Misandry* (2001) in a bookstore. Jordan claims he "thought [he] was the only person in the universe who talked about men's issues" until other Twitter users accused him of being a men's rights activist; from there he sought information about the label that was being applied to him, found the pro-men's rights documentary *The Red Pill* (2016), and began identifying with the movement. These men were not trying to find anti-feminist or men's rights content. Instead, men's rights media, which they found accidentally, articulated thoughts and feelings that had been lingering in their minds but they could not quite express, which then encouraged them to investigate the movement further.

Examples like these complicate an overly-simple narrative about aggrieved men (and women) seeking out anti-feminist or misogynist communities and ask us to consider the ways in which other entry-points and motivations may provide an opportunity for anti-feminist discourses to spread. Thus, I argue that we can understand the movement as both about misogyny and anti-feminism *and* about "something else" *at the same time*. In the case of my dissertation, the "something else" I explore is the gender-labor-rights anxieties that are often used to reproduce anti-feminist and misogynist sentiments within the movement. In this way, I see both anti-feminism and the gender-labor-rights nexus as two of many possible ineliminable components (Griffin, 2003, p. 35) at the heart of this movement.

So what do I mean by ineliminable components? Despite the divergent (and sometimes conflicting) goals and grievances of the different sub-communities within the men's rights movement, it is still appropriate to consider them under this umbrella term. Drawing on Roger

Griffin's (2003) theorization of post-war far-right movements, I argue that the men's rights movement is characterized by "groupuscularity" (p. 28). In other words, it has a rhizomatic structure where a "a cluster of 'ineliminable' components" form the core concerns of the movement, with additional concerns that may be peripheral or contingent (p. 35). This groupuscular form of social organization differs from the structure and dynamics of traditional mass movements and party politics. Groupuscules, as Griffins calls them, are leaderless, non-hierarchical, polycentric, constantly changing, and consist of a "web of loose linkages" (p. 32). The many subcommunities that make up the broader men's rights movement can thus be seen as "autonomous but interconnected nodal points of organization, performance, production and distribution" (p. 32).<sup>11</sup> By conducting my analysis of men's rights media across multiple decades, I conclude that "reacting to or rejecting feminism" is an ineliminable component because it is a consistent theme throughout the history of the movement. At the same time, however, the gender-labor-rights nexus is an equally important ineliminable component that also persists within the men's rights movement. Furthermore, as I demonstrate in my analysis chapters, these two discourses often work together to reinforce each other.

Scholars looking for clear delineations of where a social movement begins and ends will likely be frustrated by the "ill-defined boundaries" (p. 45) of groupuscular movements. However, Griffin's approach is aligned with the kinds of generative theory I outline above. Furthermore, the rhizomatic structure of groupuscular movements explains their longevity and invulnerability to attempts to dismantle them. As I demonstrate in the next chapter, the history of the men's

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<sup>11</sup> James and Liz echoed this sentiment in their respective interviews. James does not think there is a men's rights movement per se, but rather "a loose alliance of independent groups who are networked through social media, and locationally aligned." When asked to define the men's rights movement, Liz simply described it as "disorganized." She then clarified that it's "just people going online to forums, to Youtube videos, Reddit, and venting their grievances, talking about these issues, but not really having a solid plan to do anything about it. They don't really agree with each other. There's not, like, a unified theory behind it."

rights movement follows a groupuscular trajectory, where gender-labor-rights anxieties have underpinned the movement from its very beginning and persist in the movement today, at the same time that they adapt to changing cultural, political, and economic contexts. This cluster of anxieties is ineliminable from the men's rights movement as a whole, and it is therefore necessary to understand how these anxieties are mediated in order to understand the movement.

### *Collective Action vs. Connective Action*

Understanding the men's rights movement as groupuscular, then, complicates a neat schema of its concerns, demands, entry-points, and even how individuals may identify themselves as part of the movement. W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg's concept of connective action (2012, 2013) is another theoretical framework that helps to account for this variability. They identify three broad patterns of social movement organization: 1) organizationally-brokered collective action that makes use of strong coalitions and a collective framing of issues; 2) organizationally-enabled connective action, where the movement has more loosely-tied coalitions and a personalized framing; and 3) crowd-enabled connective action, where digital platforms become the most visible site for organization through the personalization of politics (2013, pp. 11 - 13). Collective action employs hierarchical institutions and requires membership in a group (for instance, a union) and thus harnesses the power of individuals by coordinating them in service of a common goal (p. 31). Connective action, by contrast, capitalizes on "the organizational processes of social media," where the social movement "does not require strong organizational control or the symbolic construction of a united 'we'" (p. 28). Connective action thus provides a "personal path to engagement" (p. 23), where "taking action or contributing to a

common good becomes an act of personal expression and recognition or self-validation achieved by sharing ideas and actions in trusted relationships” (p. 36). Furthermore, the affordances of digital media mean that “these more personalized, digitally mediated collective action formations have frequently been larger; have scaled up more quickly; and have been flexible in tracking moving political targets and bridging different issues” (2012, p. 742).

The contemporary men’s rights movement reflects the logic of connective action in many ways. As mentioned above, my interviewees found multiple points of entry into the movement and often hold very personalized notions of what “men’s rights” entail. Even the collective goal of the men’s rights movement isn’t clearly defined, with some proponents calling for legal reform and others eschewing the legal system entirely. While the ineliminable component I discuss (gender-labor-rights anxieties) is present throughout the movement, the groupuscularity of men’s rights activism facilitates a connective logic where individuals can discover, “plug in,” and express their commitment to the movement in different ways, while also distancing themselves from those aspects of the movement that don’t appeal to them. Daniel, for instance, claimed to identify with the movement but did not “feel” like a “men’s rights activist” because he didn’t want to be associated with the negativity and vitriol attached to that moniker. The main issues that drew him to the movement are paternity fraud and domestic abuse, both of which he claimed to have experienced first-hand. Theo made similar comments about being more invested in fathers’ rights activism than men’s rights, per se, and was also drawn to this activism because of his personal experiences of divorce and custody proceedings. By contrast, Ellen and Robert both identified as primarily intactivists (i.e. anti-circumcision activists), with Ellen going so far as to say that she would “retire” as a men’s rights activist if male circumcision were criminalized

in Australia where she lives. These are just two examples of the “personal path[s] to engagement” offered by a groupuscular, connective movement.

Nevertheless, the extent to which this connective logic is solely a feature of the digitally networked movement we see today is still open to debate. To their credit, Bennett and Segerberg acknowledge that the “neatly bound packages of traits” outlined in their schema are “unlikely to occur in pristine forms in society;” instead, the theory of connective action enables us to “theorize about, measure, and parse the empirical patterns, differences, tensions, and changes in complex protest spaces” (2013, p. 13). As I will demonstrate in this dissertation, the move from print to digital media in the 1990s and early 2000s certainly fostered connective logics in the men’s rights movement, drawing a broad base of support and engagement and “bridging different issues” among people who might otherwise not identify as men’s rights activists. At the same time, however, I do not want to promote an ahistorical technological determinism here. As I will also demonstrate in Chapter 2, men’s rights activists had already established networks and provided personalized modes of engagement via print media, which may have been amplified or bolstered by the move to digital platforms. Again, my goal here is not to delineate a clear shift from “collective” to “connective” logics in the men’s rights movement. Rather, I conceive of this overlap between print and digital media, and the affordances or logics thereof, as the coexistence of residual and emergent practices (Williams, 1977).

## **Methodology**

The dialectical thinking that informs my research is also evident in my methodology. I make use of qualitative methods, which are underpinned by the assumptions of qualitative methodologies. Briefly, we can understand qualitative methodologies as inductive (moving from specific



observations to more general conclusions), emergent and dynamic (methods and instruments may have to adapt as research/fieldwork progresses), and concerned with the social worlds and constructed meanings of research participants, where participants are observed in their “natural settings” as much as possible (Meyen, 2017; Scholl, 2008). Furthermore, qualitative methodologies often use multiple methods or instruments to make sense of and triangulate research findings (ibid.).

These philosophical assumptions are clear in my research practice. When I began this research project roughly six years ago, I knew I wanted to learn more about how the men’s rights movement conceptualized the notion of rights. Like many lay people encountering the movement for the first time, I assumed that men already had rights — so what could these activists possibly be campaigning for? Prior to the PhD program, my preliminary research on men’s rights activists’ responses to *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) taught me that their discourses were more complicated and nuanced than simply abhorring the film due to its supposedly feminist content (de Coning, 2016). But I had little idea of how or why they conceived of men’s *rights*, specifically, as in need of activism. Approaching the topic inductively and dynamically, I aimed to keep an open yet critical mind while investigating this question of “rights” within the movement.

During the early phases of my research in 2016, then, I attended a local screening of *The Red Pill* (2016) where I met some local men’s rights activists in Denver. I also attended a meeting of the Rocky Mountain Men’s Rights Advocates (RMMRA),<sup>12</sup> with their permission, to simply get a sense of what issues were being discussed in the group. I later conducted two oral history interviews: one with someone who had once been a men’s rights activist but later

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<sup>12</sup> This was a short-lived men’s rights group operating between 2016 to 2019 in the Denver-metro area.

repudiated the movement (Adam, 2016), and another with a self-identified men's rights activist (Alex, 2017). My encounters with these participants brought my attention to the interconnected discourses around gender, labor, and rights. From there, I developed a multi-method approach to gather data and analyze these discourses: 1) extensive analysis of print archives, digital archives, and a contemporary men's rights website; 2) interviewing self-identified men's rights activists; and 3) conducting ethnographic fieldwork at the International Conference on Men's Issues in 2019. Through this iterative process, I am confident that my findings are trustworthy and reliable, and that I have effectively capitalized on the strengths of qualitative methodologies to produce valuable knowledge about this understudied movement.

My open-ended inquiry and direct engagement with men's rights communities also led me to develop my own methodological framework called "critical empathy" (de Coning, 2021). Faced with a tumultuous mix of emotions during my interviews and ethnographic fieldwork, I needed to address the ethical and affective ambiguities of my research, where I oscillated among feeling empathy for my participants, feeling "dirty" and complicit (Jauregui, 2013) for having said empathy, and feeling critical of their discourses at the same time. In short, critical empathy is "a methodological framework to account for the difficult and sometimes problematic emotional dimensions of research on 'unsavory' populations" (de Coning, 2021, p. 2). It entails investigating our emotional responses as researchers, not to overcome them, but rather to make them apparent in the production of scholarly knowledge (p. 14). Critical empathy is, by definition, unresolvable. It is another expression of the dialectical epistemologies that inform my approach to scholarship, where I am less concerned with categories or taxonomies and more interested in the generative potential of ambiguities, amorphousness, and relational thinking. I

have tried to make these tensions explicit throughout my discussion of men's rights activists and their discourses in this dissertation.

## **Methods**

The bulk of my examination focuses on 1) historicizing the men's rights movement and its discourses prior to 1960, and 2) a more focused qualitative discourse analysis of the gender-labor-rights nexus in the men's rights movement circa 1990 to today. My reasoning here is that the majority of men's rights scholarship focuses on its (apparent) emergence alongside second-wave feminism in the 1960s, its pre-digital manifestations from roughly 1970 through 1990, or its contemporary digital incarnations from about 2010 to present. However, as I demonstrate in the next chapter, the men's rights movement has existed in some form since at least the mid-1800s in the United States. Furthermore, the interstitial period where men's rights activists transitioned from print to digital media (circa 1990 to the early 2000s) has not yet been studied. By "filling in the gaps" here, I argue that gender-labor-rights anxieties are central to the movement, from its nascent beginnings to today. Moreover, I illustrate how these discourses persist across time and media, even as they adapt to changing socio-political contexts.

### ***Archival Research and Discourse Analysis***

In Chapter 2, then, I provide an overview of the unstudied early history of the men's rights movement. To do so, I use both digital and print archives. First, I collected newspaper articles using the term "men's rights" (looking specifically for men's rights as gendered, not simply

“men” as a placeholder for “everyone”) from the Nineteenth-Century U.S. Newspapers archive and the International Herald Tribune 1887 - 2013 archive, both accessed via the GALE Primary Sources Database. This resulted in a data set of 35 articles from 1852 to 1930. I supplemented this data set with an additional 8 articles, from 1928 to 1930, found via the University of Colorado Boulder Norlin Library website. I also used the HathiTrust Digital Library to access one of the first editorials on men’s rights in 1856 (which I initially discovered by reading the historiography of Peter Wright, a notable men’s rights activist whose work appears elsewhere in this dissertation). This collection of old newspaper articles allows me to analyze the ways in which nascent men’s rights activism in the pre-war era, in the United States and later in Austria, has often drawn connections between men’s gender, legal rights, and financial prospects.

Furthermore, in Chapter 2, I continue to investigate the longevity of these discourses in men’s rights print media during the 1970s and 1980s. To collect this data, I spent two days at Michigan State University’s Changing Men archive, which houses an extensive collection of print materials from the broader men’s movement from roughly 1960 to 2000. Here I photographed thousands of pages of print materials, mostly from the United States and Canada. Unfortunately, due to the aims and scope of this dissertation, I cannot possibly discuss every publication I captured. Nonetheless, in Chapter 2, I analyze a collection of 31 newsletters from 1978 to 1981, produced by the Coalition of Free Men, which later became the National Coalition for Men (a U.S.-based non-profit that is still active today).

In Chapter 3, having established the historical development of the men’s rights movement and its gender-labor-rights discourses, I turn my attention to the movement’s transition to digital media. I retrieved the archived logs from a now-defunct men’s rights

newsgroup, alt.mensrights, from the Internet Archive's Usenet Historical Collection.<sup>13</sup> The initial "raw" data set contains hundreds of thousands of posts spanning September 1994 to February 2011. However, given my focus on the men's rights movement's transition from print to digital media, I collected clusters of 250 posts in two-year intervals between 1994 to 2002, resulting in a unique data set of 1250 posts for analysis (i.e. 250 posts from 1994, 250 posts from 1996, and so on). Nancy K. Baym (2006) cautions qualitative researchers working with large digital data sets not to rely on simple keyword searches, which can often confirm our scholarly hunches but elide the data's broader context. While the affordance of searchability (boyd, 2011, p. 48) is a temptation for large digital data sets, my method of collecting posts in sizable clusters and then investigating existing discursive trends enhances the rigor and validity of my analysis. Again, I find consistent evidence that men's rights activists employ discourses that frame men's rights as threatened in conjunction with their economic opportunities as gendered subjects.

Finally, in Chapter 4, I tie the past to the present by looking at how these same discourses are manifested in the men's rights movement today. Here I draw on a data set of 100 articles, from July 2021 to October 15 2020, collected from *A Voice for Men* (avoiceformen.com), a popular men's rights website run by Paul Elam.<sup>14</sup> Altogether, then, this dissertation draws on an enormous archive of print and digital materials, spanning 1852 to the present day, to make a case for the longevity and malleability of men's rights discourses around gender, labor, and rights. I describe the data set in more detail in Chapter 4.

To discuss these different data sets, I employ a qualitative discourse analysis. Simply put, discourse refers to the ways in which people use language to both generate and reflect their identities, values, and social realities (Madroane, 2013; O'Malley, 2019). Discourse, then, can be

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<sup>13</sup> I discuss Usenet and the alt.mens-rights newsgroup in more detail in this chapter.

<sup>14</sup> I also discuss the data set and data collection methods in more detail in this chapter.

understood as a kind of social action of meaning-making happening within a context; discourse analysis is thus looking for the “patterns and commonalities of knowledge and structures” present in texts (Wodak & Krzyżanowski, 2008, p. 6). I use discourse analysis to highlight the ways in which specific discourses or “ways of talking” (Cregan, 2012) about gender, rights, and labor generate and reflect the “social realities” of men’s rights activists during the historical periods I investigate. However, my concern here is not to take their grievances and anxieties at face value, but rather to critically interrogate how the expression of these discourses fits into the larger context of capitalism and provides men’s rights activists with an explanatory framework that often elides any critical discussion of gender relations under capitalism.

It is worth acknowledging here that discourse analysis, as a method, is not typically associated with Marxist work. For instance, arguing that neoliberalism is more than a set of *economic* policies, Wendy Brown suggests that a Marxist framework focuses on the “exploitation of labor” and “extraction of wealth” but tells us “nothing” about “the larger order of reason” behind neoliberalism or “what kind of subject formation, what kind of making of the human being neoliberalism generates” (Denvir, 2020, 19:16 - 20:48). For Brown, then, a Foucauldian approach is necessary to understand the cultural/ideological dimensions of neoliberalism, as well as its power dynamics. While I agree with many of the observations Brown makes during this interview, I disagree with her methodological claim here. Marx and Engels explicitly address the importance of human communication and cooperation<sup>15</sup> in *The German Ideology* (1846/1978) and posit that human communication is not a mere reflection of

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<sup>15</sup> With regard to Marx and Engels’ use of the term cooperation, Kevan Feshami (2018) reminds us that the “definition of cooperation does not mean only to work together, but also to comply, as in ‘to cooperate with the police’” and thus “we can understand cooperation to include coercion” (p. 46). According to Feshami, then, we may also consider “all of the ways in which people are compelled to produce, from cultural valorisations of ‘hard work’ and the ‘individual’ which encourage people to participate in wage labour to the brutalities of slavery and imperialism” (p. 46).

the economic, but a “productive force” that shapes our whole way of life (p. 157). Their conceptualization of communication thus aligns with the definitions of discourse above — i.e. as something that both reflects and generates social reality. Furthermore, Marxist scholars like E.P. Thompson and Raymond Williams clearly demonstrate the ways in which “economics” and “discourse” are not separable spheres of activity, but always co-constitutive and dialectical.<sup>16</sup> For these reasons, I see discourse analysis as a method that is wholly in line with historical materialism. My investigation of the men’s rights movement is thus not a choice between an economically-informed methodology and a discursive/cultural one, but an attempt to see the relations between economy and discourse.

### *Interviews and Ethnography*

While discourse analysis is my primary method of investigation, I also draw on interviews and ethnography to supplement my argument. Qualitative interviews and ethnography can give us a sense of people’s “everyday lived world[s]” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 28) through “deep engagement” and “close observation” of participants’ lives (Sinanan & McDonald, 2018, p.179). These methods afford a glimpse into participants’ “ways of life,” or at least how they understand and construct the stories of their lives during interactions with the researcher (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002; Potter & Hepburn, 2012). Drawing on these additional methods has informed my analysis in important ways: namely, thinking about research as an iterative and generative process, and using these different types of data to triangulate and validate the discourses I identify.

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<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, Thompson’s “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism” (1967) and Williams’ “Culture is Ordinary” (1958/2002).

As mentioned above, my preliminary research and interactions with men's rights activists led to my interest in gender-labor-rights anxieties within the movement. After obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval in 2018, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 11 self-identified men's rights activists between October 2018 and February 2020. All interviews but one were conducted remotely, via Skype, Google Hangouts, or telephone. The exception was my interview with Matt, which was conducted in-person, as he preferred face-to-face conversation and was able to meet with me. I spoke to most interviewees only once; however, I had the opportunity to interview Alex three times (an initial oral history interview and two semi-structured interviews), Lisa twice, and Adam (an ex-men's-rights-activist-turned-feminist) twice. Interviews ranged in length from 30 minutes to 2 hours 15 minutes, with an average length of 70 minutes per interview. All interviews were recorded (audio only) and then transcribed. I use pseudonyms and omit identifying information throughout this dissertation to protect my interviewees' anonymity. I include relevant-but-anonymized information about my interviewees in Appendix B.

My IRB protocol also covered my ethnographic fieldwork at the International Conference on Men's Issues in 2019. Here I attended talks from 9am to 6pm over three days, from Friday August 16 until Sunday August 18. My ethical protocol did not allow me to record or take notes on private conversations held between conference attendees. However, I took extensive notes on each talk I attended, the atmosphere and composition of the conference rooms, and general non-identifying notes regarding my interactions with men's rights activists or audience reactions. Most useful was the "emotional data" I gleaned from these interviews and ethnography. As white nationalism researcher Kathleen Blee explains, "emotions evoked in the researcher in the process of collecting qualitative data can themselves be sources of useful data" (1998, p. 382). In



particular, the critical empathy framework I developed in response to my ethnographic experiences (discussed above) helps me parse out some of the contradictions at play in the men's rights discourses I analyze. I do not include a separate chapter dedicated to analyzing my interviews and ethnography; rather, they serve as supplementary data that allow me to further triangulate and contextualize the print and digital texts I investigate. I thus weave anecdotes and quotations from my interviews and ethnography throughout the remaining chapters of this dissertation.

## CHAPTER 2

### A Brief History of the Men's Rights Movement

The object which has called this great assemblage together is one which not only concerns mankind in general, but Americans in particular. This is emphatically a land of liberty — liberty which, achieved by the exertions of our forefathers, has commanded the respect of tyrannical governments of the Old World, and resisted all unhallowed attempts to subvert it. This liberty, gentlemen, is threatened with destruction by the establishment, within the very bounds of this republic, of a despotism that has no parallel in ancient or modern history.

— H.P. Husband, 1851

What is the insidious force that threatens the very bedrock of American life, according to this nineteenth-century author? If the above quotation seems bombastic to you, it should. The passage is from a satirical article published in *Godey's Magazine and Lady's Book* in April 1852. The report, attributed only to “Chericot,” details the events of a fictitious<sup>17</sup> men's rights convention held at Independence Hall in Philadelphia just a few months prior. Chericot tells us that this convention was organized hastily after the “Female Convention at Massachusetts,” which “resulted in the collection of an enthusiastic crowd of gentlemen of all grades, trades, and politics, one common danger uniting them, in the effort to repel the proposed feminine aggression of their rights” (qtd. in Shehan, 2018, p. 67). The men in attendance are presented as excitable, emotional, even *hysterical*, as they listen to various speakers decry the state of men. The above-quoted “Mr H.P. Husband,”<sup>18</sup> president of the convention, continues his address to the crowd:

there is a conspiracy afoot in the very midst of us, which, should it succeed in its aspiring aims, will annihilate us as men, and convert us into mere household appendages to that rebellious sex who, after having for years shown a disposition to encroach on *some* of our rights and priveleges, now boldly assert a claim to *all*.

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<sup>17</sup> I could not find evidence of a men's rights convention held in Philadelphia in 1851.

<sup>18</sup> Constance L. Shehan (2018) suggests that the “H.P.” here stands for “henpecked” (p. 67).

Patience, gentlemen, is no longer a virtue; stern determination and resolute action alone can put down this ambitious usurpation and re-establish our authority on its legitimate basis. (p. 68)

The audience's "groans and sobs" are heard throughout the building, Chericot reports, and Mr Husband becomes "so overpowered by his emotions" that he must compose himself at points throughout his oration (p. 68). Mr Wumenheyter, the convention chairman, then takes the floor to propose the following resolutions: that men insist on "those rights so boldly and outrageously assailed by that weaker portion of humanity," that this "evil" is the result of women with their hands in men's pockets, and that failure to challenge these "treacherous" women will result in the "[u]niversal decapitation" of men and an "Amazonian" state (p. 70). The fictional report ends with the attendees' wives interrupting the convention to call their husbands home; the men comply meekly, with Mrs Bluster carrying her spouse, who has fainted, in her arms.

While clearly a satire, the piece piques my interest for a few reasons. Firstly, it indicates that opposition to women's rights movements was prominent enough to warrant parody in the mid-nineteenth century. While most scholarship locates the genesis of the men's rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s, alongside second-wave feminism, I have found that the term "men's rights" has been used in this specifically gendered and anti-feminist way (i.e. not simply "men" as a universal placeholder for "people") since at least the mid-1800s. This lampoon is one example of that usage and it reveals prevalent discourses around women's liberation efforts in the U.S. at the time.

Secondly, much of the discourse is strangely similar to men's rights discourses today: the notion that women's increasing rights encroach on men's privileges, that women are greedy and treacherous, that feminism seeks to annihilate men by capturing the state, and that men must take swift action to defend their rights. These are the same themes I have seen, over and over again,

across the decades of print and digital materials I have collected and in the interviews and ethnography I have conducted. Although these discourses manifest in different ways according to the norms, events, and policies of the time, there is still a discursive continuity that connects the present to the past.

Thirdly, while the men's emotional responses are depicted as hysterical and over-the-top here, my own experience of attending the International Conference on Men's Rights in 2019 mimics the fictitious event in some ways. The outpouring of emotion I witnessed during my ethnographic trip is unforgettable: the laughter, the tears, the voices quavering with emotion, but also the anxiety, the anger, and the resolve to overthrow the "feminist tyranny" that has overrun the government and is destroying the family. If men's rights discourses have persisted for almost two-hundred years, the affective dimensions of this movement have clearly persisted, too.

Lastly, the piece serves as a reminder that for as long as women have sought equal rights with men, they have also faced opposition. Although it may not have been a coherent social movement in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, the ideas underpinning the men's rights movement today have clearly existed in some form since the rise of women's rights movements in the west. Thus, the story of the men's rights movement is inextricably connected to that of feminism.

This relationship between feminism and men's rights is, however, not merely historical. Although I focus on the history of the men's rights movement (here and in Chapter 3), the past is all the more relevant because of its connection to the present. For instance, many of the men's rights activists I interviewed noted the relationship between their movement and feminism, although they framed the relationship in different ways. Some of these self-identified men's rights activists see their movement as a direct opposition to feminism. When asked to define the

men's rights movement, Jordan (a twenty-something African American man) couldn't offer a description of the movement itself and instead focused on his opposition to feminism, which he defined as "a privileged white girl movement" that had essentially ridden the coattails of the Civil Rights Movement and co-opted affirmative action in the 1960s. For Jordan, feminists are "charlatans" who try to "rewrite history" by framing women (and sometimes men) as victims of patriarchy. Men's rights activists, in turn, are "asking for men's issues [to] be added to the platform," although they also "kick feminists in the ass with facts" to oppose feminist lies. Thus, in his view, by simply raising the issues faced by men (which feminism purportedly ignores or denies), men's rights activists are automatically opposed to feminism.

However, some of my interviewees tempered their framing of the antagonism between men's rights and feminism. College-student Lisa, for instance, claimed that the men's rights movement "as a whole is anti-feminist." However, she specified that she was talking about "the mainstream version of feminists" and "white liberal feminists" who, she argued, oppose shared custody. Daniel (a father, divorcé, and husband) differentiated the "really extreme viewpoints of feminism" from the majority of feminists who are "realistic" and want to see issues like workplace harassment and sexual assault "get fixed." He contended that the men's rights movement is a necessary counter to some of the "unintended consequences" of feminist legislation that has affected men's lives. Finally, stay-at-home-husband Matt likened the men's rights movement to "a kind of feminism . . . the protestant reformation of feminism," suggesting that the men's rights movement is a continuation or extension of feminism itself. The different viewpoints expressed by my interviewees reveal the (perhaps ironic) centrality of feminism to the men's rights movement. Furthermore, they indicate that, while individual men's rights

activists may not see themselves as explicitly anti-feminist, the movement as a whole revolves around the notion that feminism has denied men their rights.

The tension between individual men's rights activists' beliefs and the tenets of the broader movement (itself a complex and manifold phenomenon) makes it difficult to generalize about either the history or present of the movement. On the one hand, it is flippant to ignore the ways in which men's rights present a backlash to feminism and women's rights. On the other hand, however, some feminists critique the use of backlash as a framework for thinking about the men's rights movement. In particular, they suggest that backlash narratives can oversimplify power struggles among social groups, reinforce victim/perpetrator dichotomies that undermine women's agency, ignore the ways in which "backlash" is often a continuation of existing power structures, and obscure the diverse political and rhetorical strategies adopted by different "strands" or groups within the larger movement (Chunn, Boyd, & Lessard, 2007; Jordan, 2016; Newson, 1991). Furthermore, to posit feminism as the progenitor of the men's rights movement elides the fact that women's liberation efforts were a response to gendered inequalities in the first place.

In this chapter, then, I provide an overview of the men's rights movement by tracing its chronological development (often in relation to feminism) from the mid-1800s to the 1970s. By historicizing the movement in this way, I hope to illuminate the contours of something much bigger and more tenacious than current literature may present. While it certainly gained traction in the 1960s and 1970s, the underlying "structure of feeling" (Williams, 1977) of the men's rights movement existed long before second-wave feminism.

## Early Rumbblings: Men's Rights from 1850 - 1900

To date, almost no work has been done on the men's rights movement prior to the 1960s. In fact, one of the only "historians" committed to this early history is the self-published men's rights activist Peter Wright. Wright's *A Brief History of the Men's Rights Movement: From 1856 to the Present* (2017) is fairly useful as an edited collection of key texts that reflects the movement's development over time. Unsurprisingly, however, Wright claims that the lack of attention paid to early men's rights history is evidence of feminist censorship and that anti-feminist tendencies within the men's rights movement are necessary "pushback" against this suppression of men's issues (pp. 6 - 7). He also claims on his blog that the men's rights convention in the aforementioned satire appears to have taken place, and the purpose of the mockery was to "dissuade men's advocates from holding future conferences" (2016, para. 1), although he provides no evidence that the convention happened.

Putting aside the veracity of Wright's historical claims, I agree with him that no serious researcher would accept that the men's rights movement began in the 1970s (2017, p. 5) — as if it sprang, fully formed, like Pegasus from Medusa's head. Men's rights scholars must do the necessary historical and archival research to bring this early history to light, and I see this chapter as a step towards that project. Wright, however, uses this history to suggest that the men's rights movement would have developed *without* the emergence of feminism, and frames it as primarily concerned with issues facing men and boys, only responding to feminism as a necessary counter to the suppression of men's free speech (pp. 6 - 7). I am not convinced that this is the case. The "men's issues" raised in the following primary and secondary sources (e.g. divorce and alimony, women's rights to their own property, etc.) suggest a more dialectical

situation where gendered conceptions of rights cannot be siloed by sex. In other words, without women's rights movements challenging social norms and demanding legal reform, many of the issues raised in these texts would not warrant concern as specifically *gendered* problems for men. As I demonstrate below and throughout this dissertation, the notion that men lack rights *qua* men relies on an implicit or explicit corollary where women have excessive rights.

While evidence of a coherent social movement is scant, mid- to late-nineteenth-century American newspapers did report on growing concerns around "men's rights" in relation to women's liberation efforts. An article in *The National Intelligencer* in 1852, for instance, states that "if women want men's rights, we hope they will be accommodated, even to working on the roads, doing military duty, and voting" ("Woman's Rights," n.p.). The author argues that the differential "apportionment of rights and duties" is simply the outcome of natural differences between men and women, and that the desire for equal rights springs from the same "silly notion that actuates abolitionists and other social 'reformers'" (ibid.). Another short item from the *Atchison Daily Champion* in 1888 notes that women are "invading colleges, assuming the duties of public office, and gradually superseding men in clerical positions," and that it will soon be in order for some to "inquire after men's rights" ("Multiple News Items," n.p.). These news briefs demonstrate the ways in which early claims about "men's rights" were constructed in direct opposition to women's increasing legal rights, institutional access, and employment opportunities. However, there is a noteworthy contradiction between these two frames: if women want men's rights, they should be willing to do men's work, but if women do men's work, then they are depriving men of their rights. The obvious outcome of this position is that women can't be granted the same rights as men without depriving men of their rights.



Marriage is another realm where men’s rights are purportedly threatened by women’s rights. A letter from a 31-year-old bachelor in the *Daily Evening Bulletin* in 1871 indicates that he has chosen to remain unmarried because marital law “merely gives [him] a woman who can leave [him] whenever she pleases” and who is owed a dowry third of his property, which she has not earned through hard work. This, he argues, essentially “degrade[s] her into a concubine” (“Man’s Rights in Ohio,” n.p.).<sup>19</sup> However, while this bachelor eschews the institution of marriage because he sees wives as gaining unearned privileges and property, other men want stricter control of their wives’ property. An editorial in *Putnam’s Monthly Magazine of American Literature, Science and Art* in 1856 laments reforms to marital law — namely, wives’ rights to divorce, to control their own property, and “breach of promise” penalties<sup>20</sup> for failing to marry a woman once intention to do so has been established (“A Word for Men’s Rights,” 1856; de Coning, 2020). The matrimonial reforms, in particular, the author argues, make women independent while men are still legally and financially responsible for their wives.<sup>21</sup> Without the (economic) corrective mechanisms to preserve “domestic discipline” (“A Word for Men’s

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<sup>19</sup> It is worth noting here that this nineteenth-century bachelor’s discourse is uncannily similar to the MGTOW sub-community of the men’s rights movement today. MGTOW stands for “Men Going Their Own Way.” These men ostensibly “go their own way” by eschewing relationships with women. As Rothermel, Kelly, and Jasser explain, MGTOWs are “opposed to relationships with women in current society because they believe that women use and manipulate men, and trap them into relationships in order to access their money, status, or sperm” (2022, p. 127). This example is further evidence of my claim that men’s rights discourses existed prior to the movement’s groundswell in the 1960s. See the Glossary of Key Terms in Appendix A for more information about MGTOWs.

<sup>20</sup> Interestingly enough, the first breach of promise case in the United States, or rather colonial Virginia, was instituted against a woman. Only a few days after the death of her husband, Cecily Jordan was courted by Reverend Grivell Pooley, who apparently took her hand and recited marriage vows to her in her home. Although Jordan apparently did not reciprocate these vows, when she later became engaged to William Farrar, Pooley instituted the breach of promise suit against her. While it appears that Pooley dropped the case, new laws were created to prevent women from “contracting” themselves (i.e. getting engaged) to two different men at the same time. See William Broaddus Cridlin’s *A History of Colonial Virginia* (1923, pp. 107 - 109) for more.

<sup>21</sup> Two later news articles provide some counter to this claim. “Married Women’s Property” in the *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel* (1870) notes that new laws in England that allow women financial independence may bolster men’s rights, as they are no longer liable for women’s debt accrued before marriage. Furthermore, the article claims that women with separate property become liable for their husbands’ maintenance if the men become paupers. “Men’s Rights” in the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* (1880) reports on a case where the judge ruled in favor of a husband who refused to pay his wife’s debts to her tailor as he had already given her an allowance.

Rights,” 1856, p. 209), men are “deprived of the powers and the rights essential to their [duties’] fulfillment” (p. 210). Anxieties about marriage in these two examples are clearly connected to middle-class men’s financial standing. Moreover, another paradox is revealed here: women are greedy and lascivious, taking what men have earned, at the same time that women who are financially independent also deprive men of their rights and power.

I have already noted two key paradoxes here: 1) that women need to earn the same rights as men by doing men’s work although they are innately incapable of doing so, and 2) that women deprive men of their rights and income whether or not they work outside the home. These contradictions are striking for a few reasons. First, as I will demonstrate throughout this dissertation, these discourses are present in the men’s rights movement during the periods under analysis and still persist today. Second, secular rights discourses in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries relied on a “liberal conception of society and a belief in natural law, human reason, and universal order” (Clapham, 2007, p. 10). However, rights “were believed (by men) to be the exclusive property of those possessing the capacity to exercise rational choice” (ibid.), and thus the contestation for rights often centered upon the “natural” capacity for rationality. Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), for example, makes similar appeals to reason (i.e. that women are equally capable of rationality) to argue for the rights of women. Nonetheless, by framing women as naturally different or inferior to men, the news articles discussed here imply that women are not able to be fully rights-bearing subjects. Thus, giving women rights throws the natural gender order, as epitomized by the paternalistic matrimonial relationship, out of balance.

Lastly, these paradoxes are underpinned by socio-economic anxieties around gendered labor and marital/familial roles. As Kristin Hoganson (1998) contends, American masculinity

was already facing a “crisis” around the turn of the century when the depression of 1893 “exacerbated anxieties about manhood” as “unemployment resulting from the depression led to fears of male dependency” (p. 12). Furthermore, she argues that the “rise of big business” impacted nineteenth-century gender roles: both upper-class and middle-class men exhibited fears “that civilized comforts were undermining manly fiber,” and that “soft” work would make them less vigorous than their working-class counterparts (ibid.). This nexus of anxieties (that men were simultaneously losing their rights, financial status, and masculine virility) would continue into the next century.

### **The First Wave: Antifeminism in the 1920s**

While the above examples reflect the early discourses of the men’s rights movement, it was only in the 1920s that a semi-coherent social movement began to take shape under the banner of “men’s rights” in Austria. There is little evidence that a similar movement existed in the United States at the time, although this is certainly an area for future research. As Erica J. Ryan explains, women in the U.S. gained the right to vote in 1920, had increasing access to birth control and economic opportunities, and were grappling with the challenges of having both a home life and a career — a theme that would come to dominate the second-wave feminisms of the 1960s (2018, pp. 96 - 97). At the same time, however, organized feminist activism in the U.S. “began its long decline” in conjunction with the Great Depression towards the end of the 1920s (ibid.), and opposition to feminism was largely tied to anticommunist sentiments during the interwar period (Ryan, 2015). Apart from coverage of the aforementioned Austrian

organizations, news media in the U.S. were not reporting on “men’s rights” per se, although antifeminism certainly existed in other guises.

Nonetheless, the Austrian men’s rights groups and media of the mid-1920s remind us of the longevity of the men’s rights movement and that its “first wave” was likely in fits and starts. In 1925, Josef Ernst Vollek began publishing his anti-emancipation magazine, *Der Mannesrechtler* (The Male Rights Activist); however, it was discontinued after the second issue in May 1926 (Wrussnig, 2009, pp. 106 - 107) and didn’t attract the attention of the mainstream press (p. 115). The second issue did, however, include a note directing readers to the meetings of the “Bund für Männerrechte” (the Federation or Association for Men’s Rights) at a local restaurant, and indicated that readers could learn more about the Bund at *Der Mannesrechtler*’s editorial office (pp. 114 - 115). This is important because it suggests a kind of precursor to the print media networks later men’s rights activists would use to bolster each other’s work.

But these nascent networks were not particularly stable. The Bund was founded by Sigurd Höberth von Schwarzthal and Leopold Kornblüh in Vienna in March 1926 (Wrussnig, 2009, p. 50). The organization was aimed at men who were unhappily married, divorced, had illegitimate children, or were simply aggrieved by women’s emancipation; the organization thus promised to help with legal matters like divorce and alimony (p. 119). Höberth, a self-proclaimed “justice researcher” (p. 119) and antifeminist, also created the Themisverband (Themis Association)<sup>22</sup> in December 1926, which allowed women to join his crusade against all injustice regardless of gender (p. 130). Kornblüh disagreed with the inclusion of women in the Themisverband, and The Bund split because members saw the two organizations as at odds with each other’s interests. Kornblüh formed the Justitia Bund für Familienrechtsreform (Justitia

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<sup>22</sup> This is likely a reference to Themis, the Greek Titaness and personification of order and fairness.

Federation for Family Law Reform)<sup>23</sup> and Höberth later created the Aequitas Weltbund für Männerrechte (Aequitas World Federation for Men's Rights).<sup>24</sup> Both Kornblüh and Höberth tried to establish publications for their respective organizations but, as with *Der Mannesrechtler*, they had little success and were discontinued after only a few issues (p. 103). This organizational volatility is not necessarily uncommon in social movements, but it presages the ways in which the men's rights movement in the latter half of the twentieth century would also experience rifts and splits, with groups taking different ideological lines on how best to solve the problem of men's perceived lack of rights.

It appears that, for the most part, Höberth's organizations were the only ones to receive some coverage in the U.S. A short filler piece from *The New York Times* from March 1926, for example, simply notes that the organization (often referred to as the League for Men's Rights in U.S. media) was founded "to protect men against Austrian feminism" and to challenge alimony and paternity laws ("Men's Rights League in Vienna," n.p.). In November 1926, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* included a longer (two-paragraph) article talking about the formation of the Bund, but also noted that Höberth was "aroused to ire" and accused American men of being cowards because they had not yet established a U.S. chapter of "his League of Men" ("Reform in the Bud"). The author comments that Höberth will find "no active sympathy in the land of the free," and ends the article by ridiculing him:

If Herr Schwarzthal had a sense of shame, he would never have issued a public statement admitting his ineptitude in dealing with women . . . the question "Are We Men or Mice?" is due for a revival. Offhand, we should say that Herr Schwarzthal was a polyp. (p. 16)

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<sup>23</sup> Justitia is the Roman goddess of justice, more commonly known as Lady Justice today.

<sup>24</sup> Aequitas is the Latin concept of fairness or equity. Clearly there was an unspoken naming convention for Viennese men's rights organizations at the time.

This scorn, and the suggestion in the article that married American men are either already “Caesars” or “slaves” in their homes, may give some indication as to why the phrase “men’s rights” did not often appear in my searches of U.S. newspapers during this period.

Nonetheless, Höberth’s later efforts to establish a global network for men’s rights did receive some media coverage in North America too. An article from *The Border Cities Star* (an Ontarian newspaper) in September 1929 advertises that 2000 men are set to arrive in Vienna for “the first world meeting of the World League for the Rights of Men” to protest feminist excesses and save men from being enslaved by women (“To ‘Save’ Man from Slavery of Woman,” n.p.). It notes that pamphlets tailored to the circumstances of men in different countries have been distributed. The U.S. pamphlet apparently included the following:

Today women share equal political rights with men, each branch of human pursuits is freely accessible to them and it is a well-known fact, under the existing state of affairs in the labor market, that women have far better chances to earn a living than men. (ibid.)

However, an article from *The New York Times* in October 1930 notes that the “Equitas” world conference was postponed due to a lack of interest, and that the organization has since disappeared (“World League for Men’s Rights Perishes”). The author claims that it is unclear whether the demise of the organization is due to the “all-conquering woman” or “merely as part of the world economic depression,” but that “practically the only source of funds” for Aequitas was its roughly 500 women members.

The Austrian men’s rights movement was short-lived, but it provides further evidence that men’s rights discourses are often underpinned by socio-economic anxieties. First, the Bund’s focus on marriage, divorce, and paternity is economically motivated in ways that align with the nineteenth-century news articles cited above, as well as contemporary men’s rights talking

points. Beyond simply resenting alimony payments, however, the Bund sought to reframe gendered labor in ways that appear fairly radical, at least superficially. A December 1930 article from the *New York Herald's* European edition claims that the Vienna League for Men's Rights had petitioned the Austrian minister of justice to recognize "a housewife's duties" as "a regular trade or profession" ("Unemployment Dole Asked for Divorcees," 1930, p. 2). In turn, this policy would mean that women deprived of their "regular work" as housewives (i.e. divorced women) should be placed on the "unemployment dole list" and thus not receive alimony from their ex-husbands. While this rhetorical move likely had little to do with recognizing women's housework as legitimate labor, it presents an interesting strategy that was, as far as I can tell, not taken up by later men's rights activists in the U.S., and is strangely aligned with socialist feminist calls for "wages for housework."

Second, it is noteworthy that Höberth's "targeted advertising" for American men in the 1929 pamphlet included an appeal to their economic status. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, almost 23% of women and girls over the age of 14 were employed in 1920, as compared to roughly 85% of men and boys (Boyd Leon, 2016, para. 12). By 1930, roughly 25% of U.S. women over the age of 16 were employed, mostly in manufacturing, agriculture, retail, and domestic service; about 14% of women worked in professions like nursing and education, with a few entering the world of "white collar" work (Ryan, 2018, p. 113). Nonetheless, women's work did not ensure their financial independence. Middle-class white women (a growing number of whom were also college-educated) were still expected to marry, stay home to have children and, ultimately, depend on a male breadwinner (ibid.). Thus, the increasing number of women in the workplace did not pose a significant threat to men's livelihoods. Nonetheless, after the low unemployment rate of 1.4% in 1918, thanks to the "wartime demand

for manufactured goods,” unemployment rates jumped to nearly 12% during the depression of 1920 to 1921 (Boyd Leon, 2016, para. 14). Unemployment rates then skyrocketed to over 20% during the Great Depression from roughly 1929 to 1939 (Fisk, 2003, p. 2). All of this paints a complex picture. Women in the U.S. in the 1920s (and white women, in particular) had more access to education and employment and had become increasingly visible in public life, but many dropped out of the workforce not long after marriage. Höberth’s claim that women had “better chances to earn a living than men” seems flimsy in this context. For most men, their employment status and earnings were more likely impacted by the economic downturns of the 1920s and 1930s than women competing for jobs in the labor market.

### **Second Waves: Men’s Rights from the 1960s to 1990s**

As mentioned above, most scholars posit the beginning of the men’s rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s alongside second-wave feminism. However, it is worth noting that this was not a simple case of reactionary backlash against feminism. Instead, the literature often refers to the *men’s movement*: a broader term that aggregates numerous men-centered movements, groups, and approaches which include pro-feminist, gay, African American, socialist, mythopoetic, conservative, evangelical, and antifeminist perspectives (Clatterbaugh, 1990; Gambill, 2005; Messner, 2000). Scholars attribute this surge in men’s groups to the political upheavals of this period. As feminist, civil rights, and LGBTQ activists demanded rights and challenged the status quo, many men (both inside and outside of these movements) began to question their own gendered norms and roles. Thus, for the purposes of this dissertation, I use the term “men’s



movement” to refer to this broader phenomenon and “men’s rights movement” to refer to the anti-feminist communities, organizations, and groups I study.

However, while I focus on the men’s rights movement in this dissertation, it is impossible to discuss the history of anti-feminist men’s rights groups without addressing their relationship to feminism and pro-feminist men’s groups during this era. By the late 1960s, men in the U.S. were joining consciousness-raising groups that mirrored those developed by feminists; while the core was initially young, white, left-leaning college students and faculty, older men and middle-class professionals began attending these groups, too (Gambill, 2005, pp. 3-4). While these consciousness-raising groups were relatively unstable and their numbers fluctuated, there was enough public interest in men’s changing roles, relationships, and identities to sustain the burgeoning men’s movement. By 1975, at least three popular books were published in this vein (Gambill, 2005, p. 6; Messner, 1998, p. 256), engaging a wider audience in the question of men’s liberation. Men’s groups also staged public protests against the stereotypes and limitations of traditional masculinity, and men’s centers across the country held workshops to help men grapple with the new frontiers of masculinity (Gambill, 2005, pp. 6 - 11).

One of these popular books, *The Liberated Man* (1974) by Warren Farrell, is an excellent example of how the broader feminist-aligned (or at least “feminist-neutral”) men’s movement foreshadowed the shifts that would lead to the men’s *rights* movement, as well as its concerns with men’s socio-economic status. During the 1970s, Farrell was known as “the most public ‘male feminist’ in the United States” (Messner, 1998, p. 262).<sup>25</sup> Farrell wrote his dissertation on the political power of the women’s movement and joined the New York chapter of the National

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<sup>25</sup> It is worth noting here that Farrell is now considered one of the “grandfathers” of the men’s rights movement and is often revered by men’s rights activists today. References to his work appear throughout my data; in fact, an interview with Warren Farrell features in my analysis of contemporary men’s rights discourses in Chapter 4.

Organization for Women (N.O.W.) in the early 1970s (Aronowitz, 2019, para. 7), eventually becoming a member of N.O.W.'s governing board. The organization tasked Farrell with arranging and facilitating consciousness-raising groups which focused on the ways in which sexism and gender roles hindered men, too (Blake, 2015, para. 11).

*The Liberated Man* takes up this same focus, arguing that “the strait jacket of sex roles” confines both men and women (Farrell, 1974, p. 8). While urging men to consider their complicity in women’s oppression, Farrell also addresses the ways in which men are limited by traditional gendered roles. According to Farrell (and other like-minded men’s movement advocates during this period), the expectation to be financially successful is one of the many forms of oppression men face. Where women are reduced to “sex objects,” Farrell contends that men are similarly reduced to “*success objects*” — i.e. objectified by the societal pressure to be breadwinners and providers (pp. 47-49). He argues that the “breadwinner role creates one of the strongest pressures on men” by linking masculinity to monetary achievement (ibid.). It simultaneously makes men treat wage-earning as part of their “protective” function, encourages them to look down on those they are protecting (i.e. women and children), and leaves women feeling inferior and vulnerable despite the fact that they also work, whether inside or outside the home, but cannot earn as much as men (p. 47).

This framing (i.e. the equal but different oppressions experienced by men and women) is what Michael Messner calls the “gender symmetry” approach (1998, p. 262; 2000, p. 38). Where early consciousness-raising groups included radical leftist, feminist, and gay proponents who were wary of glossing over the benefits men received from the gender order, this gender symmetry framework appealed to a broader base by focusing on men’s victimization, flattening differences between men of different classes, races, and sexual orientations, and depoliticizing

“oppression” by paying attention to gendered *roles* instead of gender *relations* (Gambill, 2005, p. 22; Messner, 2000, p. 38). Messner attributes the men’s movement’s split into feminist and anti-feminist camps to gender symmetry, which placed “much greater emphasis on the costs of masculinity than on the problems faced by women” (2000, p.41). As a discursive strategy, gender symmetry initially invited more men into the movement and enlisted some as “allies in liberal struggles” (p. 38), but ultimately laid the groundwork for the burgeoning men’s rights movement.

This approach is evident in the monthly newsletter *Options: A Publication of Free Men*.<sup>26</sup> According to the first issue, the non-profit membership organization (Free Men) was established in February 1977 “primarily to increase awareness of how men are limited by sexual stereotyping” (McNerney, 1978a, p. 2), with the first newsletter sent to dues-paying members a year later in February 1978. The newsletters present a combination of reports on membership meetings and workshops (in Maryland, where the group was based), snippets from local and national news stories, short reflective pieces and letters, and commentary from Richard Haddad, the group’s “chief theoretician” (Gambill, 2005, p. 79) and Executive Director from February 1977 to October 1978 (McNerney, 1978f).

*Options* reflects a complex and fraught relationship between the men’s rights and feminist movements in the U.S. during this period. The July 1978 newsletter advertises carpooling opportunities for men who want to attend the pro-ERA (Equal Rights Amendment) march in Washington D.C. that month (McNerney, 1978d). A follow-up article in August 1978 indicates that Free Men sent pro-ERA leaflets to multiple men’s groups across the country urging them to support the bill; of the six organizations that replied, only “the Minnesota-based Men’s

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<sup>26</sup> The newsletter would later change its title to *Options: A Monthly Newsletter of Free Men*.

Rights Association, which turned out to be unpleasantly macho and stridently anti-feminist” was not supportive of the measure (McNerney, 1978e, p. 1). Furthermore, the November 1978 newsletter even includes a mail-in membership form to join N.O.W. (McNerney, 1978g). These items suggest that Free Men adopted a fairly amicable attitude towards feminist organizations and policies.

At the same time, however, Haddad expresses concern that the strategy of “playing down the benefits of the ERA for men in order to get it ratified will backfire on the men who are working for its passage under N.O.W. auspices” (Haddad, 1978b, p. 2). Moments like these raise questions about early MRA motivations and allegiances. They suggest that while groups like Free Men vocally supported feminist initiatives that challenged traditional gender roles, men’s support could quickly wane if their issues were not given equal weight to women’s. Similarly, a letter from Doug Schocke (of the Washington Men’s Awareness Network) argues that men must “look from a perspective of their own interest, and not as the enforcers of ruling system nor even as penitent former enforcers,” and that male feminism often “degenerates” into “self hating guilt trips” because male feminists “often look at what they do to women instead of what the male role does to them” (Schocke, 1978, p. 3). In the same newsletter, a report on Free Men’s “May Day of Workshops” quotes Haddad’s opening address to the workshop attendees:

you have been invited here not to come to terms with your alleged role as male oppressor, but to reflect on your condition as an up-pressed class: a class which has been told that it has power and privilege and prestige. (McNerney, 1978c, p. 1)

It is interesting that Haddad frames men as an “up-pressed class” here — while he doesn’t unpack this term further, it implies that men are oppressed by being told, falsely, that they have privilege. Furthermore, the outcome of this attitude is that men’s experiences of gender-based

suffering absolve them of any critical self-reflection or grappling with the nuances of power or privilege. In other words, as Messner suggests, the gender symmetry framework allows these men to eschew the notion that they have played any role (even systemically) in unequal gender relations.

Similar sentiments about “symmetrical” gender oppression appear in the context of traditional gender roles and men’s occupations. In response to a letter from Pete Benson, president of the Howard County (Maryland) chapter of N.O.W., Haddad (speaking on behalf of Free Men) denies that women “have generally been placed in an inferior position relative to men in our society, as it denies that the male position is generally one of privilege and power” (Haddad, 1978a, p. 4). In other words, women, as a demographic, are not oppressed because men are equally oppressed. Instead Haddad argues that “male domination in areas such as government and industry and the male impulse to be in control are extensions of their basic traditional roles of protector and provider,” which has led to men’s “historical exclusion from the child-rearing role — the most important and powerful role in any society” (ibid.). Here Haddad asserts that any apparent signs of men’s political and economic power are, in fact, an indication of their subjugation. Also noteworthy is the discourse of “parenting as power” which suggests that women are not really oppressed by the traditional gender role of motherhood because it is the most “important and powerful role” one can have. Haddad uses similar rhetoric in another article where he reflects on how women pass down societal values from one generation to the next, and thus cannot point a “pompously indignant” finger at men (Haddad, 1979, p. 3 - 4). The implication is, of course, that women are inadvertently responsible for the very sexism they object to by inculcating sexist values in their children in the first place. Gender symmetry thus

provides a convenient framework in which women are reframed as powerful and men are positioned as relatively weak and exploited by their traditional gender roles.

What is interesting about Haddad and other *Options* authors' leveraging of gender symmetry is how they reflect particularly *middle-class* concerns around work and divisions of labor. A March 1978 report relays a talk given by a guest speaker, *Baltimore Sun* writer Isaac Rehert, at one of Free Men's monthly general membership meetings. Rehert apparently argued that the "revolutions" happening in the U.S. over the last two decades involved "Blacks," later followed by women, asking for a share of the "goodies" — i.e. access to power, status, and wealth accumulation (McNerney, 1978b, p. 3). While Rehert agreed that white men had denied African Americans equal opportunities to at least pursue these "goodies," he questioned whether men "were to be blamed" for women's subjugation (*ibid.*). The report continues:

However Men then appeared on the scene with a question radically different than that ever posed by Blacks or women. Very simply, Men asked whether the goodies were really goodies. What, after all, they asked, is so great about being a businessman or doctor, having no time for anything but work, ulcers, an early death, and little or no time for what might really be the goodies like parenting or leisure activities. (p. 3)

This framework is noteworthy for a few reasons. First, while I agree that racial and gender-based oppressions are not commensurate, it is not clear here why Rehert differentiates between them. Where the revolution "spearheaded" by African Americans is "accurate" in Rehert's estimation, women's similar demands for equality are presented as questionable. Second, this passage parallels Jordan's description of feminism I mentioned earlier in this chapter (i.e. as privileged white women simply riding the coattails of the Civil Rights movement). This discursive echo suggests that, whether or not they are aware of it, Jordan and men's rights activists like him are drawing on decades-long ideological frameworks that posit women's liberation movements as

secondary to the Civil Rights Movement, if not altogether unnecessary and frivolous. Lastly, the notion that (white) men are *truly* radical and revolutionary by questioning the very nature of the “goodies” seems glib — as if contemporaneous Black feminists were not also questioning the supposed “goodies” of liberation in light of their own contexts and needs.<sup>27</sup> Here, Men (a capitalized monolith in the original text) are implicitly exalted for their natural rationality, which allows them to see beyond the seemingly petty demands of women and African Americans (who naïvely want what middle-class white men already know to be a burden).

Again, several contradictions arise from these newsletters. On the one hand, engagement with organizations like N.O.W. and support for the ERA tacitly acknowledge the legitimacy of feminist politics. Likewise, there are numerous calls throughout *Options* for women to be able to choose professional roles while men should be able to choose parenting and housework — again legitimizing feminists’ questioning of traditional gender roles. On the other hand, however, women’s rights claims are only legitimate insofar as they offer some corollary rights or benefits to men. Moreover, the constant reiteration that men have no power and nothing to do with creating or maintaining these gender roles, of which they are nothing but victims, elides any critical discussion of how gendered power operates. According to this gender symmetry paradigm, men and women are both equally oppressed. But the mechanism or cause of this oppression cannot be identified (except that it is women who hold real power by passing down inter-generational values in their roles as mothers). Women, it seems, are wholly responsible for their own oppression, if that oppression exists at all.

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<sup>27</sup> Hester Eisenstein, for instance, notes that the “persistent divide” between white and Black feminisms is a “matter of life experience”: “If many white women were eager to get out of their kitchens into the paid workforce, many Black women wanted nothing more than the opportunity to leave the workforce and raise their own children, rather than the children of white mothers” (2010, pp. 418 - 419). In this way, Black feminists were in fact questioning how the definition of “the goodies” had racial and socio-economic dimensions.

In this way, men's rights conceptions of gendered power are often ill-defined at best, and often conveniently tipped in women's favor and at men's expense. Moreover, positing the middle-class professional work done by men as the "real oppression" performs two strategic functions. This framework allows men's rights activists to 1) dismiss traditionally "feminine" work (like housekeeping and child-rearing) as "not real work," and 2) elide the ways in which women have often participated in forms of labor that have supplemented the breadwinner salary (e.g. teaching, nursing, care work, home industries, direct sales, etc.). As I demonstrate in Chapter 3, this discourse would prevail during the 1990s when the movement transitioned to digital media; moreover, in Chapter 4 I show how these strategic "blindspots" are still present in the movement today.

Messner argues that by the late 1970s into the early 1980s, the men's movement was moving away from the "gender symmetry" framework where men and women experienced different-but-equal gendered oppressions. He pinpoints this moment as the transition from "men's liberation" to "men's rights" as a more "overt and angry feminist backlash" (2000, p. 41). Instead of using a gender symmetry approach, Messner claims that men's rights activists began to argue that women had achieved social, political, and economic equality, if not surpassed it, and that feminism is a "plot to cover up the reality that it is actually *women* who have the power" (Messner, 2000, p. 41). My analysis above demonstrates that, to some extent at least, the "gender symmetry" and antifeminist approaches coincided or overlapped in the late 1970s. In other words, while *Options* authors sometimes acknowledged women's oppression, they were also quick to point out all the ways in which women have power and privilege in society. While I do not think Messner is promoting clear-cut divisions or strict periodization of the men's movement, I do want to highlight the ways in which men's rights discourses do not "stop" and "start" as



much as they may appear to. As Ollman reminds us, the dialectical project is not to look for beginnings and ends, but rather the “various forms” that “change assumes” and why our object of inquiry may appear different at a given point in time (2003, p. 14).

### **From Print to Digital: Into the 1990s**

Thus, in the analysis chapters that follow, I continue to track the gender-labor-rights nexus as the men’s rights movement transitioned from print to digital media. As I demonstrate in the next two chapters, men’s rights activists exhibit a fraught understanding of the relationships among gender, labor, and rights, where they want to both reclaim traditionally masculine roles and identities *and* eschew the attendant responsibilities and pressures associated with these roles. However, before I focus on an early digital men’s rights community, I want to underscore that this transition was also not a matter of “stopping” and “starting.” Men’s rights print media (like newsletters and zines) did not disappear overnight. Instead, they played a two-fold role during this transitional period.

First, from the 1970s through the 1990s, men’s rights print publications fostered pre-digital networks by providing extensive resource lists. In other words, newsletters and zines often dedicated space in their publications to list other publications and men’s rights organizations across the U.S. and Canada — typically with contact numbers, postal addresses, or cut-and-mail membership forms (see figures 1-3 below). Thus, readers encountering one organizational newsletter or print publication could find other similar publications to subscribe to, as well as support groups and advocacy organizations to join. Furthermore, print publications often featured letters and articles from the authors and editors of other publications or

organizations. Not only did they advertise each other's work, but men's rights activists in charge of these groups and publications were often in dialogue with each other in the pages of their newsletters and zines. Again, this suggests a kind of pre-digital networking that helped to facilitate the movement's transition to online spaces and networks. While not within the scope of this dissertation, these pre- and early-digital networks are an area for further investigation.

**National Congress for Men and Children**  
*"Preserving the promise of fatherhood."*

**NATIONAL CONGRESS FOR MEN AND CHILDREN, INC.**  
**Membership Application/Renewal Form**

Phone/Home: ( ) \_\_\_\_\_  
 Phone/Office: ( ) \_\_\_\_\_  
 Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_  
 # of Children: \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
 Address \_\_\_\_\_  
 City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_  
 Zip \_\_\_\_\_

1 year membership (NCMC newsletter included) ..... \$ 35.00  
 My contribution to the NCMC Convention Fund ..... \$ \_\_\_\_\_  
 My contribution to the NCMC Student Scholarship Fund \$ \_\_\_\_\_  
 Bumper Sticker: "Kids Need Fathers-Not visitors" (\$4 each) \$ \_\_\_\_\_  
 Bumper Sticker: "I love being a DAD" (\$4 each) ..... \$ \_\_\_\_\_  
 MC/VISA No. \_\_\_\_\_  
 Check Enclosed. Credit card expires: \_\_\_\_\_ Total \$ \_\_\_\_\_  
 Signature \_\_\_\_\_

NCMC Membership Director  
 Post Office Box A  
 Glenside, PA 19038

Figure 1: A cut-and-mail membership form for the National Congress for Men and Children, Inc. in the January 1992 edition of Aladdin's Window

### In this section

American Fathers Coalition ♦ Box 5345, Tacoma, WA 98415 (206) 572-7340 .....	page 11
American Institute for Men ♦ 21986 Cayuga Lane, Lake Forest, CA 92630 (714) 951-5206 .....	page 12
Family Preservation Alliance ♦ P.O. Box 285, Mercer Island, WA 98040 .....	page 12
M.E.R.G.E ♦ 19502 61st NE, Seattle, WA 98155 (206) 486-4966 .....	page 13
Men's Rights, Inc. ♦ P.O. Box 163180, Sacramento, CA 95816 .....	page 13
Missouri Center for Men's Studies ♦ P.O. Box 1033, Kansas City, MO 64111 (816) 561-4066 .....	page 14
National Center for Men ♦ P.O. Box 555, Old Bethpage, NY 11804 New #: (516) 942-2020 .....	page 14
National Coalition of Free Men ♦ P.O. Box 129, Manhasset, NY 11030 (516) 482-6378 .....	page 14
Single and Fathering Effectively ♦ c/o 73 Eccles St., Ottawa, Ontario K1R 6S5 .....	page 15
Washington State Watch ♦ P.O. Box 68401, Seattle, WA 98168 .....	page 16
Wisconsin Fathers for Equal Justice ♦ P.O. Box 1742, Madison, WI 53701-1742 (608) ALL-DADS .....	page 17
Resource Directory .....	page 18

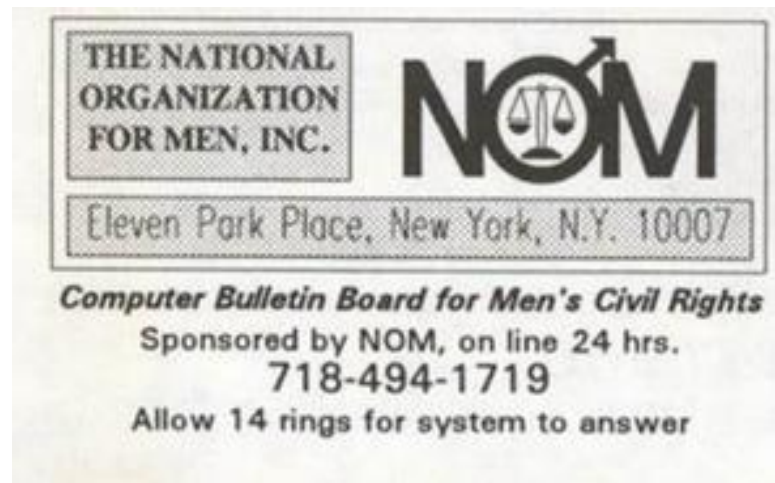
Figure 2: A header for a section of the April 1994 edition of The Backlash! containing news and short editorials from men's rights organizations across North America.

REGIONAL MEN'S GROUPS			
Council Name	Location	Meeting Date & Time	Contact
The Men's Council of Washington	Ethical Society, 7750 16th Street, NW, Wash. DC	2nd Sunday - Drum- 6:30 PM/Mtg. -7:00 PM	Answering machine (703) 820-9097
DC Brotherhood of Men	2704 Cathedral Ave., NW, Washington, DC	3rd Sunday - Meeting 7-10 PM	Dante (202) 797-8407
Arlington Men's Council	Arl. Unitarian Church, 4444 Arlington Blvd., Arlington, VA	Last Friday - Drum 7 PM /Mtg.- 8 PM	Eric Rodenburg (703) 276-0913
Fairfax Unitarian Men's Council	Unitarian Church, 2709 Hunter Mill Rd., Oakton, VA	1st Wednesday - Drum 7:00 /Mtg. 7:30 PM	Chuck Zelonis (703) 971-9320
N. Shenandoah Valley Men's Council	Unitarian/Universalist Church, Rt. 11 So., Stephens City, VA	4th Tuesday - Drum 6:30 PM/Mtg. 7:00 PM	Jack Bellingham 1-(703) 667-6954
Richmond Area Men's Council	First Unitarian Church, 1000 Blanton Ave., Richmond, VA	1st Weds. - Drum 7 PM/ Mtg. 7:30 PM	Roland Antonelli (804) 330-2526
Tidewater Men's Council	Sacred Heart Catholic Church, Norfolk, VA	Last Sunday - Drum 5:30 PM/Mtg. 6:30 PM	Alan DiCamillo (804) 623-1721
Gaithersburg Men's Council	Unity Church, 111 Central Ave., Gaithersburg, MD	4th Sunday - Drum & Mtg. at 7 PM	John Zeglin (301) 340-6315
Greater Baltimore Men's Council	St. Marks On The Hill, 1620 Reisterstown Rd., Baltimore, MD	3rd Sunday - Drum 6:15 PM/Mtg. 7:00 PM	Art Starr (301) 833-8129
Howard Co. Men's Council	Call	3rd Wednesday - Meeting 7:00 PM	Rich Warden (410) 740 2234
New Warrior Washington	1829 N. Jackson St. Arlington, VA 22201	Trainings: Mar. 26/June 11/Oct. 1	Jeff Durvall (703) 522-6812

Figure 3: A resource list of local men's groups (with locations, meeting times, and contact details) published in the April 1993 edition of Chesapeake Men's Exchange.

Second, building on these conventions, print materials in the 1990s provided analogue platforms where new digital platforms could be advertised. For instance, the National Organization for Men's (N.O.M.) Spring 1993 newsletter advertises a "Computer Bulletin Board for Men's Civil Rights" sponsored by the organization (see figure 4 below); their 1996-1997 newsletter notes advertises their website, which they see as a place for members to "keep up to date" with organizational activities, offer support to "men in trouble," and to provide a "jumping off point for a dialog on family issues." Similarly, the May 1994 edition of the men's rights zine *The Backlash!* includes an email address and CompuServe number to access their bulletin board system (BBS) alongside their phone and fax machine numbers. In June 1994, *The Backlash!* features an article advertising a new BBS hosted by the Northwest Center for Men's studies (see figure 5 below). This BBS, known as the Men's Information Network, provides lists of "resources and services catering to men," a "library of files containing articles on men's issues," and a "forum for men to speak about various men's issues." Furthermore, the Men's Information Network offers to host forums or libraries for other men's organizations that subscribe to the BBS. *The Backlash!* continued to publish short articles and extensive resource lists advertising

other groups' BBSs, email addresses, and later websites, and eventually launched its own website in May 1995.<sup>28</sup>



*Figure 4: An advertisement for a men's civil rights computer bulletin board in the Spring 1993 edition of N.O.M.'s newsletter.*

**Announcing the new Electronic  
bulletin board for men's issues  
Men's Information Network  
A service provided by the Northwest  
Center for Men's Studies  
Data: 206-328-0356**

*Figure 5: An advertisement for the Northwest Center for Men's Studies bulletin board in the June 1994 edition of The Backlash!*

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<sup>28</sup> Backlash.com is one of the few men's rights websites from this era that is still available and fully functional, with an archive of old materials as well as regular updates and new content. At the time of writing, the most recent articles on the landing page are from May 20 2021, including a list of "considerations" about the veracity of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Consequently, the men's rights movement's transition from print to digital media in the 1990s was both foreshadowed by these pre-existing print-based networks and facilitated by them. Concomitantly, the same gender-labor-rights anxieties present in men's rights print materials migrated to their online spaces, too. In the analysis chapter that follows, I focus on one early digital men's rights community (alt.mens-rights) to unpack the cluster of anxieties around men's rights, gender, and socio-economic roles and responsibilities.

## CHAPTER 3

### Men's Rights Come Online

#### WOMEN'S THREE OPTIONS TODAY:

- 1) Full-time career
- 2) Full-time family
- 3) Some combination of career and family

#### MEN'S THREE OPTIONS TODAY:

- 1) Work full-time
- 2) Work full-time
- 3) Work full-time

– excerpt from Warren Farrell's article "Men as Success Objects" published in *Family Therapy Network* (1988), paraphrased and reposted to alt.mens-rights in 1994

I'm a bit intimidated when I meet with Theo. He's a retired academic with numerous publications and he's held prestigious positions in his department. Stereotypical grad-student imposter syndrome kicks in moments before the interview: will he question how I'm collecting my data or the validity of my research? Will he interrogate my theoretical frameworks? But the conversation is fairly easy and relaxed, despite a few technical glitches during our Google Hangouts session. I found Theo's contact details while conducting archival research and asked to interview him because he ran and moderated an online discussion group for men in the early 2000s. While his group was not limited to self-identified men's rights activists, it was born of his frustrations with other online men's communities he was participating in at the time. "Feminism has always argued that it's good for both men and women. It improves the lives of both genders," he explains when we discuss the formation of his group. "But if that's true, that has to mean there's something not really good about men's lives that could be improved. And yet no one seemed to be taking that seriously." For Theo, who identifies as "on the left politically," the online feminist-aligned men's group he belonged to initially often glossed over men's issues or

resulted in men simply apologizing for their privilege. Despite the “good, productive discussions” taking place there, Theo clearly felt that something was missing. Like Daniel, who also identified as left-leaning, Theo doesn’t want to be associated with the label “men’s rights activist” because “it has a pretty negative connotation.” Also like Daniel, his entry-point to men’s rights was due to his experience of bias in the family court system:

when my kids were born, I rearranged my schedule so that I stayed home with my daughter. Their mother stayed home for six weeks, because she had that leave, and then I was home for six months, because I had rearranged my schedule to be home. Then I rearranged my teaching so that it was in narrower windows. I had three kids and when I separated from my ex and we went to court . . . there was just the assumption that moms are the primary parents and dads should be paying child support.

With this focus on fathers’ rights, running his own online men’s group allowed Theo and his community to have more nuanced discussions about custody, divorce, and divisions of labor. He tells me, for instance, that courts often look at who is doing most of the housework to determine the “primary parent” in custody disputes. According to Theo, however, where typically feminine housework (like cleaning, doing laundry, and grocery shopping) are considered work that contributes to childcare, tasks that are often performed by men (mowing the lawn, doing maintenance on the car or house) are overlooked. “As someone who cares about gender equality, that’s not right,” he opines.

Theo’s group was relatively small and short-lived. He tells me there were roughly 75 to 100 members, almost all of whom were men in the U.S., mostly non-academics, and most of whom were, in Theo’s words, “lookie-loos;” he estimated that only 20 to 25 participants were consistently active in the group.<sup>29</sup> He started the group in the early 2000s but participation had

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<sup>29</sup> Most scholars would refer to Theo’s “lookie-loos” as “lurkers.” Lurkers (also known as “silent groups,” “anonymous users,” or “nonpublic users”) are people within an online community who do not actively participate or

dwindled by 2008, and he formally closed the group in 2012. Although Theo's group is not representative of the "manosphere," the ebbs and flows of his community reflect bigger trends that are apparent in my research. Members of the broader men's movement were quick to make use of the affordances of digital technologies (creating communities, making connections, and sharing resources, information, and stories), especially in the U.S. and other western countries as personal computers and Internet access became more widely available in the 1990s and early 2000s.

With regard to men's rights activists in particular, this trend is corroborated by the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine.<sup>30</sup> For instance, The New Zealand Men for Equal Rights Association (run by Peter Zohrab, who I discuss further below) and the National Organization for Men had functioning websites from at least 1995 and 1996, respectively. By the early to mid 2000s, there were a number of active men's rights websites and forums available, like Antimisandry.com, MRAUSA.net, mens-rights.net, and ihatefeminism.com, to name a few. However, as with Theo's group, participation in and traffic to these pioneer forums and sites appears to peter out between 2008 to 2010. One possible explanation is that contemporary forms of social media were becoming more prominent during this time; for instance, Facebook was launched in 2004, and Reddit and YouTube launched in 2005. Although not the focus of this dissertation, the creation and ascendancy of these new social media platforms likely shaped how

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contribute, but choose to "lurk" instead (Lampe et al., 2010; Preece et al., 2004; Sun et al., 2014). In other words, they may not be involved in the production or governance of the digital space, but are "passively" involved via their silent consumption of content. The number of lurkers engaging from the sidelines is difficult to gauge, but studies indicate that lurkers make up a majority of the people in online communities – from roughly half to 90% of all users in these spaces (Preece et al., 2004).

<sup>30</sup> The Internet Archive is a non-profit organization and digital library with "expansive holdings, including hundreds of billions of webpages, millions of books, audio recordings, videos, and images, and over a hundred thousand software programs, all freely accessible at <http://archive.org>" (Milligan, 2019, p. 4). The Wayback Machine is an archive of websites collected from 1996 onwards that provides a "snapshot" of what the website looked like at the time of collection.



men's rights activists used, participated in, and migrated between different platforms and online communities in the 2000s.

The focus of this chapter, then, is the continuation of the gender-labor-rights nexus in early men's rights digital spaces. I analyze how these anxieties played out in alt.mens-rights, a Usenet newsgroup dedicated specifically to men's rights activism. I begin by providing additional history and context for the data set before analyzing multiple, interrelated discourses that reveal how men's rights activists were talking about rights, gender, and work during the period under examination.

### **Context for the Data Set**

The proliferation of personal computing technologies and dial-up modems between the 1970s to the 1990s laid the groundwork for the highly connective online communities we see today. Bulletin board systems (BBSs) are a form of networked communication developed in the 1970s that allowed users to share files, send and receive messages, and even play some basic text-based games (Delwiche, 2018; Kollock & Smith, 2005; Warf, 2018). Although initial BBSs were created to network at the local scale and could only cater to asynchronous communication, by the 1980s BBSs were becoming accessible to a wider public and provided synchronous chat capabilities, paving the way for global Internet communications. During their heyday in the 1990s, it is estimated that there were over 75,000 BBSs serving roughly 50 million users worldwide (Mark, 1996), with approximately 45,000 BBSs operating in the U.S. alone by 1994, amounting to a \$2 billion industry (Delwiche, 2018). Even as Internet technologies developed and newer platforms (i.e. websites, blogs, and eventually social media) would replace BBSs, their legacy and impact as a mode of early networked communication is significant.

Technically speaking, Usenet is *not* a BBS, although it was developed alongside BBSs in the late 1970s and shares many of the same features (Hauben & Hauben, 1998). In fact, in an October 1983 issue of *Byte* (a computing magazine), Sandra Emerson claims that Usenet is essentially a BBS for Unix users, which appears to the user “as would most electronic bulletin boards” (p. 220). Similarly, Barney Warf argues that Usenet “resembled” other BBSs “but differed from them in that it lacked a central server or administrator” (2018, p. 892). As one of the largest systems of its kind, Usenet offered roughly 100,000 individual newsgroups organized by topic; users would log in using newsreader software and receive a bulk of messages often “threaded” or strung together as conversations developed asynchronously among newsgroup members (Dame-Griff, 2019; Hahn, 2020a; Kollock & Smith, 2005).

However, conversations could also take place *across* newsgroups as users could post the same message or thread to multiple newsgroups with similar or overlapping interests. For instance, in the data set I analyze in this chapter, users might “cross-post” the same message about child custody legislation to groups dedicated to the discussion of men’s rights, fathers’ rights, parenting, and divorce. In this way, Usenet newsgroups formed a networked public sphere made up of multiple communities that sometimes overlapped. Furthermore, Usenet was known for its “anarchic” structure and atmosphere (Kollock & Smith, 2005; Smith, 2005). With no central authority and a long tradition of “uncontrolled freedom of expression” (Hahn, 2020b, n.p.), newsgroups policed their own community boundaries, establishing norms for engagement and the range of acceptable topics for discussion within a group. In 1992, computer scientist Eugene Spafford described Usenet as akin to “a herd of performing elephants with diarrhea. Massive, difficult to redirect, awe-inspiring, entertaining, and a source of mind-boggling amounts of excrement when you least expect it” (qtd. in Warf, p. 893).

However, despite the seemingly unruly ethos of Usenet, there were some structures and norms in place. As mentioned above, Usenet newsgroups were organized by topic. The initial categories were broad, but the rapid expansion of Usenet resulted in increasingly niche topics and subcategories catering to almost any interest and identity. An important feature of Usenet's infrastructure was the use of a hierarchical naming system, with the "root" name indicating the general theme or nature of the topic group ("Usenet," 2013) and additional names indicating the increasing specificity of the group. For example, in the newsgroup sci.geo.earthquakes, the root "sci" indicates that this group falls under the broad topic of "science and technology," but more specifically discussions about geography, and about earthquakes in particular. This naming convention has important implications, not only for how Usenet groups were organized, but also expectations for discussion etiquette, moderation, and newsgroup creation. The "Big-8" root hierarchies, established around 1986 to 1987 (comp., misc., news., rec., sci., soc., humanities., and talk.), received wider distribution and made up the core of Usenet's activity (Dame-Griff, 2019; Hahn, 2020a).

Alongside these mainstream hierarchies, however, the alt. hierarchy was created to impose less restrictions on users. To create a new group within one of the Big-8 hierarchies, users had to participate in a formal process that included proposing and rationalizing the creation of the group, and submitting a charter and moderation policies to the wider community via news.groups.proposals; the Big-8 Management Board would then vote to accept or reject the proposal to create a new Usenet group (Allbery, 2011). By contrast, the alt. hierarchy required no formal proposal, review, or voting process, allowing anyone to easily create their own specific group (Hahn, 2020a). Thus, these groups were designated as "alternative" due to their creation

and moderation status when compared to more mainstream groups (not for “alternative” topics as is sometimes assumed).

This infrastructure is important because it tells us something of the status of a particular newsgroup within the larger Usenet public sphere. In this chapter, I focus on the men’s rights newsgroup alt.mens-rights. As the name indicates, this group was dedicated specifically to men’s rights issues and, as part of the alt. hierarchy, had no formal creation process or moderation policy. The group was founded by New Zealander men’s rights activist Peter Zohrab.<sup>31</sup> In a threaded conversation from October 1994, Zohrab says that he created the newsgroup in August (assumedly August 1994). I discuss some of the controversy surrounding the creation of the group in my analysis section below.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, I retrieved the initial alt.mens-rights “raw” data set, containing hundreds of thousands of posts spanning September 1994 to February 2011, and then collected clusters of 250 posts in two year intervals between 1994 to 2002, resulting in a data set of 1250 posts. I then read through each cluster multiple times, organizing individual posts into thematic groups that emerged from the data, which I analyze below. Each post contains the written content of the message (in most cases, threaded conversations where users go back-and-forth in response to specific comments) as well as the metadata attached to the post. In other words, the data set allows me to see not only the contents of each post, but also potentially sensitive information like a participant’s full name, location, email address, and Internet provider or the institution or business from which they accessed Usenet. This metadata is incredibly

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<sup>31</sup> I use Zohrab’s real name, not a pseudonym, as he has published other men’s rights content under his name. It is worth noting here that Zohrab’s book, *Sex, Lies, and Feminism: Deconstructing Feminism*, was first published electronically in 2000 by Backlash! Books, a subsidiary of New Chivalry Press which is owned by Rod Mechelen -- the editor of *The Backlash!* zine I mentioned briefly in the previous chapter. These kinds of transnational connections further demonstrate the ways in which men’s rights activists were networking across borders during the “early” stages of widespread Internet access.

useful, as I can demonstrate that alt.mens-rights had a fairly international membership, although the group skews towards western countries (in particular, the U.S., Canada, the U.K., Australia, and New Zealand). Many of the participants, especially in the first data cluster (i.e. the 1994 data set), are posting from or have email addresses from prestigious universities in the aforementioned countries – for instance, the University of Canterbury (New Zealand), Simon Fraser University (Canada), and the University of Colorado Denver (U.S.). In other words, the metadata also demonstrates that early members of the newsgroup often held, or were studying towards, degrees from tertiary education institutions. While it is impossible to know how many people were participating in alt.mens-rights, or how extensive the reach of the platform was, a rough calculation based on my data set suggests that there were  $\pm 10$  posts/day in 1994, with participation peaking at  $\pm 30$  posts/day in 1998, and decreasing to  $\pm 12$  posts/day in 2002 (de Coning, 2022). Using the metadata to make these kinds of inferences about membership and participation is not precise. Nonetheless, it is valuable as a first step towards parsing out the kinds of people participating in early online men’s rights activism, especially given the dearth of scholarship on the movement during this period.

At the same time, however, this same metadata raises a number of ethical questions and challenges (see Dame-Griff, 2019; Milligan, 2019; Kollock & Smith, 2005). The data captured by Internet archives, in general, often includes users’ full names, email addresses, and other information researchers typically deem sensitive. Moreover, early Internet users did not necessarily anticipate their conversations being archived and becoming part of our public record (or someone’s doctoral dissertation) decades later, nor could they likely fathom the shifting cultural norms around privacy and publicity in our increasingly digitized world. For these reasons, I have anonymized the data as much as possible, using pseudonyms to protect users’

identities, including only the year in which posts were published in parenthesis, and omitting all other identifying information. The only users who have not been anonymized are the group's creator (Peter Zohrab), who has published men's rights content under his name, and public organizations.

## **Analysis**

### *Meta-Talk*

Meta-talk (conversations about the newsgroup itself) reveal the history of the group's creation and the ways in which men's rights activists conceptualize their movement during this period. As mentioned above, Zohrab indicates that he created the newsgroup in August 1994. He states that it is intended as "a place for philosophical discussion, but also a place for political activity" because "[f]eminists have had their way for too long, and the only way that men can call a halt to all this garbage is to refuse to be pulled along by the nose any longer" (1994).<sup>32</sup> However, some users objected to or criticized the creation of alt.mens-rights. Doug, for example, is opposed to the newsgroup because it is redundant; he notes that there are other groups that already fulfill the same purpose — for instance, alt.society.civil-liberties, soc.rights.human, and soc.men, the last of which is described as a newsgroup dedicated to issues "related to men, their problems & relationships." However, Zohrab responds:

I think it is clear to any dispassionate observer that 'issues related to men, their problems and relationships' is very broad, compared to 'alt.mens-rights', which is

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<sup>32</sup> All direct quotations from alt.mens-rights appear in their original format, with spelling and grammatical errors as they appear in the data. To maintain the fidelity of the original text, I have not used [sic] to indicate these errors in quotations where they occur.

obviously centred on men's \*rights\* -- not on their problems or relationships, unless these are relevant to their rights. (1994)

Thus, Zohrab tries to justify the existence of alt.mens-rights as a specifically rights-focused community with a different agenda than existing men's Usenet groups. However, about a month before Zohrab's interaction with Doug, Russell claims that alt.mens-rights has "already collapsed into a collection of repetitive discussions on the same issues discussed on other newsgroups" (1994). For some users, then, alt.mens-rights is simply an unnecessary addition to existing newsgroups covering similar topics.

For other users, alt.mens-rights represents the ways in which men already dominate online and offline spaces. Riley, another user from New Zealand, argues that "men are the predominant posters in soc.women, alt.women.attitudes, and any other group which is aimed, theoretically at conversation or discussion between women . . . therefore why bother having an alt.mens-rights group?" (1994). Emily, a self-identified feminist, openly explains that her "sole reason for joining this discussion is to point out the fact that alt.mens-rights simply should not exist" (1994). Her reasoning is that "[m]en are the favoured gender throughout the west and most of the rest of the world. There can be no justification for them to hold any little winge<sup>33</sup> sessions such as those occurring on the group" (1994). She sarcastically refers to the newsgroup as "alt.stroke.my.ego," suggesting that Zohrab's motivations are more conceited than political. However, when Emily claims that "the whole of the Western world is dedicated to the embellishment of 'men's rights'"(1994), Jasper defends the group's existence by claiming that

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<sup>33</sup> All spelling and grammatical errors in direct quotations are as they appear in the data. In the interests of maintaining the fidelity of the original text, I have not used [sic] to indicate these errors in each quotation where they occur.

“there is a need for a recognition of men’s rights” because “men are legally and systematically discriminated against in a host of areas, in the name of affirmative action” (1994).

These kinds of interactions are noteworthy for a few reasons. First, they provide context for the norms, taboos, and discourses of this particular community within the larger Usenet public sphere. As mentioned above, Usenet was already considered an “anarchic” space, and groups within the alt. hierarchies could be considered a kind of “wild west” for public discourse given the lack of moderation and group-creation procedure. It is thus interesting to see that alt.mens-rights faced swift opposition from some users in the broader Usenet public sphere. This is particularly evident earlier in the data set, where feminist or other “interlopers” were not afraid to debate and deride the group. Without the means to moderate, censor, or disband the group, however, these complaints simply vocalized dissent and were of little practical consequence.

Nonetheless, feminist participation in the newsgroup evokes different reactions from men’s rights users. When Seth suggests that members of alt.mens-right simply ignore or “kill file”<sup>34</sup> the “trolls”<sup>35</sup> who object to the group’s existence (1994), Zohrab responds that “as creator of alt.mens-rights and initiator of the current thread, [he’d] like to plead that [they] \*not\* take the censorship road that the Feminazis so often do” (1994). His argument is that the fierce and often sardonic opposition to the group is “really very useful to the men's rights cause” because it gives a “clear impression of the fascist and mindlessly rude approach of Feminazis” (ibid.). In this way, Zohrab perpetuates the notion that feminists are all-powerful censors of men’s legitimate issues.

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<sup>34</sup> A “kill file” is a file used by a newsreader to automatically filter out specific messages and content. A kill file could be used to essentially block all posts from a specific user (Hahn, 2020c).

<sup>35</sup> The terms “troll” and “trolling” have become common Internet parlance, but the term first appeared on Usenet in the late 1980s (Petykó, 2018, p. 880). While definitions of trolling are open to some interpretation, a troll is typically someone who deliberately disrupts online communities and discussions through deception, inflammatory remarks, and causing or escalating conflict within a group (ibid.).



By contrast, men's rights activists are positioned as superior to feminists for not censoring them or engaging in the same "bad behaviors" feminists do. David, for instance, claims that the group is "being criticized for turning into a 'men fight back' group. If we want to whine and pout about how we are victims of persecution by the feminists, then we are no better than the feminists" (1994). For David, not indulging in victimhood — which he calls the "Oprah-fication" of men (1994) — is an important part of the community's identity because it differentiates them from feminists. Similarly, Hugo claims that "[f]eminists post out of hate and a desire to denigrate" whereas men "post to inject a bit of reality and truth into the issue re the fact that abuse and violence is not only a male problem but also a female problem" (1998). Feminists are thus often framed as "nasty, power-mad, unprofessional, and unscrupulous people" (Zohrab, 1994) who complain, overreact, and lie, whereas men's rights activists are noble and honest in their attempts to rectify feminist wrongs.

Finally, similar to the print-based networking discussed in Chapter 2, meta-talk also reveals the ways in which men's rights activists used alt.mens-rights to network and share resources during this transitional period. The works of famous figures like Warren Farrell and Christina Hoff Sommers<sup>36</sup> are mentioned often, but so too are smaller or less well-known outlets. When one user asks, "What are the names of men's activism publications, newsletters and journals? I'm looking for resources other than the ones found on the internet" (2000), two users respond:

The Liberator is put out by the Men's Defense Association, [www.mensdefense.org](http://www.mensdefense.org). The National Coalition of Free Men, NCFM, puts out a newsletter called Transitions - [www.ncfm.org](http://www.ncfm.org). My understanding is that these are

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<sup>36</sup> I discuss Farrell's impact on the men's rights movement in Chapter 2. Christina Hoff Summers is another popular figure in the movement, best known for her books *Who Stole Feminism?* (1994) and *The War Against Boys* (2000).

more along the lines of activism newsletters than academic journals. Both have good articles and essays. (Joel, 2000)

Here is another possibility: Nuance Journal. It is a research journal rather than a men's activist publication, but tends to have balanced articles with relevant information and is more male friendly than most academic journals. It can be found on the web at [www.nuancejournal.com.au](http://www.nuancejournal.com.au) (Chris, 2000)

Men's rights organizations also use the newsgroup to advertise their own initiatives and publications:

The National Center for Men has prepared a legal challenge to today's restrictive paternity laws, and is searching for a suitable plaintiff in or near Hartford Connecticut, Boston Massachusetts or New York City. Simply put, we intend to initiate the male Roe v. Wade on the federal level. (1994)

Check out a new mens website THEMENSCENTER.COM at = <http://www.themenscenter.com> /New Florida Men's Resource Center location at: <http://themenscenter.com> (1998)

You are cordially invited to join with the American Fathers Equal Rights Association (AFERA), and the Children's Rights Council (CRC), in our joint celebration of "Equal Parents Week." . . . For more information, or to R.S.V.P., Email: [Rights4Dads@aol.com](mailto:Rights4Dads@aol.com). (2000)

Thus, just as men's rights print publications often shared lists of resources, meetings, and events, alt.mens-rights provided opportunities for networking and outreach among individual users and organizations, mostly in the United States. Furthermore, my aforementioned estimates for participation in the newsgroup over time are supported by a comment from Samuel in September 1996:

When I wrote this review [of Christina Hoff Sommers' *Who Stole Feminism*] in 1994, there were only a hand full of fellow anti-feminists posting regularly on the newsgroups. Since that time, the numbers have exploded to the point of dominating four or five of the most active newsgroups. (1996)

According to Samuel, the number of men's rights activists and anti-feminists participating in the broader Usenet community has "exploded" over the course of two years. Of course, he could be exaggerating or overestimating their presence on the platform. But it is not untenable to see how alt.mens-right (and Usenet in general) became a popular space for men's rights activism as increased access to Internet technologies in the 1990s and early 2000s (particularly in western countries) allowed more people to network, share, organize, and foster community online. Moreover, discussions and posts like these give us a glimpse into the dynamics of alt.mens-rights as the men's rights movement was increasingly transitioning from print to digital media.

### ***Rights & Equality***

Given Zohrab's emphasis on alt.mens-rights as a platform dedicated to men's *rights*, it is unsurprising that much of the discussion is oriented towards rights and equality. Zohrab himself weighs in on the "two wings of the International Men's Rights Movement," claiming that

There's the wing that wants to go back to the "god old days", as it were, on the grounds that society is breaking down (The Garbage Generation, by Daniel Amneus, Primrose Press, Alhambra, California, 1990);

And there's the wing that wants to achieve \*real\* equality of the sexes by focusing on those areas where men are disadvantaged, relative to women (Warren Farrell, The Myth of Male Power -- and other books). (1994)

In conversation with another user, Zohrab clarifies that he identifies with the second category, and specifically advocates that "men can no longer let Feminists act as if 'equality' is a non-reciprocal relation" (1994). Similarly, in his aforementioned interaction with Emily, Jasper claims that the newsgroup exists because men are legally discriminated against. He continues to

explain that his “conception of men’s rights” is “[e]quality: no more, no less. I’ll fight for women’s rights to the same thing, too” (1994). For Zohrab and Jasper, the men’s rights movement promotes real equality by challenging the excessive rights now granted to women and promoting “equal rights” for men, who are disadvantaged.

However, Samuel responds to Zohrab’s post by categorizing these two wings along conservative/liberal lines. For Samuel, who identifies with the conservative branch, returning to the “good ole days” is not returning “to the days of ‘oppressing’ women or racial slavery,” but rather “wanting to reverse social policies that have proven to do more harm than good” (1994). He claims that his wing of the movement is “very politically active in the Father’s Rights movement” where they “actively push for pro-father legislation on the state and national levels” (1994). This sentiment about changing legislation is echoed by Lucas, who suggests that men’s rights activists “talk to [their] state legislators”: “With a republican congress, I would think this would be the best time to try and repeal the feminist tyranny that has been created in the family court/child support system” (1998). Similarly, in another discussion about child support, Grant asks, “has -anyone ever- been able to use the Constitution’s 13th Amendment (or any other part of it) to defeat a CS order or to stop the MA DOR/CSE from taking action????” (2002).<sup>37</sup> These men’s rights activists suggest that the law can be used to curtail feminist overreach by reversing or challenging legislation they see as discriminatory against men.

Nonetheless, still speaking for the conservative branch of the men’s rights movement, Samuel also espouses a more laissez faire approach to the question of equality:

We believe in equal opportunity for all to participate in our capitalist system. However we also believe that there are gender roles that are innate--generally making women good at some things, men at others. (1994)

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<sup>37</sup> The 13th Amendment abolished slavery in the United States; the “MA DOR/CSE” refers to the Massachusetts Department of Revenue Child Support Enforcement division.

Here equality is framed as equal opportunity to “participate” (i.e. compete) in the free market. Nonetheless, due to men and women’s “innate” gender roles, we can assume that the outcome of this free competition is that men will prosper in some jobs and roles while women are better suited to others. For Samuel, the problem is that feminism is trying to “create an artificial ‘equality’ . . . at the expense of men, children and the family. Our priorities are to put the family and its children ahead of the individual rights of either men or women” (1994). Implicit in his statement is the notion that feminists have disrupted the natural order of the family by destabilizing innate gendered roles. According to Samuel, the conservative branch of the men’s rights movement is more invested in reclaiming gender traditional roles and letting equality play itself out in the free market than instituting new laws to protect or aid men.

By contrast, Samuel sees the more “progressive” branch (which he calls the “Warren Farrell wing of the movement”) as “a competing branch of the feminist movement,” where men are trying to “out-victimhood women” (1994). He claims that promoting victimhood leads to “special remedial governmental consideration” — “a classic liberal political ploy for power” (1994). What is noteworthy here is not only the ways in which Zohrab and Samuel conceptualize the wings of their movement, but also the ways in which they understand equality and the role of rights. For Zohrab, equality means recognizing the ways in which men are disadvantaged and discriminated against *as men* — his men’s rights activism begins from this premise. For Samuel, however, this is a form of self-induced victimhood that necessitates further government involvement. Instead, his vision of equality requires an active political presence focused on repealing legislation. While rights and equality are thus conceptually central to the movement, they are not necessarily well-defined or uncontested.

Furthermore, as Chelsea Ebin and I note, the participants of alt.mens-rights rarely make clear distinctions between “the legal ascription of rights and the social status of equality” (de Coning & Ebin, 2022). Yash, for example, claims that he has “never had a problem with equality of the sexes, and [he thinks] that an ERA would be most useful in sorting out many of these problems” (1994). Here he suggests that legal mechanisms can promote gender equality. But, in a discussion on workplace sexual harassment policies, he states that

If the guidelines were merely suggestions on how to properly respect a MOS,<sup>38</sup> most men would have no problem with them. However, feminists want to put these guidelines in the form of LAW, forbidding men to utter any disrespectful comment to a woman, and this is what troubles the men . . . Men who have to constantly watch what they say to the opposite sex necessarily won't feel as comfortable around women as they would around "the guys", and thus would have problems viewing them as equals, since there would always be a distance in the platonic relationships between men and women. (Yash, 1994)

Thus the problem is not that companies make loose and unenforceable “suggestions” for workplace behavior (which he concludes would be ideal), but that *feminists* want to *legislate* these guidelines. In contrast to his ERA comment, Yash implies here that legal frameworks are harmful. For him, any formal implementation of sexual harassment policies will result in women’s further ostracization because they would wield the power to punish men for “any disrespectful comment.” Moreover, he suggests that for women to be included equally in the workplace, men should feel comfortable around them and be able to treat them as they would “the guys.” He also claims that, in practice, workplace harassment guidelines will impact men; thus men will be the “most vocal complainers against a blatant infringement on freedom of speech” (1994). Yash’s comments here reveal a few common, interrelated discourses within the broader men’s rights movement. First, when women and minorities demand equality they

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<sup>38</sup> This acronym likely stands for “members of the opposite sex.”

necessarily make themselves (appear) less equal because they require legal or corporate intervention; furthermore, they will use these policies punitively against men. Second, the standards for equality and appropriate workplace behavior center *men's* perceptions and comfort. Third, there is an implicit assumption of men's homogeneity — in this case, that men automatically feel comfortable with each other and have shared understandings of how “the guys” interact. And lastly, the conflation of legal rights, private/corporate policies, and social norms, where policies for workplace behavior are framed as an infringement of one's constitutional right to free speech.

Lastly, while equality and rights are not often discussed in terms of race, the resentment expressed towards programs like affirmative action and welfare presents an implicitly racialized worldview, where the rights of white men, in particular, are infringed due to the “special treatment” other groups receive. Moreover, men's rights activists sometimes align the oppression of men with that of racial minorities. Dale's comments about affirmative action, for instance, epitomize this rhetoric. He argues that when a “woman with zero experience and an associates degree” is hired over “a man with five years experience and a masters degree,” we call this an “equal shot,” but “[w]hen they used this sort of ‘equal shot’ against blacks, it was called Jim Crow” (1996). Similarly, in a discussion about the opening of an all-girl public school, Carl claims that the media coverage of the school is using the same “‘Seperate but equal’ defense southern states did as an excuse to make it okay to segregate blacks” (1996).<sup>39</sup> Programs like affirmative action or single-sex schooling are thus reframed as oppressive to men because they deny them equal opportunities to participate, compete, or succeed — just as African Americans were under Jim Crow or separate-but-equal legal doctrine. This tactic lends an air of legitimacy

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<sup>39</sup> Carl does not specify which school he is referring to in his post, but he could be talking about the Young Women's Leadership School, which opened in Harlem in 1996 (around the same time as the post).

to their claims. In this case, Dale and Carl align men's apparent disadvantages with the oppression experienced by Black people and conceptually link women with white supremacy. Thus, they present a worldview in which they are unjustly "held back" from participating in society as citizens with full and equal rights, just as African Americans were.

### *Special Treatment*

Overall, the rights discourses expressed in alt.mens-rights suggest that men are not afforded the same rights as women. This leads to another theme related to the question of men's rights (or lack thereof): the ways in which women and minorities are granted special rights, privileges, and opportunities that deprive men of their rights and livelihoods. In other words, the issue is not simply that men do not have rights, but that their lack of rights is a direct result of the rights and privileges given to minorities. In the aforementioned post about the opening of an all-girl school, Carl asks, "[w]hat happened to equal rights there? . . . Why are they having this in the first place?" He continues: "Because they claim to get a better education without boys. But if it's a better education, than it's no longer equal and in fact woman get special treatment based on sex alone" (1996). Carl reveals an interesting logic here. If girls receive a better education in a single-sex school, that is discrimination against boys who deserve the same (better) education. But if girls receive a poorer education in a mixed-sex environment, that is equality because they are not receiving special treatment. In this instance, equality is framed as a situation where no one benefits, lest some receive special or "better" treatment.



The notion that women and minorities receive special treatment which victimizes white men is further reinforced in discussions around work, employment, and affirmative action. Dale, for instance, professes that

Anyone who is denied a job because of gender has been discriminated against . . . I once spent half a day testing for a job and when the results came in they demonstrated that I was highly qualified, but the woman testing me then told me I was not going to get the job because I was male. (1996)

A few days later he comments again that diversity and affirmative action programs are “redress against people who have no power and committed no sins” (1996). In this way, Dale frames government programs and corporate policies for diversified employment as forms of legal discrimination against men. Simultaneously, he evokes a kind of “sins of the father” rhetoric, where modern men are punished for past discrimination against women by having their rights revoked now. Patricia echoes this sentiment, claiming that

As a woman, I want equal rights, equal pay, etc., but since when does this require that these rights be taken away from someone else in order for me to have them? Since when does that require that I demean another person based solely upon his gender, all in the name of "getting even" for the past? Isn't this what we are trying to get away from? (1996)

While qualifying that she wants equal rights and pay, Patricia also perpetuates the notion that affirmative action and similar programs are a way of “getting even” and denying men their rights — not unlike Yash’s comment above about workplace harassment policies as punitive or retributive. In these examples, attempts to remedy historical discrimination against women and people of color are necessarily discriminatory against white men in the present.

As indicated above, some men's rights activists advocate for bureaucratic or legalistic solutions to redress their lack of rights. In a discussion about hiring female firefighters (discussed further below), Caleb argues that

I feel the BEST and ONLY way to ensure the hiring process is executed in the fairest and most unbiased way is to have a hiring number (eg. "John Smith" becomes "Candidate 12345") assigned to each and every individual at the time of their application. The "Name, Race, Creed, Color Religion and Sex" should then become cloaked and unanimous. They then must be tested and rated by the performance they provide and graded towards the number they have been assigned, upon the completion, the highest graded number can then be picked. (2000)

Here Caleb suggests that some kind of color-blind and gender-blind skill testing could overcome the discriminatory hiring practices fostered by affirmative action. Frank asks, “[Caleb], would not this work for all areas too?” (2000). He continues:

Including the justice system somehow so that females would not be let go because they are female? I would bet the number of women in prison would sky rocket if somehow only the facts of a crime could be taken into account and not the gender of the accused. In effect, justice would truly be "blind". (2000)

Likewise, another user suggests employing “a neutral independent hiring company to perform the tests” (2000) and thus further anonymize job applicants. However, while other users agree that this system would be ideal, many are skeptical that policies like these would be implemented. Steve claims that Caleb's suggestion is “[n]ot such a bad idea. Unfortunately, women's groups would most likely sue for discrimination when they found that 100% of the firefighters turned out to be men” (2000). He continues, “[s]uch is the idiocy of the age. Maybe Amendment 19 to the US Constitution wasn't such a good idea after all. :-)” (2000).<sup>40</sup> Similarly,

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<sup>40</sup> The 19th Amendment gave woman citizens the right to vote in the U.S. in 1920.

Herbert agrees with Caleb's proposal for anonymized testing and says, "[w]hy not carry this thought to every job opening. Only the highest qualified accountant, butcher, nurse, computer programmer, etc." (2000). Nonetheless, he qualifies his statement by saying, "[w]e used to have this, but then the minority groups pressured the gov't to require percentages, I mean 'equality in the workplace'" (2000). According to Steve and Herbert, anonymized skill testing is a good idea but cannot be implemented because of special interest groups' political power. White men, by contrast, have little power to resist or challenge these policies, even though they are clearly competent and, in some cases, superior to their minority competitors in the job market.

By corollary, the beneficiaries of these special rights are cast as undeserving, unskilled, and unable to match men's competence in the workplace. For example, Harry comments that "because of AA, the person who gets the job is too incompetent or unskilled" (1996), and Dale claims that affirmative action is "holding jobs open until a woman with even half the requisite skills comes along" (1996). In an argument about fathers and child support, Jerry accuses a woman user of being a "functional illiterate" who is "probably only working either due to affirmative action or because [she is] a feminazi collaborator" (1998). Like affirmative action, welfare programs and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) are identified as mechanisms through which the undeserving gain special treatment:

Of course you realize that the ADA (in it's present incarnation) is just as bad as affirmative action. I don't have any problem with the idea of guaranteeing every citizen a job that pays the bills or welfare payments to those who agree to be sterilized, but I also don't think that the government should be in the business of guaranteeing everybody any particular job that happens suit his/her fancy.  
(Steve, 2000)

Steve's proposed sterilization means-testing for welfare recipients is eerily evocative of the history of eugenics and forced sterilization "primarily directed towards poor women, disabled

women, and women of color” in the United States (Manjeshwar, 2020, para. 2). Furthermore, he infers that government programs like welfare, affirmative action, and the ADA allow minorities to attain whatever jobs they like with few barriers to entry.

Thus, taken in aggregate, the rationale presented in alt.mens-rights is that minorities in general, and women in particular, are granted special rights that unfairly advantage them in hiring and employment practices; essentially, they are given free rein on the job market regardless of their skills, training, or competence. This is exemplified by the aforementioned “female firefighter debate,” where a number of users weigh in on an apparent scourge of petite woman firefighters. Steve suggests that it is not “unreasonable to conclude that literally ALL female firefighters are the beneficiaries of some sort of favoritism” (2000). Caleb echoes this concern, stating that he “believe[s] that there is some form of conspiracy to hire females and other minorities over higher qualified individuals” (2000). The anxiety around female firefighters is not simply that they are unfairly given these positions, but that fire departments are hiring “5' 100lb. female[s]” (Steve, 2000) who are physically incapable of performing their duties:

Female firefighters are dragging fire victims out by their heels, down staircases, causing head injuries stupid. They deserve no credit for what they are not doing. (Thomas, 2000)

The real question is; How many people (who died in fires) could have been saved if only there was a man in her (female firefighter) place? (Steve, 2000)

I work for a department that keeps telling us that there is no favoritism towards any individual they hire, yet it seems they hire the type of person that I truly believe could not drag me out of harms way if I happen to collapse or become injured while performing my job. (Caleb, 2000)

so what if we lose some lives because women don't have the strength required to carry somebody out of a burning building. The important thing is that female firefighter "cared" enough to try and that we can be politically correct. (Simon, 2000)

These users suggest that, in the case of woman firefighters at least, affirmative action and political correctness are literally killing and maiming people. When a retired fire captain enters the conversation to ask for evidence of the “epidemic of people who die because female firefighters can't do their job” (2000) and to point out that firefighting takes more than brute strength, Steve retorts that the agility test for his local fire department is “absurdly easy” and that “[a]ny healthy man who's 5'10" 180 lbs. could outperform any female firefighter at her own job given a little training. Some could probably do it without any training” (2000). This anecdote exemplifies the ways in which women are seen as incapable yet privileged in the labor market, as compared to men who are naturally able to perform almost any task but are disadvantaged by discriminatory hiring practices.

Within this framework, women and minorities do not need to compete with men fairly because of the special rights they receive via state intervention and cultural norms. Dale argues that weak women demand “separate schools for girls” and “fully funded female sports leagues” to not compete with men (1996). Weak women, he continues, will “hijack somebody else's work” and “cannot compete unless they have special programs, special rights, special classes, special privileges and special protections” (1996). In the aforementioned female firefighter debate, Steve concludes that while women as a whole lack the “strength and stamina” to do what men can do, they do not have to “compete with men on a level playing field, they only have to elect politicians who are willing to grant them special privileges” (2000). Sophie remarks, sarcastically, that “it’s just \*so\* sexist to think a woman should earn a job on merit rather than by being female” (2000). Overall, there is a sense that women do not need to compete fairly on the job market because they are privileged by policies like affirmative action. However, the men’s rights activists participating in alt.mens-rights also suggest that women, more often than

not, cannot compete with men on the job market because they are weak, inferior, or unskilled, either due to innate differences between the sexes or because the special treatment they receive has made them so. Women, it seems, are incapable of acting as responsible adults.

### *Responsibilities*

For the users of alt.mens-rights, then, women (and minorities) receive special treatment, privileges, and rights that deny men equal rights and opportunities. Simultaneously, while men lack equal rights to women, they must still take on the responsibilities of manhood.

Responsibility thus becomes another central discourse in the data set, where men's excessive responsibilities and burdens are juxtaposed with women's seemingly responsibility-free lives.

For instance, in a discussion about sexual assault, one woman raises the notion that wives were previously considered their husband's property. Spencer counters by arguing that

this "property" relationship cut both ways. If women were "property" than men were less than property because they were expected to die rather than to allow their "property" to get hurt. "Gentlemen" used to carry swords at their sides so that they could fight to the death at a moment's notice if a "lady's" honor was impugned. If the husband's "property" committed a crime, HE was put on trial for HER crime and HE did the time. If SHE ran up huge debts which the family could not pay, HE and only he would go to debtor's prison. (1994)

Women's historical lack of individual rights is reframed here as actually diminishing men's rights, livelihoods, and personal freedoms by making men responsible for women's actions.

Similarly, Kyle asserts that "[i]f a man marries in this culture, he gains, as far as I can see, absolutely no rights. Yet he gains a tremendous number of new responsibilities" (1994). Kyle does not specify what new responsibilities are foisted on married men but it is clear that, for

these men's rights activists, there is an inverse relationship between rights and responsibilities that victimizes men and benefits women.

Spencer's above suggestion that men were "less than property" and thus oppressed due to their excessive responsibilities is paralleled elsewhere in the data set, namely through the discourse of slavery and servitude. One user's signature<sup>41</sup> links rights, responsibilities, and enslavement: "Free and open civilization requires that each individual's responsibility match their authority. When authority exceeds responsibility we have despotism. When responsibility exceeds authority we have slavery. - me" (Scott, 1996). As Scott's signature implies, the excessive responsibilities men must take on, relative to their lack of rights or limited authority, makes them slaves. This slavery/servitude rhetoric is also apparent in discussions of marriage and fatherhood. Responding to an opinion piece in *The Observer* about "men who just don't want to grow up," Oliver retorts that the woman author is "upset that young men are reacting quite predictably to a situation in which 'responsible behavior' is rewarded with divorce, court orders, and a lifetime of hounding by the government's child-support police" (1998). He continues:

This behavior on their part is totally rational . . . She can shame them, she can call it "laddish", she can berate men for not Growing Up(tm).<sup>42</sup> But the real culprit is a society where, for men, Growing Up(tm) means taking on a serious risk of lifetime indentured servitude at the hands of some court. (1998)

For Oliver, young men are scrupulous to reject the trappings of responsible (male) adulthood, where responsibility to a wife and family is almost certainly going to result in a "lifetime of indentured servitude." Similarly, George asserts that he would "much rather stay at home

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<sup>41</sup> Usenet allowed users to include "signatures" at the bottom of each of their posts. Akin to email or forum signatures, Usenet participants would often include links to websites or quotations reflecting their values and positions. In this example, Scott has attributed his signature quotation to himself.

<sup>42</sup> Oliver is indicating the registered trademark symbol here in parenthesis.

bringing up [his] children than spend 45 years slaving over a job with NOTHING except financial reward” (2002), and Larry calls child support “a failed feminist system to enslave men as indentured servants for the support of the women who break up families” (2002). The special treatment women receive (from society and the state) victimizes men by making them solely responsible to provide financially for their wives, ex-wives, and children, thus enslaving them or trapping them in a life of indentured servitude. Again, as demonstrated above, while men’s rights activists do not necessarily talk explicitly about race, their discourses draw on racialized language (like slavery and indentured servitude) to frame men as victims of women’s oppressive behavior.

The corollary of this discourse is that women are irresponsible despite, or perhaps because of, their surfeit of rights and privileges. For many alt.mens-rights participants, women are seen as infantile, weak, and inferior, and thus incapable of acting responsibly. In a discussion about date rape and drunk sex, Jacob suggests that men “need to show more responsibility to their counterparts,” and that, while “women are equally stupid for getting drunk” in “a mixed sex situation,” women “have enough problems with unwanted pregnancy. Men should not get away scott free” (1994). However, Joel questions his reasoning:

Women can't take responsibility for their own actions? Women need to be treated as children and protected from their own actions? What?!?

DO YOU **\*\*REALLY\*\*** MEAN TO SAY THAT WOMEN NEED TO BE BABY-SAT BY THE STATE? (1994)

Although the question is posed sardonically, Joel suggests here that any “special treatment” given to women (in terms of responsibility for their sexual encounters) infantilizes them. He returns a few days later to reiterate this point in a different thread, claiming that



Women aren't able to be responsible for anything, they are child-like creatures who aren't responsible for anything because they are not capable of \*being\* responsible for anything. \*I\* find this insulting, and I fail to see why women don't too. At least those women who are capable of independent thought. (1994)

Here, Joel leverages the infantilization of women to suggest that he, and women like him who are capable of “independent thought,” are insulted by weak and irresponsible women. Similarly, Rick claims that feminism infantilizes women when he refers to the “women-are-too-stupid-to-think-for-themselves-so-they-need-feminists-to-guide-them nonsense” and the “feminist whining using the woman-as-child ploy” (2000). Maurice simply states that “feminism wants special rights for women only, while holding men only, responsible for all the worlds ills” (2002). Within this framework, men’s rights activists posit a worldview in which feminist ruses to gain special rights and priveleges for women make women child-like and irresponsible. The implication is that men and women should be held to the same standards, receive the same rights, and have the same responsibilities.

The principle of equal rights and responsibilities, however, becomes complicated when applied to a practical example: abortion. Discussions around “Choice for Men” (C4M) epitomize the tensions and contradictions inherent in these men’s rights activists’ conceptualizations of equal rights and responsibilities, and also reveal disagreement within the men’s rights community. C4M is a loosely-organized campaign that proposes that men should have the right to opt out of parenthood, parallel to women’s right to choose abortion; it is sometimes referred to as a “paper abortion” or “male abortion.” The aforementioned call from The National Center for Men, requesting a plaintiff “served with a paternity suit who isn't adverse to publicity,” clarifies the organization’s position: “we intend to initiate the male Roe v. Wade on the federal level. The basis for our suit is that while women may decline motherhood, men can't decline fatherhood”

(1994). Tim reiterates this notion, arguing that “[i]n the US, choice for men would give men only the rights women have had since *Roe v Wade*, nothing more” (1996). Moreover, for many users, a man’s corollary “right to choose” is directly tied to his financial interests:

if you get a woman pregnant, you do not have an equal choice in whether the child is born, and no choice in whether you have to pay child support. (Dale, 1996)

being responsible for a child can put an emotional and financial drain on a man's life as well. Why can't they get the option to opt out, just as she can. (Shawn, 1998)

The primary reason both exercise extra choice is to protect themselves from 18+ years of enslavement. Because a girl incubates for a mere 9 months does not entitle her or her child to enslave a male for 18+ years. (Larry, 1998)

In principle, the notion that men should have an equal right to opt out of parenthood — especially if they are unwilling or unable to provide financial and emotional support for their children — seems reasonable. However, a few pragmatic issues arise here. First, equating C4M with *Roe v. Wade* is a misunderstanding of the latter’s legal status (de Coning & Ebin, 2022). In the U.S., *Roe v. Wade* grants women access to abortion on the grounds of their fundamental right to privacy, which is restricted in later trimesters by the state’s authority to protect the life of the mother and/or fetus. It is not clear how C4M, proposed here as “equal” to *Roe v. Wade*, aligns with the fundamental right to privacy or what corollary limitations the state could uphold on men’s “right to choose.” As Ebin and I ask, would C4M “be bound to a trimester calendar” or could men revoke their parental status “at any time up to, or even after, the birth of a child”?

Second, alongside discussions of welfare as “special treatment,” the proponents of C4M both denigrate single mothers and expect them to be sole providers for their children (de Coning

and Ebin, 2022). As Terrell explains in relation to C4M, the “problem with this entire scenario is that society should not be forced to support children that do not have adequate support” (1998). Martin suggests that “proof of financial where-with-all should be a requirement for having children” in today’s world, as it is “grossly unfair to bring a child into the world and expect somebody else to pay for raising it” (1998). While these men’s concerns about reluctant fathers having to “subsidize” (Larry, 1998) unwanted children may evoke sympathy, overall their discourse suggests that unmarried women who do not choose to terminate their pregnancies are irresponsible for doing so, and are not entitled to welfare benefits that may assist them in supporting their children alone.

These tensions are further complicated by those men’s rights activists who object to either abortion or C4M. In the first instance, Shawn, who is quoted above saying that men should “get the option to opt out” too (1998), also argues that “[w]omen having abortion rights DOES take something away from men -- the ability to know that if their sperm causes a pregnancy that their child will be born” (1998). He continues by arguing that because a man makes a genetic contribution to conception, “even in the case of sperm donation [he] should be able to say that he WANTS to be involved and responsible” (1998). Thus, while arguing that men should have an equal right to “abort” their parental status, they should also not be deprived of their right to know that their children will be born and have a choice in whether or not they want to be involved in parenting — something women deny men via their right to medical privacy. Furthermore, Shawn indicates that the “problem is that we don’t limit the reasons for which she can get an abortion” at the same time that he advocates for men to have the same right to “avoid 18 years of support for a born child” (1998). Likewise, Larry, who compares child support to slavery and indentured servitude above, states that abortion is “not a natural function of the female body. It is an

extraordinary, unnatural act to end the natural function of her body” while simultaneously arguing that men should have the same “moral right” to this “extra choice” (1998). While these men’s rights activists want men to have an equal right to “abort” their parental status, they also do not unequivocally support this choice for women.

Furthermore, some men’s rights activists object to men abdicating responsibility for their children. Darren is the most vocal opponent to C4M, commenting, sardonically, that “abandoning their children to the terrors of father-absent homes is the c4m male's ‘moral right’” (1998). In another post he responds to a long list of statistics that claim, for instance, that “63% of youth suicides,” “90% of all homeless and runaway children,” and “80% of rapists motivated with displaced anger” are “from single mother, lesbian, or otherwise fatherless homes” (Alister, 1998). Darren insists that he “will continue to use these statistics in opposition to c4m as masculinism maintains them as indicative of the necessity for the presence of the paternal male” (1998). He thus posits that C4M will contribute to the existing epidemic of fatherlessness that causes juvenile delinquency, crime, sexual assault, suicide, and homelessness.

Nonetheless, where other users do not directly criticize C4M, they exhibit ambiguity about men relinquishing the role of fatherhood. Seemingly countering his previous comments about C4M, Larry claims that for “most of human history women brought their children to the father for support. That is a system that has worked \*\*\*for the children\*\*\* for a couple of million years” (2002). In response to the aforementioned opinion piece about juvenile men, Oliver also argues that “[h]istorically there had been some psychological rewards for taking on the responsibility of supporting children financially” but that men are now denied those rewards while they must still accept responsibility (1998). The issue, then, is not necessarily that fatherhood itself is unwanted, but that there is a disjuncture between rights, responsibilities, and

rewards. The C4M debate thus reveals the ways in which men's rights activists may simultaneously resent women's "right to choose," desire the same right, and argue that men should not make the choice to "terminate" their parental duties even if they have the right to do so.

Similar to the "special treatment" discourse discussed above, men's rights activists' conceptualizations of gendered rights and responsibilities are fraught and even contradictory at times. While they clearly conceive of men as victims with relatively fewer rights and more responsibilities than women, there is also no clear solution to this conundrum: women should live up to men's standards yet, at the same time, they are generally incapable of doing so. Men also lose their rights and must take on extraordinary responsibilities, regardless of whether or not women have individual rights. These kinds of paradoxes pervade the data set (as well as the data I analyze in Chapter 4), leaving men's rights activists in an unresolvable dilemma where they are constantly victimized for the benefit of women.

### *The Weaker (Privileged) Sex*

Despite their victimization at the hands of women and feminists, men are still framed as capable, responsible, mature, and hard-working. Women, by contrast, are often cast as unintelligent, unskilled, immature, manipulative, and lazy — overall, they are the weaker sex *and* more privileged than men. Thus, despite some men's rights activists' claims that they are invested in equality for both men and women, there are multiple instances where newsgroup participants engage in bald-faced misogyny in their descriptions of women as weak or inferior to men.

For example, in the aforementioned female firefighter debate, Steve claims that “millions of men can be trained to match the mental skills of the best women. But no woman can be trained to match the physical strength skills of the best men. It's all a question of who's interchangeable and who's not” (2000). In other words, while men can do anything women are capable of, women cannot live up to men’s natural strength and superiority. Women are, by all accounts, replaceable in the workforce and thus do not contribute anything unique or valuable to society. In a thread titled “Women vs. Men,” William asserts exactly this:

Why can't you accept that woMEN are the weaker sex in all areas . . . If you think of all ground breaking inventions from the wheel to the internet it's all been invented by a man; all the great buildings or structures have been built by men. Do you truly think you would be called a woMAN if god intended you to be equal. woMEN were put on the earth to help support the male race in our evolution. You will always be inferior to men as you don't have the mental capacity to survive without men . . . What makes me laugh is that woMEN are always finding the slightest angle to try and better themselves against men, we know that you are the inferior sex . . . but the only reason you do this is to feel better about yourself about being a lesser animal than a man and you feel compelled to try and match man. Give up now, you will always be inferior. (2002)

Here William perpetuates a fairly common men’s rights trope: the notion that men have been solely responsible for inventing things and building civilizations, while women play a supporting role at best. Furthermore, he argues this role is due to women’s status as “lesser animal[s]” (2002). The implication, of course, is that women are less evolved than men and thus cannot compete with their ingenuity. In the same thread, Nathan shares a similar sentiment while arguing with a woman who celebrates her unmedicated birth as an achievement and questions “why women don't rule this planet” (2002). He retorts:

this might be a reason why women don't "rule this planet" in the sense that you mean - a lack of gray matter. Why would you think that you could be "one of a

kind" as far as your supposed accomplishments go and yet perfectly ordinary as far as giving birth goes? And you gave birth in a hospital constructed by men and operated by the male medical establishment? Why didn't you remain consistent to your principles give birth in the bushes? (2002)

In this instance, Nathan suggests that giving birth in a "hospital constructed by men" nullifies her accomplishment of unmedicated birth, which he frames as something that is not remarkable in the first place. Moreover, by suggesting that giving birth "in the bushes" would be more in line with her principles, he also insinuates that women's natural state, sans men, is animalistic or less civilized — in other words, without men, women would still be giving birth in the bushes. Benjamin makes similar comments to another woman who implies that men being "in charge for the last 2000 years" has resulted in environmental degradation:

You are always free to abandon your MAN made computer and MAN made labor saving devices and MAN made medicines and go live in the forest, rooting for berries and swatting at insects. That IS the more natural, "feminine" lifestyle, no? (2002)

Akin to William and Nathan's sentiments, Benjamin suggests that men are solely responsible for civilizational progress whereas women are naturally animalistic or "less civilized." Taken together, comments like these assert that women are inferior to men, not capable of contributing to society in the same ways that men do, and simply parasitize from men's labor and genius.

As indicated above, women's weakness is often framed as innate, whether due to "natural" differences (as Samuel suggests) or god-given roles (as William indicates). However, some men's rights activists also see women's inferiority as an inculcated weakness. In a discussion about child support and why women find themselves in unhappy marriages they eventually leave, Anthony suggests that "[p]erhaps [women] have got used to having everything

from adoring parents and from a hard working husband. So when it comes down to not being totally happy 24/7 they just take the easy route?" (2002). The special treatment women receive via the state (in this case, no-fault divorce and preferential treatment in family courts) is mirrored by the special treatment they receive from parents and husbands who ensure their happiness and comfort. As mentioned above, Dale also criticizes weak women who need "all sorts of special advancements and programs" because they cannot compete fairly on their own merits (1996). A strong woman, by contrast, "can go out into the world and compete with men on her own strengths" and "does not need everyone to stop their own lives to provide her with 'a safe and nurturing environment'" (Dale, 1996). Here Dale suggests that strong women do exist, but only when they live up to masculine standards of self-sufficiency and toughness. Interestingly, he carries this logic through to the entire women's movement, claiming that strong women

don't need to hijack somebody else's work, the way feminists hijack the civil rights movement, and strong women don't need to try to co-opt somebody else's pain and suffering to try to get another chair endowed in feminist studies. (1996)

Again, we see here the discourse that women and/or feminists parasitize others' hard work get ahead, contributing nothing original or meaningful to society themselves. Furthermore, he perpetuates another fairly common men's rights discourse that white women essentially co-opted the civil rights movement — a sentiment Jordan shared with me in our interview, as I mentioned in Chapter 2. For Dale and men's rights activists like him, then, women have the potential to be strong (i.e. equal to men by being more like men) but, generally speaking, are weak because they can take advantage of special programs and privileges that negate fair competition. Moreover, the women's movement is framed as secondary to the civil rights movement and, by extension,



frivolous: women and feminists don't really want equality, they simply want power, privileges, and "feminist studies" chairs at the expense of others' suffering.

Women are also frequently framed as lascivious, lazy, and greedy, compounding the image of women as parasites who expropriate men's labor and ingenuity. George, for instance, claims that he has "NEVER met one woman who wanted to work long term" (2002). This discourse is prevalent in discussions around relationships, marriage, divorce, and child support. Logan asks, "Why do most divorces happen because of money problems?" He immediately answers his own question: "\*Some\* women feel they can get a better provider, if the current one doesn't meet her demands and maintain her security" (1994). Similarly, Owen asks, "why actually file that marriage license that simply gives the state power to interfere with your intimate life? In seven or so years when your lover's love for you fades or she finds a new lover it gives her vast opportunity to loot you financially and emotionally" (1994). Larry claims that "[m]ost men want to support their children. Greedy women want men to send money after they have taken the children" (2002) and Ernest remarks that "[m]en have the responsibility to stay out of sight/out of mind and provide the mother with too much money" (2002). Furthermore, Jerry states that "[s]ingle mothers who steal children and suck out CS [child support] are witches who should be burned to death at the stake" (1998). For these men, women's primary motivations are economic, where the decision to marry and/or divorce is ultimately about finding men to provide for them financially. Marriage and child support therefore become legal mechanisms through which women can seize men's wealth. Oliver says so in explicit terms, claiming that "marriage has become the mechanism by which a woman acquires an ex-husband, a sort of remote-controlled, government-operated worker drone whose function is to go off somewhere and earn lots of money... which is then confiscated by the court" (1998). Again, as with discourses about

rights, equality, responsibility, and special treatment discussed above, discourses of women's greed further reinforce the notion that men are responsible and skilled providers/workers who earn wealth but are denied equal rights, while women are irresponsible parasites who leech from men's labor and have excessive rights.

Furthermore, because women are inferior, they must often manipulate men to attain money and power. Mark claims that "[w]omen have controlled relationship forever, it is in your manipulation of emotions" and that "[w]omen by nature are very good at the manipulation of emotions, far better than most men" (1996). In the aforementioned discussion where one woman asks why women don't rule the world, Nathan responds: "Through mind games and emotional manipulation and histrionics they do, actually. Otherwise, it would be a difficult thing to accomplish when you have tits for brains" (2002). Wyatt echoes this sentiment, claiming that feminists have been able to institute discrimination against men via their "manipulation of chivalry in Congress" (1996). I discuss men's rights discourses around feminism/feminists in more detail below; however, it is worth noting here that the categories of "women" and "feminists" are sometimes collapsed, where feminism's stranglehold on powerful institutions is framed as an extension of women's natural tendencies for manipulation and "histrionics." Thus, while women are seen as weak, inferior, and incapable of "ruling the world," they have, in fact, achieved ascendancy by manipulating men.

However, women do not only manipulate men emotionally: they use their sexual prowess to exploit men, too. Zohrab perpetuates this discourse in a threaded discussion about how women "tease" men sexually. He claims that if men rape women as a way to humiliate them, it is a response to women humiliating men by "playing hard to get, by not knowing what they want, sexually, by forcing men to chase them, give them presents" (1994). Furthermore, Zohrab argues

that women's manipulative behavior should be criminalized: "Lots of women say 'no' when they are just sexistly testing the man's virility, and daring him to go on . . . this sort of female sexism should also be punishable by law -- unless men can use it as a defense in rape cases" (1994). When another user responds sarcastically that Zohrab wants to "outlaw teasing," Julian steps in to clarify that "it is not teasing, it is 'taunting.' It may also be seen as 'entrapment' (i.e. inciting someone to commit a crime). There is a reason why entrapment is illegal, you know" (1994). Again, as with Yash's comments about free speech above, Julian conflates the legal defense of entrapment with a social behavior of "teasing," suggesting that women are essentially inciting men to rape them. Most disturbingly, however, Zohrab states in this thread that "rape can be seen as a political act -- it is an act of revolt by men against the privileged, aristocratic status of women in society" (1994). Here he justifies rape because women are simultaneously lascivious (they want sex but "play hard to get"), fickle (they don't really know what they want), and privileged. Women's sexuality thus becomes another discursive flashpoint that captures their concomitant weakness and power. In this instance, it is also interesting to note the ways in which Zohrab and Julian advocate for legalistic responses to women's behavior (i.e. criminalizing "teasing") *unless* it can serve as a legal defense for men in rape cases.

George's comments in the aforementioned thread about child support and women leaving unfulfilling marriages further illustrates this contradictory discourse where women's sexuality apparently exemplifies both their inferiority to men *and* their power over men. He states,

I think that women have just got far to big for their little booties. They THINK (relative term) that THEY are more valuable than MEN in society . . . Grow up and realise that no-one owes you anything - just because you can lie back and wiggle your arse ! (2002)

Here women are framed as infantile (the directive to “grow up”) and conceited (they think they are more valuable than men). He also implies that women’s sexuality is relatively passive (they “lie back”), a notion that Zohrab also expresses when he claims that women’s teasing is a “gross exploitation of [their] relatively passive role in sexual intercourse” (1994). Furthermore, in this thread, George accuses women who commit adultery of “wanting to screw the guy who spent a few quid on her at the local bar” because they are “shallow” (2002). According to George, women do not want to resolve the problems in their marriages because “BOB down at the Pub tells her ALL THE TIME how wonderful she is - and proves it by buying her a few beers and giving her a right good rogering her in the back of his BMW !’ - (Which means to her that he's rich and therefore a potential replacement MATE” (2002). He thus suggests that women’s confidence and sexual proclivities can be explained with their superficiality: women think too much of themselves because there are men who are willing to spend money on them when they “wiggle their arse[s]” (2002). Moreover, he argues that “MOST WOMEN have ‘someone’ they at least believe to be ‘on the sidelines’ ready to assume the required role of Lover, provider and pseudo Father” (2002). In other words, women are simultaneously 1) weak and infantile (they constantly need a male figure in their lives to provide for them); 2) superficial and promiscuous (they have sex with any man who gives them attention and/or financial support); and 3) powerful and manipulative (men will lavish them with drinks, gifts, etc. in exchange for sex).

By contrast, George also claims that “[m]en commit adultery because they want MORE sex - plain and simple” and because a man needs “BOTH people for the amount of SEX he wants;” however, it is the mistress who expects that “someday that he will leave his partner - but usually this does not happen” (2002). Here men’s sexual activity and motivations for adultery are framed as purely biological and devoid of emotional or moral content, unlike women who

commit adultery or engage in sexual activity to secure a partner who can provide financially for them or bolster their vanity. Once again, these discourses create a dichotomy where men's actions and motivations become the standard against which women's actions and motivations are judged. In other words, whether women seek marriage, divorce, custody, extramarital affairs, or any kind of sexual activity, they are seen as weak, manipulative, and opportunistic. Men's actions and motivations, by contrast, are seemingly "simple" or mundane.

The stereotyping of women as weak is also perpetuated by women participants in the newsgroup, who are often equally scornful of other women whom they perceive to be parasitical dependents. Amy, for example, argues that

It is purely stupid on a woman's part to depend utterly and totally on a man for support for herself and her children. ALL adults should be prepared to support themselves . . . I, too, am sickened by these women who grab, grab, grab all their lives and couldn't support themselves for five minutes if their lives depended on it. I fully expect to get flamed for this, but I see them as modern day prostitutes - alimony is just a form of prostitution. (1996)

Here Amy also perpetuates the notion that some women are child-like because they are not responsible or independent, while also conflating alimony with prostitution. Furthermore, she differentiates herself from women who receive alimony, claiming that she "would rather have dug graves with [her] bare hands than take a nickel in alimony from my ex" and that she is "capable," "intelligent," and "free" because she is financially independent. For Amy, the typing skills she learned in high school are the "very bare minimum" that is "usually enough to at least get a foot in the employment door" (1996). Thus other women should not accept alimony, allow themselves to become financially dependent on men, or make the "monumental decision" to have children unless they are "self-supporting" (Amy, 1996). Similarly, in an argument with one woman claiming child support from her ex-husband, Clarissa accuses her of giving other women

a “bad name” and admonishes her: “You remind me of one of those modern day idiots who believe they can go thru life sucking, yes you read that right, sucking off their husbands” (1996). Thus, even as they might challenge some men’s rights activists’ views by holding themselves up as examples of women who are not weak, irresponsible, or infantile, Amy and Clarissa contribute to this discourse by evoking the imagery of prostitutes and vampiric/parasitical women who “suck” and “grab” from men.

The overall effect of this discourse is to cast women, in general, as simultaneously weak and privileged. They are weak because they cannot compete with men or replace them in the workforce, but are privileged because they do not need to compete fairly for work or can rely on husbands, alimony, or welfare to avoid financial independence and responsibility. While this may seem contradictory (i.e. how can women be both the weaker sex and so adept at controlling society to meet their needs?), men’s rights activists find explanatory frameworks to make sense of women’s ascendancy despite their inferiority.

### *Feminazi State Capture*

If men are innately capable, responsible, and skilled, how then are they so easily victimized by irresponsible and infantile women? To explain men’s predicament, another discourse that emerges is that all-powerful feminists have essentially captured the state and other social institutions in order to deny men their rights and grant women and minorities excessive rights, protections, and privileges — all under the guise of equality. The government and law, in particular, are framed as arenas where feminists have undue power. For example, Dale states that “[f]eminists \*have\* instituted discrimination as official government and corporate policies”

(1996), and Dieter claims that “feminazis” are “most decidedly =not= interested in equality, but in giving all rights to women only, and none to men” (1998). Mark explains that the “‘women's movement’ is about money, it's about selfserving attitudes and ‘equality’ is the ploy” (1996). Similarly, Joel (quoted above asking if women need to be baby-sat by the state) proclaims that “THE LAW IS WRONG. TWENTY YEARS OF FEMINAXI TYRRANY IN THE LAW SCHOOLS HAS GIVEN THIS TO US” (1994). For these men’s rights activists, feminism has taken over legal and governmental institutions to purposefully discriminate against men for women’s benefit. Furthermore, the term “feminazi” is deployed to denigrate feminism as a fascist or totalitarian movement — one that is unequivocally not interested in equality.<sup>43</sup>

Again, however, we might ask how feminists have achieved such unprecedented power if women, in general, are so weak and incapable. As discussed above, many men’s rights activists support the notion that women are inherently manipulative and have gained power, privileges, and special treatment with their Machiavellian cunning. Concomitant with this discourse is the argument that feminists knowingly lie, misrepresent statistics, and use dubious research to manipulate others into believing that women are or have been oppressed. Thomas, for instance, claims that it’s “trivial to observe that most feminists lie about feminism” while “totally ignoring clear evidence of the very real feminist war on equality under the law” (1998). Other alt.mens-rights users reinforce this discourse:

I've heard your stupid claims my whole life and am sick because I have not seen many argments of merit in MODERN civilization (Carl, 1996)

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<sup>43</sup> Zoe Williams argues that “feminazi” was popularized by conservative radio host Rush Limbaugh in the 1990s, and is often effective because “feminists can be tainted by the inference that their love of equality is just a power-grab” (2015, para. 10). It is thus not surprising to see this term used in this way, especially as the initial raw data set includes multiple mentions of Rush Limbaugh’s radio show.

show me the section in the Constitution that says my rights to equal treatment and my rights to not be discriminated against are based on someone's partisan statistical analyses. (Dale, 1996)

the REAL data shows women responsible for 67% of the PHYSICAL CHILD ABUSE in America, NCCAN and American Humane Society. EVERY objective source in America . . . Only your FEMINAZI whacko sources to the contrary. (Elijah, 1998)

you quote are sources from your PACK of INSANE Feminazi who LIE almost as much as you do! I on the other hand have used RELIABLE, and OBJECTIVE official sources. Ones where the math WORKS. Not that twisted delusional shit YOU quote! (Henry, 1998)

But then, you feminazi adulteresses have your Clintonesque ability to turn the truth inside out. It is a talent of sorts. (Jerry, 1998)

Feminists post out of hate and a desire to denigrate. Men post to inject a bit of reality and truth into the issue re the fact that abuse and violence is not only a male problem but also a female problem. That women are constantly beating up on children, men and elders. (Hugo, 1998)

The overall effect of these arguments is to present feminists as inherently untrustworthy, manipulative, shrewd, and deceitful. Zohrab calls this the “typical Feminazi approach”: “Bully and brainwash people into feeling they have to think women are always innocent victims, and men are always evildoers” (1994). Men’s rights activists, by contrast, possess the “real” facts and objective research, and their use of information is always unbiased, neutral, and rational. This discourse is often used to undermine evidence or counterarguments presented by feminist participants in the newsgroup. In fact, as a rhetorical strategy, the seemingly logocentric neutrality of men’s rights activists allows them to pre-emptively dismiss any evidence that might challenge their worldviews, while also staving off the need to turn a critical eye towards their own use of evidence, statistics, and research.



Nonetheless, we are told that, through lies and manipulation, feminists have captured the state and instituted legal discrimination against men. Alongside this legislative power, many men's rights activists argue that feminists also control the media and other social institutions — further empowering them to oppress men and privilege women. One user, for instance, claims that the “feminist media” lies about the divorce rate, which he says is “effectively a 100% divorce rate” in California (1998). Zohrab argues that the “police don't take domestic violence complaints by men seriously” because they are “sexist and also bullied by Feminazis” (1994). Women are thus “able to provoke domestic violence by whatever means, secure in the knowledge that Feminazi control over the media and police will ensure that [they come] out of it with all the kids and half the marital assets” (Zohrab, 1994). Akin to his comments above about rape as a political act, Zohrab suggests here that women purposefully provoke violence because it benefits them. With powerful institutions like the media, police, and family courts in their thrall, feminists have empowered manipulative women to use these mechanisms to exploit men and extract their wealth. Furthermore, there are “male wimps” (Zohrab, 1994), “legions of male lackeys willing to fight for feminists's rights” (Dale, 1996), and “a veritable army of feminist censors” (Roger, 1994) that further bolster feminist state capture. Within this discursive framework, innocent, hardworking men are seemingly powerless to resist or challenge the tyranny of the feminazi regime. Instead, men are kept on a “short leash” by their “Feminist partners/captors” (Zohrab, 1996), for whom they must provide.

## *Gendered Roles and Work*

Thus far, the discourses espoused by men's rights activists in alt.mens-rights pose some interesting contradictions. Men are hardworking, honest, and rational, which makes them innately superior to women. Women are lazy, manipulative, infantile, and parasitical and yet, despite their inferiority, have managed to enslave men and capture the state, giving themselves undue rights and relinquishing responsibility. However, while these discourses would seem to suggest that women need to live up to masculine standards of independence and industriousness, men's rights activists in the newsgroup are not altogether comfortable with the responsibilities, pressures, and apparent lack of reward that comes with fulfilling traditionally masculine roles. On the one hand, reminiscent of the gender symmetry paradigm discussed in Chapter 2, many men's rights activists see the expectations of traditional masculinity as oppressive. On the other hand, however, women's inferiority makes it impossible for them to alleviate men of this pressure, at the same time that their attempts to take on "men's roles" also victimizes men by usurping their positions in society. This conflict becomes particularly evident in discussions of men's work and the pressure to be financially successful.

As demonstrated above, socio-economic anxieties often appear in conversations about employment and the "special treatment" women receive on the job market. However, marriage and relationships provide another discursive terrain where men's rights activists' contradictory fears around financial exploitation come to the fore. In a threaded discussion that draws on Farrell's terminology, Gabriel claims that the "majority of women treat men as success objects, that a majority of relationships in the U.S. break up over financial concerns, and that a great many men feel hurt over this" (1994). Akin to Spencer's comment above about men being less

than property by “owning” their wives, Logan argues that women have “benefitted greatly from this so called patriarchal society” because they can “get a free ride” from the men who provide for them and their children (1994). Similarly, while he acknowledges that financial stability is a “practical consideration for raising a family,” Logan also clearly resents the “fact [that men are] judged by their degree of success or lack thereof” (1994). He expounds further:

So, what woman wants a man for a husband who cannot be a breadwinner? Her parents won't accept him, and they will even criticize her for making a mistake. The way males are raised, is in essence, to prepare them for being a responsible provider, and to grow up as soon as possible, to serve the demands of others, wife, the children, his employer and the government's taxes. (1994)

Here, Logan parallels the slavery/servitude discourse discussed above, and implies that men are victimized by the responsibilities foisted upon them — from the public, macro-level of government to the private, micro-level of the home. As mentioned above, he concludes that the reason most divorces can be attributed to “money problems” is because women are often looking for “a better provider, if the current one doesn't meet her demands and maintain her security” (1994).

Men are thus pressured into unfulfilling employment by women who expect to be provided for financially. George, for instance, asserts that he would “much rather stay at home bringing up [his] children than spend 45 years slaving over a job with NOTHING except financial reward” (2002). Furthermore, he admonishes women who are equally unfulfilled with the role of stay-at-home mother and housekeeper: the “childish trials and tribulations that we as parents have to deal with are menial in comparison to what most men deal with every day” (2002). Men’s work outside the home is implicitly framed as *real* work — i.e. difficult or dangerous. Dale expresses similar sentiments, claiming that “Feminists are NOT clamoring for

the jobs in the sanitation industry (garbage collection) road crews, long-haul trucking, etc.” or other industries where “there is a certain amount of danger or unpleasant working conditions” (1996). The fact that men “make up 95% of workplace deaths” (Dale, 1996) is presented as evidence of his claim. Women, by comparison, are “clustered in safe, indoor jobs, then cry discrimination when they don't get the higher pay that comes with higher risks and more physically demanding jobs” (Dale, 1996). George and Dale suggest here that, once again, women are spoiled and privileged; they do not know the meaning of hard work because they can be taken care of by their husbands or have safe and physically-undemanding jobs.

Given the positions I unpack in this chapter, one would think that women working outside the home and being financially independent, or at least financial equals who can contribute to the family's income, would alleviate men of this undue burden. However, the users of alt.mens-rights do not universally support this as a solution to their woes. George, who claims he “NEVER met one woman who wanted to work long term,” and also asserts that sex “is what women offer a man in a relationship - a man offers his 'income'. Put them together and you have a potentially mutually satisfying relationship” (2002). Furthermore, he argues that women should accept their role in the home just as they “accept our ‘going out to work every day’ as our role in the family” (2002). George thus reinforces the notion that it is natural for women to be dependents and men to be providers, echoing Lenny's comments above about innate gender roles that make “women good at some things, men at others” (1994). Similarly, David acknowledges that “[i]t's hard to deny that women were traditionally sub-citizens in our society” but that they “certainly did have a place”: “Women were very important in our society in their roles as homemakers, nurses, and teachers” (1994). While David thinks “subjugating women to these roles was a mistake,” he takes issue with the “modern day tyranny of feminism” which tells

women they are oppressed and forces them into “dead-end jobs” because women who choose to be “homemaker[s] or [secretaries face] scorn from the radical feminists for not setting [their] goals high enough” (1994). Although he does not directly use the language of “natural” or “innate” gendered roles here, David implies that feminism has disrupted the prior stability of gendered divisions of labor by forcing women into forms of employment that they are not suited for or do not want to do in the first place. The implicit naturalization of gendered work is further reinforced when he claims that the solution to feminist tyranny is to return to a “focus on the strong family unit” (1994). Overall, comments like these suggest that women’s place is in the home, or in limited caretaking and administrative occupations.

This logic is reinforced by other participants. In a threaded discussion titled “REPEAL WOMEN'S RIGHT TO VOTE??? OUTSTANDING IDEA!!,” an unnamed user posting from the organization FathersManifesto.net<sup>44</sup> argues that men and women cannot have egalitarian relationships, and that men must be the “head” of the family. His reasoning is that women are not as intelligent as men. Arguing with a man who claims that he and his wife are “peers” and equals, the unnamed user acknowledges that it is “possible that you are from the extreme left edge of the male intellectual bell curve and because it is entirely possible that your wife is from the extreme right edge of the female intellectual bell curve” (1998). In other words, men with “lower” intellects may in fact be equal to women with “higher” intellects; nonetheless, on average, men are more intelligent than women. The FathersManifesto.net user continues to chide the man, concluding that he is “a member of the organizational structure which is doomed to

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<sup>44</sup> FathersManifesto.net is far-right Christian website with white nationalist overtones. A 1999 petition from their website demands that children be returned to their fathers on the grounds that Christianity stipulates that children belong to their fathers, and thus their first amendment rights are violated by family courts that award custody to mothers.

failure. The only organizational structure which has a chance of survival is one in which the husband is the acknowledged as the head of the family” (1998). While he never clarifies what it means to be “head of the family,” we can infer that a strict gendered hierarchy is the natural state of being, according to this user. Women’s limited capacities are reiterated by Jerry, who reduces women to their biological roles as mothers:

You mean nothing to us, but you bear our children which mean everything to us . . . Fuck you and all you smelly cunts. You think to much of yourselves . . . There is one thing I have to concede, that the Talibans have it right: no rights to bitches, period. (1998)

Here Jerry suggests that women have no value except their ability to bear children. This is evocative of George’s comments about women overestimating their value because they can “lie back and wiggle [their arses]” (2002). Furthermore, Jerry openly supports revoking women’s rights, directly contradicting other men’s rights activists who ostensibly support “equal rights,” as discussed above.

Again, the aggregate effect of this discourse is to posit men as hard workers who are forced into the role of breadwinner and provider, a form of servitude, at the behest of lazy or incompetent women. However, when women do work outside the home, their labor is not considered “real work” and/or they are not really suited for it anyway. Women, it seems, should accept their natural roles as mothers, homemakers, and caretakers and leave the real work to men. But it is this exact arrangement that frustrates and apparently oppresses so many men — when women perform their proper role in the home, men are reduced to “success objects” by having to provide for their families. In the next chapter, I continue to unpack these discourses in a contemporary data set, tying the past to the present. As will become evident, men’s rights

activists today draw on the same contradictory logics to posit men as victims and women as oppressors.

## CHAPTER 4

### Men's Rights Today

What I am saying in *The Myth of Male Power* is that no, we didn't live in a world dominated by patriarchy, we lived in a world dominated by the need to survive. And in order to survive, women played a role that was extremely restrictive and men played a role that was extremely restrictive. Women's role was 'get married and raise children,' men's role was 'get married and raise money' or some equivalent thereof. Kill the enemy, kill for food. Women's role was to love and be loved. Men's role was to kill and be killed.

— Warren Farrell (AVFM Video Source, 2021a)

[Feminism is] not based on evidence, it's not based on rationale. It's based on a victimhood culture . . . That's what's happened in your lifetime, that feminism has gone from addressing issues of disadvantage for women into a constant barrage of attacks on men.

— James, interview (November 2018)

It's a few minutes to six on Friday August 16, 2019. The air outside the hotel, where I've chain-smoked between talks since 9am, is muggy and warm. It's been a long first day at the International Conference on Men's Issues. I'm tired, almost dazed, from being hyper-aware of my presence in this place. I'm not sure if my unofficial "chaperone" — a young British man who's been talking to me and sitting next to me at every session — is attracted to me, simply intrigued that a feminist is here doing research, or was sent by conference organizers to keep an eye on me. (I find out later that it's all three, and that he has been reporting back to some of the organizers he knows about who I am and what I'm doing. They try to find my social media profiles, but apparently with no success.) I want to dip out, catch my breath, get some space. But I've been waiting to attend the next panel since I saw it announced in the conference schedule months ago. I stub out my cigarette and head inside, chaperone in tow.



The panel is titled “How we're failing poor and minority boys.” Featuring three people of color — Sonja Schmidt, Tommy Sotomayor, and Brian Martinez — the panel bills itself as a discussion about the “unique challenges facing poor and minority boys in education, jobs, fatherlessness and social acceptance” (“Event Schedule,” 2019). I had already attended Sotomayor’s keynote speech (“The Bar for Queendom”) and Schmidt’s talk (“DehuMANization”) earlier that day, both of which proposed that Black families are in decline due to the low expectations and lack of accountability fostered by feminists, leftists, and the welfare state. However, when master of ceremonies Karen Straughan opens the discussion, she tweaks the title and asks the panelists how “the *current cultural narrative* fail[s] men and boys of color”<sup>45</sup> (emphasis added). Sotomayor is the first to answer. He believes that minority boys are told they are “not the masters of their own destination” and thus young black men continue to blame “outside influences” when they can’t get a job or are “arrested for selling drugs.” Martinez then rambles about how boys are raised in feminized spaces, from single-mother homes to schools with predominantly women teachers, and thus have no male role models to guide them. He concludes that “institutionalized racism” is “not true” and “just a distraction,” and that we should question how masculinity can be “toxic” if all these men are raised by women.

Schmidt says she agrees with both Sotomayor and Martinez, but takes a slightly different approach in her answer. Schmidt is an African American conservative who’s enjoyed a successful career as a writer and producer in Hollywood. However, having been a single mother who relied on welfare herself, she claims that the problem is not just that minority boys are being raised by women, but that these women are

highly stressed, because now they have to take care of the family on their own; they’re highly unloved because they don’t have a man that values them; their

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<sup>45</sup> All direct quotations from conference speakers are taken from a YouTube video of the event.

child, their boy child, many times looks like that man who they resent, so they're not giving that love and letting that child know that he's valued.

While recognizing that single mothers are under pressure, however, Schmidt's solution to the problem of "fatherlessness" is to reinstate a sense of public shame around single parenthood and receiving welfare benefits. She believes that a healthy cultural stigma around these activities could curtail the irresponsibility she sees in minority communities.

From behind her podium, Straughan then steers the panel into a discussion of "financial abortion" for men. Martinez and Sotomayor are in favor of it, but keep coming back to the lack of "female responsibility" in society. In other words, they believe women need to be held accountable for using birth control properly, for not having sex with or falling pregnant by men they aren't married to in the first place, and for not relying on governmental aid. However, things get heated when Schmidt decides to "speak on behalf of women who are also sweet-talked by men, looking for love, hoping to have a family, and it doesn't work out." At this point, Sotomayor and Martinez react, visibly and almost cartoonishly, while Schmidt explains that there are well-intentioned women for whom things do not work out as planned sometimes, and that men also need to be held responsible for fathering children.

Sotomayor shoots back at her, "are women not adults?" Martinez, seated between them, tries to smooth things over by pointing out that single mothers are part of a larger cycle and were also likely raised by single women themselves. But Sotomayor continues:

Are women not adults though? It's bothersome to hear me say that. You never hear a man say, 'you know she's sweet-talking me out of it,' [*Schmidt rolls her eyes*] No he's just a bad guy . . . No offense but I'm just tired of hearing people saying, 'oh well her clock was ticking' and 'she got sweet talked out of her pants.' There's a thing called 'if he's not married to you, why would you let him get you pregnant;' that's just common sense. There's a thing called, 'if I can't afford to

have this kid by myself, why would I bring it into the world hoping that someone who has not committed to me would commit to it?’

After some audience applause for Sotomayor, Straughan tries to wrap up the session by opening the floor for questions. Martinez even cracks a joke, noting that “it’s starting to get uncomfortable here in the middle of things.” Sotomayor and Schmidt both laugh, and the tension on stage appears to have dissipated as Martinez pats Schmidt on the back.

The crowd around me, however, is fired up. One woman in the audience shouts out that we need to “stop saying that men get women pregnant!” A man at the Q&A microphone stand shushes her and asks if, instead of “parental termination” for men, women should be forced to demonstrate their “willingness and ability to support a child.” Sotomayor answers that women wouldn’t “sign up for it” because “they want to get things but they do not want to give things.” Schmidt sighs, frustrated, as she cuts off an audience member to interject:

I don’t know these women . . . the women I know take responsibility for their actions. Shit happens . . . One of my children, her father was a drug addict. I don’t want any money from him, because now he’s gotta partake in the parenting of that kid. I can do a better job. He’s unreliable, irresponsible, and was he a drug addict when I got pregnant by him? Yes. But I took responsibility. I don’t know these women who you’re talking about. So I don’t know that binding us financially is going to work. It’s not going to work for the child, it’s not going to work for the mother. I don’t necessarily want to be beholden to some guy.

I am on the edge of my seat, scribbling furiously in my notebook. Having just attended Schmidt’s 5pm talk about how communists and feminists destroyed middle-class Black America, I did not expect to be rooting for her (albeit with some critical caveats) during this panel discussion. Nonetheless, watching her openly challenge Sotomayor was powerful, even thrilling, especially as much of his keynote mocked and denigrated Black women.



*Figure 6: Sotomayor (third from the left) reacts, rolling his eyes, leaning back in his seat, and laughing as Schmidt (far left) explains that sometimes things don't "work out." [Image taken from YouTube]*



*Figure 7: Martinez (second from the left) hunches his shoulders, pulling his legs closer together. He looks visibly uncomfortable as Schmidt discusses her own daughter's decision to have a child out of wedlock. [Image taken from YouTube]*



*Figure 8: Martinez and Sotomayor react as Schmidt argues that binding men and women financially is not going to work. [Image taken from YouTube]*



*Figure 9: Martinez and Sotomayor share a look and are barely holding back their giggles as Schmidt talks about not wanting to be beholden to someone else. [Image taken from YouTube]*

But the conflict is not over yet. As Schmidt proposes adoption as an alternative to abortion, Sotomayor cuts in to question her: “any birth control?”

Schmidt: Yeah. Crap happens.

Sotomayor: Really?

Schmidt: Yes.

Sotomayor: I talk to a lot of women who are always that one percentage of women who got pregnant on birth control. [*He starts laughing. Audience members clap, cheer, and holler in support.*]

Schmidt: Yes. It happens. Can you get the flu if you take Airborne? Crap happens.

Straughan jumps in to “back up Tommy” because her best friend’s sister “‘oopsed’ her way into five of the six pregnancies that she had with her husband.” Schmidt retorts, “I think that we’re a little off-topic here. We started out talking about the best things that we can do for minority boys and now we’re talking about who gets pregnant on purpose.” I find myself nodding in agreement, recalling the panel description. The back-and-forth continues:

Straughan: I think these are interrelated topics though.

Schmidt: They are connected but now we’re not talking about what could help the kid. The thing that’s going to help a minority boy is to not be brought into these situations where he’s not wanted, and I would rather see an adoptive family or there’s other options . . .

Sotomayor: I just love it that if a guy slept with a crackhead and got her pregnant, we would say, ‘what are you doing?’ But when a woman sleeps with a crackhead . . . how is that a responsible behavior? You were literally sleeping with a crackhead.

Schmidt: It may not be a responsible behavior to sleep with him but it’s what you do afterwards. It’s like anybody else that makes a mistake in life, it’s what you do to rectify that mistake that makes sense.

Sotomayor is about to respond to Schmidt when Straughan and Martinez try to get the conversation under control again. But Schmidt cuts Martinez off: “And why are we talking about black people like they’re all crackheads?!”

More than two years later, this scene stands out in my memories of the International Conference on Men’s Issues 2019. I was fascinated by what I saw as the dual appropriation and denigration of intersectional feminism, which has become increasingly popularized in both academia and mainstream public discourse (Hancock, 2011; Hill Collins, 2015; Seerung, 2019). In other words, the conference organizers made a conscious decision to frame the panel as an investigation of the specifically racialized issues faced by minority men and boys (i.e. considering the intersections of race and gender, and, to a lesser extent, class). However, the discussion consistently denigrated Black and Hispanic men as gangsters, criminals, and drug addicts, and Black and Hispanic women as lascivious, deceitful, and parasitical. In my estimation, the panel’s purpose was to respond to feminist criticisms of the men’s rights movement as predominantly white (Coston & Kimmel, 2013; Hodapp, 2016), a criticism Martinez invoked directly. But, in practice, it played out as a rehashing of racist stereotypes for its predominantly white audience.

Furthermore, I was struck by how quickly the mood of both the panelists and audience changed as Schmidt began to challenge some of the racist and sexist discourses espoused by Sotomayor in particular. It seemed to me that Schmidt’s presence as a conservative Black woman was expedient when she agreed with Martinez and Sotomayor, but raised hackles when she stood up for Black women, argued that men should be equally responsible for their “offspring,” or tried to redirect the conversation to the wellbeing of children. While I can’t know how Schmidt experienced the discussion as a panelist, and I often disagreed with her

conclusions, as an audience member I was frustrated by the apparent lack of respect and patronizing derision she received when she dared to present a more nuanced view of single motherhood or welfare.

The conference was thus a reminder of how gender-labor-rights anxieties persist in the men's rights movement today, but have also taken on new dimensions and rhetorical tactics — in this case, appeals to race to appear more “inclusive.” In this final analytical chapter, then, I address how these discourses are still present in the movement and how men's rights activists have adapted their discourses to speak to our current sociopolitical climate.

## **Methods**

The bulk of this chapter is a discursive analysis of a data set collected from popular men's rights website, *A Voice for Men* (AVFM). Unfortunately, the site does not provide a clear chronological catalog of *all* articles published. Instead, the landing page is divided into “Featured” articles displayed at the top of the webpage, followed by sections for “Videos,” “Men's Rights News” (mostly external links to other websites), “Recent Articles,” “Trending,” and “Popular Posts.” However, there is much overlap between the articles in the featured, recent, trending, and popular sections (with no clear designation for how articles are organized into these categories). In order to collect my data set, then, I used the “Popular Posts” section to gather 100 articles in reverse chronology. The resulting data set thus begins on July 2 2021 and runs through October 15 2020. Of these 100 articles, 44 are embedded YouTube videos (i.e. they are watchable from within the AVFM webpage), 4 are blogs interspersed with embedded YouTube videos (i.e. a combination of text and video), 2 were simply external links to sources outside of AVFM, and



the remaining 50 articles are traditional text-based blog posts from AVFM's cadre of writers. While most of the YouTube videos are produced by existing AVFM writers and content creators (for instance, the *Regarding Men* podcast hosted by Paul Elam, Tom Golden, and Janice Fiamengo), a few videos shared on the site are from the broader right-wing mediasphere (e.g. *The Rubin Report* and Tucker Carlson on Fox News). Nonetheless, most of my analysis focuses on the discourses espoused by men's rights figures within AVFM. After reviewing each article and video, taking notes on their content and rhetoric, I identified the discursive themes discussed below. To supplement my analysis of these articles, I draw on my ethnographic fieldwork at the International Conference on Men's Issues 2019 (ICMI 2019) and interviews with men's rights activists, as discussed in Chapter 1.

## **Analysis**

### ***Meta-Talk***

Before exploring gender-labor-rights discourses in the data set, I want to establish how men's rights activists envision their own movement at this point in time. Key figures, in particular, reveal much about how they see the history and development of their movement. Recounting how AVFM began, for instance, Paul Elam recalls that he read Warren Farrell's *The Myth of Male Power* when it was published in 1993 (Wright, 2020, n.p.). Working as a "mental health professional" at the time,<sup>46</sup> Farrell's work was Elam's entry-point to the men's rights movement.

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<sup>46</sup> Elam worked as a substance abuse counselor, although his expertise in this area remains ambiguous. According to a *Buzzfeed* exposé, he has claimed to have been "the clinical director of three substance abuse recovery programs as well as a private contractor" before quitting to become a truck driver in 1999 (Serwer & Baker, 2015, para. 34). His LinkedIn profile indicates that he studied psychology at the University of Houston from 1984 - 1988, and that he has

He bought the domain name for AVFM in 1998 but did not launch the site (ibid.). Instead, in 2008, he began writing for *Men's News Daily*. Elam claims that “if there was a flagship back then for men’s issues, that was it” (ibid.), but that *Men's News Daily* was “really a group of trad cons” (traditional conservatives), and that once site-owner Mike LaSalle made Elam the editor-in-chief, he “ran a bunch of his traffic off” because his politics deviated from that of their conservative readership. He then launched AVFM in 2009, under Red Pill Solutions LLC, and has relied on reader contributions and subscriptions to keep the site running at approximately \$3000 per year at the time of writing (Elam, 2020, para. 11).<sup>47</sup> Elam claims that there’s still “good traffic to the site” and that they have roughly 7000 articles available (Wright, 2020, n.p.). Peter Wright also recalls his onboarding at AVFM. According to Wright, he and Elam “first exchanged in around 2007 while he was working at *Men's News Daily*” and Wright was “working on expanding International Men’s Day to reach a more global audience” (Meigs, 2021, para. 11). However, it was only “around the beginning of 2010” that Wright joined AVFM as a contributor and quickly became the website’s editor (ibid.).

The history of *A Voice for Men* is interesting because it demonstrates the intellectual and technological genealogy of the broader movement. Elam traces his own entry to the movement to Warren Farrell, whose work I discussed briefly in Chapter 2, as part of the “second wave” of men’s rights in the 1970s. While Elam was aware of “Yahoo groups and things like that” in 1998, he waited almost a decade before becoming more involved in the movement as a writer

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worked as an “addiction counselor/personal consultant” in the Roanoke, Virginia, area from 2009 to present. However, I cannot find any contemporary evidence of his qualifications or licensing.

<sup>47</sup> It is not clear if Elam left *MND* before launching *A Voice for Men* in 2009. According to Serwer and Baker (2015), Elam was also blogging under the pseudonym “The Happy Misogynist” in 2008, that he raised “thousands of dollars through online fundraising in just days to launch *A Voice for Men* that year,” and that he claims to have launched the site from a laptop in his semi-truck while driving 10 to 12 hours a day (para. 45 - 46). In November 2020, PayPal severed ties with Red Pill LLC; according to Elam, PayPal claims that the LLC violated their acceptable use policy but “refused to tell us precisely which provisions of that policy we violated” (Elam, 2020).

and, later, editor and site-owner of AVFM.<sup>48</sup> He has significant influence over the movement today, with AVFM often considered the flagship website for the contemporary movement (Hodapp, 2015, p. xix), and as the co-founder of the International Conference on Men's Issues. Similarly, as AVFM's main editor, Wright (who I also cite and discuss in Chapter 2) may be equally influential in steering the focus of AVFM and thus the movement itself.

Meta-talk also reveals how key figures see their own movement. In a video interview about his "vision" for the men's rights movement in 2020, Elam refers to it as a "factioned movement" that draws "a very diverse group of people together" (AVFM Video Source, 2020b, n.p.).<sup>49</sup> Similarly, his co-interviewers, Mike Buchanan and Elizabeth Hobson, describe the movement, respectively, as a "nebulous, largely online movement, necessarily" and one in which, "unlike everywhere else in society, we can disagree with other . . . and still love each other at the end" (ibid.). Elam clarifies that there "isn't any ideology you have to follow" to be part of the movement, but the "core" belief that unites men's rights activists is the notion that men "suffer in silence" (ibid.). In fact, he suggests that there are many people who may not identify as men's rights activists per se, but if they are "trying to change laws that are onerous and punitive to men" or trying to change "the narrative," then they may be considered a "contingent of the men's movement" (ibid.). Furthermore, Elam acknowledges that the various groups and factions that are part of the men's rights movement (even those that may not identify with the movement) are reacting to "gender feminism" (ibid.).<sup>50</sup> As he explains elsewhere, the

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<sup>48</sup> I have evidence that Elam participated at least once in the alt.mens-rights newsgroup in 2012 but, given the incompleteness of this digital archive, I cannot say whether he participated or "lurked" in the newsgroup at any other point in time.

<sup>49</sup> Due to covid-19 restrictions, ICMI2020 was fully digital. Many of the talks from the conference were shared via *A Voice for Men*.

<sup>50</sup> Elam is drawing on Christina Hoff Sommers' terminology here. In *Who Stole Feminism?* (1994), Sommers argues that feminism essentially shifted from "equity feminism" (concerned with women's legal equality) to "gender feminism" which proclaims "women's inherent difference from men and trying to change the legal, economic, educational, and political systems to favor this view of women" ("Christina Hoff Sommers," 2005, para. 2).

“one thing” that “seems to bind” the “disparate groups we loosely label as the manosphere . . . is a distaste for feminism and for feminist orthodoxy” (Elam, Golden, & Fiamengo, 2021a, n.p.). These definitions, from movement leaders, align with my own approach to the movement as a groupuscule (Griffin, 2003) and as a movement primarily organized around connective action in the digital age (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012 & 2013).

However, while these key figures evoke feminism, they are also quick to dismiss charges of misogyny. In the aforementioned ICMI 2020 interview with Elam, Buchanan responds to Laura Bates’ *Men Who Hate Women* (2020), challenging her to find “one sentence of misogyny” in the 240 hours of speeches for that year’s conference. Similarly, in an episode of *Regarding Men* on “Women, Relationships and Victim Mentality,” Fiamengo claims that she likes the men’s rights movement because men’s rights activists are angry about the issues, but “hating on women” and making “mass generalizations about female evil” are not part of the movement (AVFM Video Source, 2021e, n.p.). However, as I demonstrate in my analysis below (and have already demonstrated in earlier chapters), there are many instances where the supposed distinctions between feminists and women are collapsed, and men’s rights activists are quick to make contradictory and misogynistic generalizations about both women and feminists.

While men’s rights discourses around women’s lack of personal responsibility persist in the contemporary data set, some of this meta-talk highlights the need for men to also become more responsible. Elam, in particular, proposes that most of men’s problems are a direct result of their choices:

98, maybe 99% of men’s rights issues can be resolved with the decisions that men make, if they don’t get married, if they don’t cohabit in a place that will turn that into a marriage, if they don’t make stupid decisions with women, then they’re less likely to end up dead . . . we have to put the responsibility on men to make those choices. (Wright, 2020, n.p.)

For Elam, then, the men’s rights movement is not about fostering a sense of victimhood, but rather encouraging men to take responsibility for their actions. Ironically, Elam notes that he came to this conclusion after two failed marriages,<sup>51</sup> both of which he says he entered into voluntarily and was “doing what [he] thought [he] wanted to do” (ibid.). This raises the question of how one is supposed to know *what* to choose and whether those choices are really our own — a difficult question for a movement that often relies on narratives of free choice and personal responsibility and, simultaneously, the systemic oppression of men as a group. Elam himself cannot seem to reconcile the tension between doing what he “thought” he wanted to do (i.e. implying some kind of hegemonic process of where he experienced pressures and limits [Williams, 1977]) and his own free will, as he never addresses the underlying philosophical problem of what free choice entails. Instead, he simply advises men to not get married in the first place (i.e. a MGTOW solution).<sup>52</sup> In other words, Elam suggests men make the “right” choice to opt out of marriage altogether. Here we might recall McRobbie’s commentary on post-feminist discourses, where women must be “the kind of subject[s] who can make the right choices” (2004, p. 261). In the men’s rights movement too, then, it seems that men must be the kinds of subjects who make the right choices and must be empowered in the right ways.

Likewise, Wright emphasizes men’s choices and claims that the MGTOW wing of men’s rights is about “male self-determination,” where men can “choose what [they] want to do with [their lives] in preference to having [their] goals conferred or dictated by others, whether by the State, by women, or anyone else” (Meigs, 2021, para. 29). For Wright, relationships between

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<sup>51</sup> Elam claims two failed marriages in this podcast, but Serwer and Baker (2015) note that he’s been married and divorced three times (2015, para. 34 - 35).

<sup>52</sup> See the Glossary of Key Terms in Appendix A for more information about MGTOW ideology.

men and women are inevitable. However, instead of the “faux equality proposed by feminists,” he encourages relationships based on “libertarian-style principles” that

emphasize individual choice for each person of the relationship, relative autonomy, voluntary association, individual judgement, free will, self-determination, and negotiated labour-sharing arrangements & agreements between partners. In a nutshell; *freedom to choose, instead of conferred roles or duties.* (para. 51)

Here Wright perpetuates common men’s rights discourses about individual choice and not having one’s life determined by the state or women. Furthermore, he evokes a kind of “straw feminism” (Sarkeesian, 2011): one of “faux inequality” that is contrasted with the supposedly “real” equality of the men’s rights movement. However, his description of libertarian self-determination is not antithetical to a feminist conception of equality in relationships. In fact, many feminists would likely advocate for relative autonomy, voluntary association, negotiating divisions of labor, and negating gendered roles and duties in relationships *as tenets of feminism.* As I explicate further in this chapter, straw feminism is often evoked as an oppressive ideology that limits or discourages free will or personal responsibility by promoting a “victim mentality” instead.

### ***Choice, Responsibility, and Infantilization***

As with my analysis in Chapter 3, discourses of responsibility, agency, and choice are prominent in the data set. Akin to the examples from Elam and Wright above, the rhetoric of choice is often contradictory or unstable. For instance, we are told that gendered discrepancies in the labor market and earnings are a result of unfettered free choice. For instance, discussing Australia’s

superannuation program,<sup>53</sup> Robert Brockway argues that “[i]f we really want to understand why women retire with less superannuation we need to look at the choices people make” (Brockway, 2021, para. 23). Hobson also comments that “disparities in occupational sex-demographics” are “based primarily on choice,” concluding that “this is something we need to accept” because “[w]e need the best people for the job — even when they’re men” (Hobson, 2021b, para. 46). Similarly, in a *Rubin Report* video (shared via AVFM), conservative commentator Dave Rubin tells us that “[m]en and women choose different things. Women are generally more interested in people, men are generally more interested in things. That’s why more women are nurses and more men are engineers” (AVFM Video Source, 2021g, n.p.) Brockway, Hobson, and Rubin thus challenge criticisms of the gender wage gap (via superannuation and occupational discrepancies) by claiming that these differences are the result of seemingly natural choices and preferences.

At the same time, however, we are also told that men have little to no choice in their occupations. Mark Dent, for instance, claims that where many women have the choice not to work (i.e. to be stay-at-home wives and mothers supported financially by their male spouses), men do not have that choice and must work outside the home (Dent, 2021a, para. 65). He continues:

Some of these mums may have yearned for more and been unable to achieve their dreams due to having children. But just as many dads had to let go of their dreams and take on mindless, back breaking, often dangerous and dirty jobs in order to provide for their family. (para. 68)

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<sup>53</sup> Superannuation is a compulsory pension plan in Australia. On average, women accumulate 40% less retirement funds than men in their superannuation (“The future face of poverty is female,” 2021, para. 2).

Men and women, he implies, are thus equally dissatisfied by a division of labor where they must forgo their “dreams” for the sake of the family; in other words, their choices are limited. Farrell makes a similar argument about men being discriminated against by being “obliged to earn more money,” lest women decide not to marry them or have children with them (AVFM Video Source, 2020a, n.p.), or by having to quit “jobs they would like to do, like being musicians or elementary school teachers” because they need to earn more to support their families (AVFM Video Source, 2021a, n.p.). Similarly, Wright maintains that women “coerce men into compliance and servitude” by “withholding affection, sex, approval and love” — essentially, he argues, women implicitly or explicitly say “If you don’t earn more money, I’ll stop loving you” (Wright, 2021b, para 16). In these instances, the wage gap is framed not as the result of men and women’s choices, but rather as something produced by women’s economic manipulation of men. In other words, women earn less because they can coerce men into providing for them financially.

The rhetoric of choice is thus conveniently leveraged for contradictory purposes. Gendered differences in income or occupation are a matter of free choice when the status quo is being defended, but reflect a lack of choice when they impact men negatively. Nonetheless, the notion that men are responsible, despite their choices, and women, by contrast, are irresponsible and infantile is a consistent theme throughout the data set. In fact, various authors focus on the infantilization of women as a purposeful tactic to maintain men’s oppression and limit their agency. In an article titled “An Existential Take on the View of Women as Children” (2021), Andrew Exeter claims that women continue to “to act in a childlike manner with the use of neoteny” (i.e. the appearance of youthfulness achieved with make-up, behavior, etc.) in order to avoid responsibility (para. 14). Moreover, women purposefully remain childlike to



reinforce their own belief in the presence of an ultimate rescuer in their lives — a man who will both provide them with an easier life and protect them from harm, even at the cost of his own life, just as their fathers would have happily done. (ibid.)

For Exeter, infantilization is an intentional ploy women use to appeal to men’s “undying desire to be sexually validated by women” (ibid.)<sup>54</sup> and to manipulate men into providing for them. Similarly, Vernon Meigs maintains that “acknowledgement of women’s agency is rightfully abandonment of women’s sense of entitlement” (AVFM Video Source, 2021d, n.p.). In other words, when women abdicate responsibility and agency, they become “creatures of entitlement” where men are treated “as women’s servants, laborers, and sacrificial death objects” (ibid.). Furthermore, Wright claims that for men, “growing up” entails a “path of ordered responsibility” and “being in service to women and society;” if men are not “enslaved to serious responsibilities six-and-a-half days per week,” they are criticized and told to “man up” so they can “start providing a lifestyle for a deserving female partner” (Meigs, 2021, para. 37). These examples imply that women enjoy a state of “arrested development” by coercing men into taking responsibility for them and their wellbeing, often in the form of financial support — a strikingly similar sentiment to the discourse of weak women I analyzed in the previous chapter.

The notion that women are infantile and irresponsible is also present in discussions of sexual agency. Greta Aurora, for example, echoes this sentiment when discussing the recent sexual assault allegations against Marilyn Manson. She claims that his accusers exaggerate their youth and vulnerability, creating an “extended childhood” whereby they refuse “to be held to the same standards as men when it comes to agency and responsibility” (AVFM Video Source,

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<sup>54</sup> Exeter does not clarify how women’s child-like qualities validate men sexually. The implication, of course, is that men want sexual validation from minors.

2021i, n.p.). However, she suggests elsewhere that this “extended childhood” and lack of sexual responsibility is not necessarily women’s *conscious* choice. In a separate video about her own brief sexual liaison with Manson when she was 19 years old, she lambasts the social climate in which women are encouraged to abdicate their agency:

I am blaming and shaming the education system that tells girls there is nothing they can do to prevent rape and assault. I am blaming the culture that tells women they have no power. I am blaming the culture that takes all responsibilities away from women, hands it all to men, and then calls that women’s empowerment. (AVFM Video Source, 2021c, n.p.)

Here Aurora implies that women’s apparent lack of sexual agency and assertiveness is not necessarily an intentional choice, but rather a product of socialization that deprives them of the ability to act responsibly. Nonetheless, she argues women must “stop defining themselves as victims” and “be prepared to speak up if we don’t like something,” instead of expecting men to “ask for consent at every stage of an intimate encounter” (ibid.). Sexual assault is thus framed as something women are implicitly responsible for by not taking more responsibility in the bedroom. While I agree that women should be socialized to be more assertive and vocal about their sexual needs and boundaries, a sense of reciprocity is conspicuously absent from this conversation: men’s choices and responsibilities are simply not discussed here. Instead, it is infantile women who need to make better choices to avoid sexual assault.

In sum, then, choice is something only women enjoy and they choose, more often than not, to be irresponsible and childlike to avoid being held to the same standards as adult men. At the same time, however, women may be socialized into this infantile behavior and fail to see that they can choose otherwise. Either way, women’s lack of agency and responsibility makes them

privileged, as compared to men who are manipulated and enslaved by women's infantile behavior.

### *Divisions of Labor: Privileged Women and Enslaved Men*

As shown above, confusing narratives about choice and responsibility are often deployed in the context of sex and relationships, as well as work and finances. Mirroring my analysis in Chapter 3, women are often framed as lazy or unwilling to work at the same time that they are naturally incapable of hard work. Fiamengo claims that the majority of women resent having to “pull their weight economically” or “the thought of having to marry someone who doesn't make more than them,” and that this is a “deeply entrenched part of female psychology” (A Voice for Men, 2021b, n.p.).<sup>55</sup> Alison Tieman also argues that most women believe “men should provide stuff” but “women don't need to provide anything for men” (AVFM Video Source, 2021f, n.p.). And, citing Esther Vilar's *The Manipulated Man* (1971), Exeter states that a woman is “a human being who does not work” because men “play this role in women's lives” (2021, para. 11). In these instances, women are beneficiaries of men's hard work, a privilege which they are apparently reluctant to give up.

This privilege (i.e. not having to work because they are financially supported by men) also indulges women's worst tendencies, further infantilizing them. In his ICMI 2020 talk, titled “Husband 2.0, Alternatives to Indentured Servitude,” Steve Brule compares women to toddlers throwing tantrums, and advises his audience to say “no” to women:

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<sup>55</sup> Of course, Fiamengo clarifies that she and a number of other women are not like this. Conveniently, the women of the men's rights movement never display any of the negative characteristics that women, in general, apparently succumb to regularly.

As a man, you have been trained throughout your life to assume that you must give women everything they ask for, or you will not get a woman. And women have been trained to believe that they deserve everything that they ask for. (AVFM Video Source, 2020d, n.p.)

Furthermore, he complains that “beautiful and sexy women in the west” are “also the most spoiled” because they “have become fully accustomed to getting everything they want when they want it and rarely, if ever, have been held accountable for even their most outrageous, crazy behavior” (ibid.). Elam expresses similar sentiments while appearing as a guest on an episode of the podcast *MGTOW Chats*. One of the hosts, Ayam Sirias, comments that the “modern western woman is the most privileged class that has existed in recorded history” (Wright, 2020, n.p.). Chuckling, Elam responds, “and in prehistory, too . . . the most pampered, privileged, spoiled class of human being that has ever existed on this planet, and still insists they’re oppressed” (ibid.). Thus, because women do not have to work hard and can simply exploit men’s labor, they are like spoiled children with no responsibilities and unrealistic expectations. By corollary, men are the ones who are truly oppressed due to these exploitative divisions of labor.

However, as in Chapter 3, we are also told that women are incapable of performing the kinds of hard work men must do. In a YouTube video shared via AVFM, Will Knowland<sup>56</sup> argues that “women have always been spared the worst work,” citing the slaves who built the pyramids, Great Wall of China, and the colosseum as examples of the difficult and dangerous labor undertaken exclusively by men (AVFM Video Source, 2021b, n.p.). He also claims that “men invented well over 90% of the inventions that have improved women’s life expectancy and quality of life,” and that “mining, oil extraction, heavy and chemical industry, long distance

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<sup>56</sup> Knowland was a teacher at Eton College, a prestigious boys’ school in England. Eton apparently requested Knowland take down the video from YouTube multiple times before firing him (“Eton College,” 2020).

transportation, most forms of construction, many kinds of agriculture such as forestry and the herding of large domesticated animals” and “deep-sea fishing” would all cease in a world without men; women would thus “revert to a primitive life based on horticulture, dwelling in huts and suffering from a permanent shortage of animal protein” (ibid.). Similarly, Peter Ryan maintains that “if men collectively walked off the job, our modern society would literally fall apart and descend into perpetual darkness” (2021b, para. 25). Both Knowland and Ryan, however, suggest that these differences in labor are due to innate biological predispositions: men are physically stronger, more agile, more competitive and aggressive, and thus “better suited to undertaking [these] tasks” (para. 22). Hobson reiterates this argument, claiming that evolutionary psychology “tells us that human sociality is about males competing with each other for access to females, not oppressing females,” and that this innate competition drives artistic and technological innovation, resulting in “advances of all kinds that enrich all of our lives” (Hobson, 2021b, para. 10). And, as Ava Brighton puts it, “men invented the wheel, but women invented the Duluth wheel” (AVFM Video Source, 2020c, n.p.)<sup>57</sup> It is thus men, not women, who are responsible for civilizational progress and stability by dint of their natural strength and ingenuity.

At the same time that women are framed as spoiled, lazy, and spared the worst work, some men’s rights activists contradict the notion that women are not suited for certain forms of labor. Wright, for instance, historicizes “unemployed and pedestalized ‘home-maker’ wives, who appeared *en masse* after the industrial revolution” (Meigs, 2021, para. 16). He claims that, by contrast, women in pre-industrial societies “would labour alongside men as field workers,

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<sup>57</sup> The Duluth Model is a method for domestic violence intervention created by activists in Duluth, Minnesota, in 1980. It “engages legal systems and human service agencies to create a distinctive form of organized public response to domestic violence,” and centers victim safety and community response (McMahon & Pence, 2008, p. 207). Brighton is referring to the Power and Control Wheel, a visual tool developed in 1982 for court-ordered programs for those charged with domestic battery. The wheel is based on the experiences of working-class domestic violence survivors involved in creating the Duluth Model; it identifies a range of tactics abusers use, including emotional and economic abuse, and coercion and intimidation (Pence & McMahon, 2008).

brewers, butchers, bakers and candle-stick makers, along with sharing a great deal of the care of children with other family members, including fathers” (ibid.). Here Wright acknowledges that women have, historically, done much of the same work as men, and suggests that a more equitable distribution of labor is possible. However, he also argues that, due to this more equitable arrangement, pre-industrial women were more “family-centered than self-centered,” and would not keep their children “all to themselves, like chattel or bargaining chips,” as modern mothers do (ibid.).

Nonetheless, even when women are capable of doing the same work as men, they are not necessarily fulfilled by it. Elam acknowledges, on two separate occasions, that many women are unhappily trapped in white-collar work:

Women were promised, ‘oh yeah, just come into the workforce like men, you’ll be in power.’ And then 90% of them end up in cubicles somewhere with bags under their eyes and pictures of kids stuck to the wall and they barely even know who they are anymore. (Wright, 2020, n.p.)

We have millions and millions and millions of women, their connection to their children is pictures on the wall at their cubicle at work, and they’re in there 8, 10, 12 hours a day in middle-of-the-road positions going nowhere, missing their children like crazy, and still having to live under the illusion that they’re somehow empowered by this lifestyle. (AVFM Video Source, 2021a, n.p.)

Where Wright sees women’s (historical) ability to work as evidence of more equitable divisions of labor, Elam’s tone indicates that women are either not cut out for white-collar work or are deeply unhappy when they do these jobs — essentially, feminism has sold women the lie of empowerment by doing men’s work. In fact, his descriptions of women working long hours and missing out on the joys of parenting is exactly what men’s rights activists argue men have been forced to do for the benefit of women. Given persistent men’s rights discourses about how men

are forced into these same unfulfilling jobs, Elam's criticisms of women in the workforce here reveal another unresolvable paradox in the men's rights movement: who *is* meant to do that work?

Again, the advice offered by men's rights activists with regard to who should do what work is confusing and often contradictory. Elam, for instance, complains that women shame men into spending money on them, and that men need to watch "their own finances and [take] care of themselves" by not lavishing women with gifts, paying for dates, etc. (A Voice for Men, 2021b, n.p.). By corollary, he tells women that "if you don't want to be viewed as a sex object, stop putting your body up for sale" and "if you're sick and tired of guys who think you owe them sex because they bought you dinner, find your fucking purse" (ibid.). Here he suggests that men and women share financial responsibilities in a relationship. Yet, during his appearance on *MGTOW Chats* (where he acknowledges that many women are miserable in white-collar jobs), he argues that if a woman "wants any kind of balance and happiness in her life, she will surrender herself to masculine leadership . . . if women want any kind of happiness, it's gonna come because they're willing to submit to a man" (Wright, 2020, n.p.). Elam never elaborates on what it means for women to "submit" to men. Nonetheless, in the context of his commentary about women's unhappiness in the workplace, he seems to suggest that women should leave the workforce and return to the domestic sphere, where they will be happier raising their children — assumedly with breadwinning husbands as their "masculine leadership." But his advice to women appears to directly contradict his advice to men: to not marry or support women financially.

Within these men's rights paradigms, gendered divisions of labor are naturalized and reified, where women's labor is non-existent, makes them unhappy, or should be confined to the domestic sphere. Even Dent, opining above about men forgoing their dreams to provide for their

families, comments that “[t]his isn’t a good or bad thing. The men worked and earned the money and the mum’s [sic] took care of the home front” (2021a, para. 52). For these men’s rights activists, the problem is not necessarily that women do not perform these difficult jobs, but rather that feminists have undermined men’s contributions to society by disrupting “natural” divisions of labor and obscuring the fact that women are actually privileged by this arrangement because they are spared “real” hard work (i.e. not the easy task of raising children or home-making). Yet, as demonstrated above, men are also “enslaved” by the responsibility of supporting women and children financially by doing all the dirty, dangerous, and unfulfilling work in society.

### *Families, Fatherlessness, and Single Mothers*

As shown above, men’s rights activists frequently frame heterosexual relationships as a kind of entrapment, where men are forced to work for the benefit of women and children. This raises the question of how men can maintain more equitable relationships or marriages with women, especially as the problem of “fatherlessness” is a prominent talking point within the movement. In short, men’s rights activists not only argue that family court and custody proceedings are biased against them, but that the phenomenon of children (especially boys) being raised in single-parent households (most often with women as the primary caregiver) is incredibly detrimental to society. For instance, David Solway claims that 1 in 4 children in the US “live without a biological, step, or adoptive father in the home,” which is “generating a cascade of social ills: poverty, depression, drug abuse, social maladjustment, school dropout and criminal behaviour” (2021, para. 1). Elam also claims that there is a “causal relationship between things like teen pregnancy, drug use, truancy, criminality” and “father absence” (Elam, Golden, &



Fiamengo, 2021b, n.p.). In an episode of *Regarding Men*, special guest Warren Farrell links the “boy crisis” in developed countries to fatherless homes — again citing “lack of father involvement” as the “core cause” behind issues like substance abuse, mental health issues and suicide, educational underperformance, ADHD, pornography and video game addiction, male obesity and decreased life expectancy, and men’s apparently declining IQs and sperm counts (AVFM Video Source, 2021a, n.p.). Fatherlessness or father absence, then, becomes an explanatory framework to account for any number of social, psychological, physical, and economic problems.

The reasoning is that fathers provide a unique style of parenting, often involving roughhousing and risk-taking in children’s early years, that teaches them “postponed gratification” and empathy in ways that mothers cannot provide, because women are too quick to protect children, be manipulated by them, or fail to enforce boundaries (ibid.). Solway expresses a similar sentiment, claiming that children who grow up in “a single-parent household, minus the guiding influence of a stern and loving father” become “wayward, uncontrolled, incapable of governing their impulses, and grandly self-infatuated” (2021, para. 14). Interestingly, however, Paul Nathanson<sup>58</sup> contradicts some men’s rights activists’ arguments about the necessity of fathers during children’s early developmental years. He maintains that fathers have become “assistant mothers” at best: “playing with children and doing the diapers is not what makes men feel like fathers and not what fathers need to do” (AVFM Video Source, 2021e, n.p.) Nathanson claims that “infants are cared for by their mother” and therefore fatherhood does not begin at infancy. Instead, he says that the “role of a father begins as children grow up and begin to leave

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<sup>58</sup> Nathanson is most famous for co-authoring a series of four books about misandry. He holds a doctorate in religious Studies from McGill University. In fact, I mentioned in Chapter 1 that one of my interviewees, Adam, stumbled across the men’s rights movement when he found Nathanson and Young’s *Spreading Misandry* (2001) at a bookstore.

the home;” where a “mother’s contribution is unconditional love,” a “father’s contribution is earned respect” (ibid.). At the same time, however, he claims that fathers need to participate in family life on an “enduring basis” (ibid.). Nevertheless, the aggregate effect of these discourses is to posit a father’s role as disciplinarian and authority in the home, further reinforcing gender stereotypes about women as empathetic caretakers and men as impartial rule-enforcers.

Moreover, there is a clear and consistent pattern in the way men’s rights activists attribute a range of social problems to lack of father involvement in children’s lives.

The corollary to this framing is that mothers (and single mothers, in particular) lack the requisite skills to effectively raise children. As shown above, mothers are seen as giving unconditional love and protection, but are not capable of enforcing the necessary boundaries and structure for children to develop a healthy sense of independence and empathy for others. However, there is little evidence provided for how mothers fail to do this. Instead, most discussions of mothers and motherhood rely on anecdotal situations that denigrate women. In the aforementioned episode of *Regarding Men* with Farrell, Elam says that it is “no surprise . . . that we see such a crisis, in the last couple of generations, in lack of empathy from all these single-mother households” (AVFM Video Source, 2021a, n.p.). Nonetheless, he clarifies that “that’s not meant to demonize single mothers but [Farrell is] putting out facts that the research supports” (ibid.). However, in his appearance on *MGTOW Chats*, agrees with Ayam Sirias that another way to define the problem of fatherlessness is that “the problem is single mothers” (Wright, 2020, n.p.) Elam continues:

We’re supposed to say single mothers are the bravest people . . . all they need is a paycheck from the ex and a little bit of padding from the government and a bunch of sympathy from the society around them, treating hoes like heroes . . . how can a society not collapse? . . . she’s an abusive, disgusting parent who has no

business with children and no business with the ability to impact anyone's life other than her own (ibid.)

Here Elam *is* quick to demonize single mothers, generalizing them as abusive “hoes” (i.e. sexually lascivious women). Furthermore, he reflects on his time as a substance abuse counselor, claiming that being raised by a single mother was a “common theme with all the drug addicts and crackheads” (ibid.). The *MGTOW Chats* co-hosts are equally derogatory to women, with Lamprey Milt joking that mothers are “out twerking at 4 o'clock in the morning,” and claiming that western women “put themselves ahead of the child,” treat their children like accessories or property, and are “very rudderless” (ibid.). Martinez makes similarly anecdotal claims about the “high chance that you grow up without a father . . . with a mother who beats you” (AVFM Video Source, 2021f, n.p.). Thus mothers in general, and single mothers in particular, are framed as inept and irresponsible. What women can provide as parents is usually limited to stereotypically gendered caregiving (e.g. unconditional love), but even then, they are conceived of as generally selfish and abusive.

Again, one has to wonder if the men's rights movement provides a portrayal of marriage or family that is not immediately doomed to fail because of women's innate flaws or societal biases against men. And again, as with the discourse of choice, men's options seem extremely limited and fatalistic from a men's rights vantage point. Nonetheless, in his aforementioned talk on alternatives to the indentured servitude of traditional marriage, Brule provides two tangible options for men who want to “satisfy their natural urges for intimacy, children, and companionship” while mitigating the financial risks of marriage and divorce (AVFM Video Source, 2020d, n.p.). He claims that we are told three “lies” about “traditional marriage”: that it is fulfilling for men, necessary for children, and oppressive for women (ibid). Also citing Vilar's

*The Manipulated Man*, Brule explains that when women begin making ultimatums about marriage, they are not looking for a lover or companion, but rather “an indentured servant over whom she can exercise enormous legal power” (ibid.). Thus, men must resist the trappings of traditional marriage and think outside the box to fulfill this need. The first alternative he proposes is to live in separate residences and maintain separate financial lives (without the legal contract of marriage). In other words, a man can maintain a relationship and even have children with a woman, going between each other’s homes to visit or spend the night, but they should not cohabit and his partner should sustain herself financially without his help. According to Brule, if the relationship ends, “a woman cannot take away [his] home if she has never lived there” and the man has already established “fifty percent custody” of his children (ibid). In fact, he argues that “children of divorced parents can do exceptionally well, even while splitting their time between two homes, if the separated parents cooperate” (ibid.).

However, Brule recognizes that he has never seen this kind of relationship in “the west.” By contrast, his second proposed alternative is “already in practice”: “start your family in a poor country” (ibid.). Essentially, he suggests that western men with well-paying jobs can afford to support a woman and children in a developing country, visiting them three or four times a year. His reasoning is that

in countries where there is widespread extreme poverty, women are extremely attuned to a man’s ability to provide, and the average first-world male might appear as rich as Bill Gates to women in that situation. She will often be unconsciously and reflexively sexually excited just by your presence and attention. (ibid.)

This arrangement is thus a “dream come true” for many “beautiful and deserving women in poor countries,” where a western man’s “value in that dating market is enormous” (ibid.).

Furthermore, because “she is dependent on your monthly support . . . she is more likely to behave fairly,” and if she turns “nasty,” the man can “abandon the entire mess without losing the equity you have built up in the first world” (ibid.).

Two things stand out here. First, Brule directly contradicts so much men’s rights activist opining about the scourge of fatherlessness by suggesting that men spend less time with their children — especially in the case of his second alternative, where western men would only visit their “third-world” families a few times a year — and that children from divorced families can in fact thrive (when parents cooperate). Second, his second option also contradicts the notion that men should not be required to support women financially. In fact, the entire premise of this alternative to “indentured servitude” is to create a relationship where a woman is financially dependent on a man who can walk away from his family at any time. Nevertheless, he justifies this arrangement by arguing that “hypergamy” (i.e. women’s desire to “marry up”) is “universal and the result of natural selection” (ibid.). Elam makes a similar comment, claiming that “in the end, women are not attracted to weak men, they are not attracted to non-powerful men . . . to ignore this in the way you want to model masculinity, you want to create a model of masculinity that is totally against sexual selection in the human species” (AVFM Video Source, 2021a, n.p.). In other words, women are naturally attracted to powerful and wealthy men; therefore, men must be able to provide financially to attract a mate, even while this arrangement is oppressive to men.

Thus, within the paradigm presented here, men’s lack of involvement in parenting and family life has led to almost any problem we can imagine. This is, of course, the fault of feminists whose goal is to “to dissolve the family, destroy the family” and “to make children dysfunctional and dependent . . . on the feminist state” (Elam, Golden, & Fiamengo, 2021b, n.p.). Subsequently, while men are entrapped by the “legal responsibilities that hobble all

married men” (Mortimer, 2021, para. 12) and undermined by feminists at every turn, they do need to be invested in fatherhood and family (the very institutions that allow women to enslave them) for the sake of society. And although they should not have to financially support their wives or partners, it is also a fact of evolution that women seek men “from a higher status social group” (AVFM Video Source, 2020d, n.p.).

### *Evolutionary Psychology*

One might ask why, from the perspective of the men’s rights movement, men continue to be enslaved by responsibility instead of working toward a more equitable division of labor. Some men’s rights activists explain this state of affairs with appeals to innate biological differences — again, the notion that men and women are naturally suited for different tasks and skill sets. Scholars demonstrate that various groups in the men’s rights movement synthesize neoliberal rationalities with evolutionary psychology to naturalize specific kinds of gender relations (Ging, 2019a; O’Neill, 2018; Van Valkenburg, 2018). For instance, pick-up artists, misogynist incels, and Red Pillers<sup>59</sup> promote discourses of a naturally-occurring “sexual marketplace” where men must compete with each other for access to women (framed as a kind of passive resource), and must use tactics to overcome women’s innate hypergamy (women’s apparently natural desire to “marry up” or only have sex with “alphas”). Explanations stemming from evolutionary psychology are not limited to these specific subcommunities, however, and can be found throughout the broader men’s rights movement and manosphere.

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<sup>59</sup> See the Glossary of Key Terms in Appendix A for more information about these specific groups and monikers.

Similar discourses are thus present in my data set. As seen above, Hobson hangs the entire development of “civilization” on men’s biological need to compete for women. Elam talks about the low “sexual marketplace value” of many incels with physical disabilities (Elam, Golden, and Fiamengo, 2021a, n.p.). Knowland argues that patriarchy is “world-wide and history-wide” because it “serves an evolutionary purpose for men and women,” and thus women are not oppressed by it but rather enjoy the privilege of being protected and provided for by men (AVFM Video Source, 2021b, n.p.). As mentioned above, the notion of neoteny (i.e. the appearance of youth or child-like features) is often evoked as an explanation for women’s ability to seduce and manipulate men. Thus, so-called biological or evolutionary explanations hold much sway within the movement.

Some of my interviewees also espoused evolutionary psychology and “biological” explanations for men’s current state of victimhood. For instance, Alex felt that “people in general, on a biological level, are much more willing to help women . . . than they are with men.” This is what men’s rights activists often refer to as the “empathy gap” (Meigs, 2021; Hobson, 2021a and 2021b) or sometimes as “gynocentrism”: the notion that people are naturally inclined to care more about women’s issues than men’s, which is typically understood as a result of evolutionary psychology. The common explanation for this phenomenon is that women can only gestate one child at a time, a process that takes nine months and makes women vulnerable or less physically capable, whereas men produce enough sperm to impregnate multiple women at any time and are not made vulnerable by their reproductive activities. We have thus evolved to care more for women: to protect them from harm, respond to their needs and desires, and prioritize their safety for the survival of the species. While this may seem fairly innocuous, evolutionary explanations like these provide a framework for a number of related concepts and phenomena.

Like Alex, Toby also claimed in our interview that we are biologically “hard wired” to automatically help women in distress:

It goes back to the days of the cave men. You had to protect women because they were the only ones that could bring the species along . . . I mean that's just a biological fact. You know, one man could probably impregnate a dozen or so women in a month if that was what was needed. Whereas obviously a woman can only have one child every year, if that's what was needed.

Liz offered a similar explanation for the concept of “male disposability”:

in the past, men were more disposable because a man could get a lot of women pregnant but women could only produce so much children at a time. So, society could survive with less men than women. That's why men were doing most of the dangerous work, like hunting and warfare and stuff . . . And that sort of created the evolutionary reason for why men are considered disposable.

Thus, if men are oppressed by the current state of gender relations, their situation is, at least in part, due to a deeply-ingrained biological imperative to protect women for the survival of the species. This explanatory framework suggests that men are not really at fault for their choices regarding their relations with women because, to some extent, they are “hard-wired” to respond to women’s demands. Furthermore, the implication is that the very survival of our species relies on women benefiting from men’s strength, sacrifices, and hard work.

However, this still begs the question why so many men are miserable with their seemingly natural role of provider and protector. In my data set, discourses of naturalness and evolutionary psychology often seem contradictory for this reason. Furthermore, many men’s rights activists themselves have realized the limitations of a purely “biological” explanation for men’s apparent plight. During our interview, for instance, Ellen took a more tempered approach to concepts like male disposability and the empathy gap, claiming that they are “not quite



biological determinism . . . just a tendency” that humans have due to historical reproductive differences. Matt made similar caveats when biological determinism came up in our conversation, claiming that he was not simply talking about “body parts” but rather “hormonal profiles,” “dimorphic stress reactions,” women’s “larger corpus callosums,” and the ways in which “even the physical size of someone will change how they relate to other people.” Ellen and Matt were both careful to frame these discussions in more nuanced ways or qualify their views about biology and gender.

Some men’s rights activists go further, directly critiquing biological explanations for men’s lack of rights and dignity. Meigs disparages biological explanations of male disposability, arguing that “what should be a lament is used instead as a validation of the status quo” (2021, n.p.). Similarly, Ryan labels the above discourse (i.e. that women are treated better due to their reproductive capacities) the “Golden Uterus” fallacy. He claims that those who appeal to nature to justify or explain women’s apparently higher “value” in relation to men’s “disposability” are “reproductive reductionists” (2021a, para. 33). Instead, Ryan acknowledges that, while these behaviors may have evolved from our prehistoric ancestors, natural selection is not always beneficial: “Think of how much biological dysfunction exists in nature like cancer and how much of it has obviously no evolutionary benefit. Evolution is not intelligent design, biology is not perfect” (2021b, para. 4). Here he frames the apparent tendency to care more for women as biological *dysfunction*, not optimization. Thus, while evolutionary explanations are present in men’s rights communities, scholars should be careful not to assume that all men’s rights activists leverage these discourses in the same way. In some cases, biology is used to justify and naturalize gendered differences in occupations and earnings. In other cases, however, it is something to be overcome, resisted, or reevaluated.

## *Gynocentrism*

Gynocentrism is a theoretical framework that, ostensibly, clarifies and deepens discussions around the “naturalness” of men’s predicament. Typically, men’s rights activists use the term to describe our inclination “to care more about the plight of women and girls than men and boys” (AVFM Video Source, 2021i, n.p.); in some cases, it seems synonymous with the “empathy gap.” However, because gynocentrism also refers more generally to a society’s state of “female-centeredness,” I posit it as an overarching concept that subsumes male disposability and the empathy gap, often accounting for both of these phenomena within men’s rights discourses. While the term has been in use in men’s rights communities since at least the mid-1990s, it appears to have become increasingly popular in the 2000s,<sup>60</sup> and is prevalent in my contemporary data set.

Like many of the discourses I discuss in this dissertation, gynocentrism is also paradoxical. As mentioned above, it is often framed as an innate human behavior: we have evolved to protect and care for women more than men as a result of natural sex differences. Aurora uses the term in this sense, for example, when discussing the aforementioned sexual assault allegations, claiming that we are more likely to listen to women accusers because we are

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<sup>60</sup> I would have to conduct an extensive media genealogy of this term to give a full account of where it came from and how it has become mainstream among men’s rights communities. Due to the limitations of this dissertation, I do not undertake this task here. However, preliminary investigation indicates that the terms “gynocentrism” and “gynocentric” were being used in the alt.mens-rights newgroup by 1996, and appear sporadically throughout the “raw” newsgroup data set (i.e. not the smaller data sets I collected for analysis). *Gynocentrism Theory*, a series of “lectures” published in blog format in 2011, aims to “encourage the intellectual crystallization of what we are calling the Men’s Rights Movement” by proposing gynocentrism as a theoretical “system which explains social relations between the sexes” and “supersedes Patriarchy Theory” (Kostakis, 2011, para. 13 - 14). Peter Wright began publishing his own blog, gynocentrism.com, in late 2012 (approximately two years after joining *A Voice for Men*), and cites *Gynocentrism Theory*. The term certainly existed and was in use before the 1990s, but I do not have space here to fully unpack its history.

“programmed to care more about the plight of women and girls” (AVFM Video Source, 2021i, n.p.). Wright, however, is quick to qualify or downplay the “biological programming” approach to gynocentrism:

There’s obviously a biological component to gynocentrism, but I’ve always maintained that the gynocentric impulse has been wildly exaggerated, supersized by cultural forces that have exploited our biological tendencies. The cultural gynocentrism we have today has vastly overrun whatever evolutionary purposes it may once have had — it’s now a runaway freight train leaving human destruction in its path. (Meigs, 2021, para. 48)

Akin to Ryan’s argument about “biological dysfunction” above, Wright suggests that what is natural is not necessarily beneficial or fixed. Instead, he challenges a deterministic understanding of gynocentrism, pointing to nefarious “cultural forces” that have capitalized on this biological impulse to help women. In “The Biological Origins of Damseling” (2021a), for instance, he further historicizes the “cultural gynocentrism” he sees running amok in society. According to Wright, damseling “is a biologically-based behavior that’s as old as the human race” (para. 1). While it may refer to any person who “announces [their] vulnerability to others” (para. 1), Wright uses it to refer especially to “adult women who engage in theatrical versions” of feigned vulnerability (para. 3 - 4). However, his article does not focus on the “biological origins” of this behavior so much as its “codification” in western cultures via the chivalric traditions of Medieval Europe (para. 6). He argues that damseling is a “gynocentric specialization” wherein men pledged their service to women, which has resulted in women’s “social ascendancy” (para. 7). Contemporary feminism and other social movements have essentially extended this practice by “blanket[ing] much of the world with aggressive demands for redress” (para. 7) and perpetuating a “cult of victimhood” (para. 14). In other words, feminists exploit an innocuous biological tendency in order to turn women and minorities into helpless victims by constantly complaining,

calling attention to their experiences of oppression, and demanding equality — another common men’s rights trope. He concludes that feminism would have “died out long ago if it were not for the power of this ancient ruse” (para. 23). Thus, even if gynocentrism emerges from a natural, biological inclination, men’s rights activists must resist and refuse to act on this traitorous impulse, which has been exploited by women for centuries.

Similarly, Dent writes about resisting gynocentrism in “A Simple Man’s Observations of a Gynocentric Universe” (2021c). He does not define gynocentrism (likely assuming that AVFM’s readership is familiar with this term), but rather compares himself to the protagonist of the television show *The Invaders* (1967-1968), David Vincent. Like Vincent, Dent suggests that he is “trying to open people’s eyes to the truth” but few people listen and most consider him a “crazed conspiracy theorist” (para. 3). He continues:

For years I have seen feminism infest our schools, Judicial system, entertainment industry, media and government. It has spread its tentacles into every powerful institution in the western world.

When I first began to call out the bigotry and hatred which was already such a fundamental feature of this vile ideology, I was either brushed aside, politely and rather contemptuously and dismissed as a fool who had some kind of an agenda when it came to females or someone who was grossly overstating the power and influence of these feminists . . . (para. 7 - 8)

Nonetheless, despite feeling “exhausted” and emotionally drained by having to write about “any issue regarding feminism” (para. 20), Dent continues to cling “steadfastly to [his] rage about the daily injustices meted out to men and boys” (para. 12). For many men’s rights activists, then, gynocentrism is an ideology, a form of bigotry, and a “social tyranny” (AVFM Video Source, 2021h, n.p.). Regardless of its supposedly biological origins, then, gynocentrism must be challenged and made visible because it is a threat to men’s wellbeing.

Gynocentrism thus does the conceptual work of accounting for both the “biological” and “cultural” impetuses for men’s victimization by redirecting attention to the feigned victimization or exaggerated vulnerability of women. It also provides an explanation for why men’s rights activists are apparently treated with scorn, humor, apathy, or disbelief when they try to educate others about the plight of men and boys. Overcoming our tendencies toward gynocentrism would thus seem to be a key goal of the men’s rights movement. However, Elam, at least, states that he does not “want to throw out the baby with the bathwater” (AVFM Video Source, 2020b, n.p.). In the aforementioned interview with Hobson and Buchanan, Hobson claims that feminism is “just one head of a many-headed beast that is threatening our civilization” (ibid.). Elam agrees and says that he has been thinking about the “underlying problem of gynocentrism” at the same time that he does not think “society would benefit from blindly removing all gynocentrism” (ibid.). For example, he claims that it is “wholesome” and “healthy” for society to be invested in protecting pregnant women and children, if we can stop undermining “marriage and families” (ibid.). Later in the discussion he also indicates that a healthy approach to gynocentrism is possible:

If I hear something go bump in the night in my home, I am going to be the one to go look into that. I’m the one that’s more capable of physical aggression . . . If we’re doing work around the house and it involves picking up something that weighs sixty or seventy pounds and moving it upstairs, I’m going to be the one to do that. That is what I call rational gynocentrism. I can do the job better and safer in those cases . . . (ibid).

Again, examples like these are fairly innocuous and rational on the surface. If men, on average, are stronger and more physically capable than women, on average, then it makes sense to negotiate labor according to these gendered differences in skill and competence. But the logic presented in these kinds of arguments still implies that men *should* be doing the dangerous and

demanding jobs because of their innate physicality, even as they resent doing this work against their will (as discussed above). Where do men's rights activists draw the line between men's virtuous biological drive to protect and provide and the exploitation of this drive for the benefit of women at the expense of men and, correspondingly, civilization itself?

I cannot provide a clear answer to this question, at least not from the data I have analyzed here. Like most of the men's rights discourses I unpack in this dissertation, there are disagreements within the community, if not direct contradictions, about how these terms should be understood or used to explain men's lack of rights and autonomy. What is clear, nonetheless, is that the concept of gynocentrism has been taken up by the broader men's rights movement. Moreover, it provides men's rights activists with an explanatory framework to further rationalize men's supposed victimization without necessarily calling men victims (lest they fall into the "victim mentality" feminists and minorities indulge in). Furthermore, whether framed as a biological imperative or cultural ruse, the downfall of civilization also hinges on gynocentrism.

### *The West*

A new discourse that appears alongside gynocentrism is that of the "west" or "western civilization," which overlaps with other discourses I explore in this dissertation. Aurora (cited above in relation to discourses of choice) criticizes the cultural norms that apparently make women incapable of sexual agency. It is western culture, specifically, that she takes to task: "Western women are indeed victims — they are the victims of a society that deprives them of all agency and treats them as mindless, helpless puppets who have no say in what happens to them" (AVFM Video Source, 2021c, n.p.). Similarly, in my discussion of "privileged women" above, I

quoted Ayam Sirias of *MGTOW Chats* claiming that the “modern western woman is the most privileged class that has existed in recorded history” (Wright, 2020, n.p.). In that same section, I cite Steve Brule’s pre-recorded ICMI 2020 talk, in which he claims that beautiful western women are spoiled because they usually get what they want and are never held accountable for their actions. Men’s rights activists routinely espouse the notion that western societies, in particular, coddle women and indulge their whims, thus infantilizing them. Again, in the aforementioned article by Exeter on women as children, he asserts that

[o]ne of the most commonly made arguments in the manosphere concerning female socialisation in the West is that women are most often raised to behave like children and remain in an eternal state of emotional and psychological childhood throughout their lives. (para. 1)

Exeter adds that the “blue pill world” (i.e. not “red pill’d” men’s rights activists) encourages this behavior by treating women as “delicate princesses when they are young,” encouraging neoteny through the use of cosmetics, not holding women accountable for their crimes, “ensuring their safety through male adherence to the dictates of chivalry,” and using “feminist dogma” to convince women of their “permanent victimhood at the hands of evil men” (ibid.). In all of these instances, men’s rights activists bring together multiple discourses — women’s concomitant infantilization, privilege, and irresponsibility; chivalry and gynocentrism; neoteny and evolutionary psychology — by framing these “problems” as the result of western women’s socialization. The notion that western women are especially spoiled, privileged, and infantile thus reinforces other beliefs and discourses within the men’s rights movement.

This discourse about spoiled western women also serves other purposes. First, feminism is contrasted with western culture. Dent, cited above talking about gynocentrism, claims that he has “seen feminism . . . spread its tentacles into every powerful institution in the western world”

(2021b, para. 7). Similarly, Gerald Schoenewolf Ph.D.<sup>61</sup> argues that from “the 1960s until the present feminists have pressed Western governments to pass more than a hundred new laws favoring women and disfavoring men” (2021, para. 5). Furthermore, he claims that, by the turn of the century, the National Organization for Women was “comprised of lesbian, transgender and black women” who began to “target . . . straight white males,” and that “the influence of these women was so great that almost all of Western culture was following their dictates” (para. 6). Akin to the discourses of feminist state capture in Chapter 3, Dent and Schoenewolf paint feminism as an all-powerful and pernicious force that has successfully achieved its goals in western societies. At the same time, however, feminism is positioned as antithetical to western values: a parasite that has “infested” education, law, media and government, or imposed its will on otherwise rational and egalitarian institutions.

Second, by consuming western culture and concomitantly victimizing men, feminism has led to (or is at least contributing to) the downfall of western civilization. As mentioned above, Hobson posits feminism as “one head of a many-headed beast that is threatening our civilization” (AVFM Video Source, 2020b, n.p.). Similarly, in the aforementioned episode of *MGTOW Chats*, Elam claims that “this western world is going down . . . and you can thank feminism for a lot of that” (Wright, 2020, n.p.). His explanation is that feminism has “beaten” male authority “out of society,” and that when women are given authority, “feels lead the way” (n.p.). In other words, feminism has over-empowered women, who are not capable of responsible leadership because they are too emotional (and, by corollary, irrational). Opining about the decline of monogamy, John Davis also argues that the “culprit” responsible for the “downward potential of the west’s trajectory” is our “gynocentric affection” (2020, para. 14). His argument is that, by “rebranding

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<sup>61</sup> This is how the author’s name appears in all his articles for *A Voice for Men*. Dr Schoenewolf is a licensed psycho-analyst in New York (<http://www.drshoenewolf.com/>), and has published multiple articles for AVFM.



monogamy as oppressive to women,” feminism has not only “wreak[ed] havoc on the pair bond between the sexes” (para. 11), but also led to a “female centric era” of “institutional cannibalism” where “petulant, raging entitlement seeks to consume the benefits of western ingenuity” (para. 14). Again, Davis melds multiple discourses of gynocentrism, women’s entitlement, feminist overreach, and western decline in his article. Moreover, feminism is portrayed as cannibalizing otherwise stable and noble western institutions.

But feminism is not *solely* responsible for the downfall of western civilization. Lamenting the increasing secularization of western societies, for instance, David Solway claims that the diminished authority of our spiritual father is reflected in the lack of authority afforded to earthly fathers, which has led to the “societal curse” of fatherlessness in western societies (2021, para. 1). Echoing Hobson’s comments about the “many-headed beast,” Solway says that feminism is “but one manifestation of the secular Left’s war against Judeo-Christian Western civilization” (para. 7). While feminism has “gone a long way to quite literally unman the cultures where it flourishes” (para. 6), he cites Marx and Engels as the progenitors of anti-religious and simultaneously anti-monogamist ideologies that feminists would later embrace and “vigorously put in practice” by asserting “cultural dominance” (para. 7 - 8). Solway thus aligns feminism with a broader secular left that is responsible for the “eschatological patricide” and resulting “civilizational malaise” that has “befallen the West” (para. 9). Leftism, in tandem with feminism, thus provides another explanation for western societies’ apparent decline.

Nathanson makes similar claims about the “collective suicide going on” in “all western countries” (AVFM Video Source, 2021e, n.p.). He uses “wokeism” as an umbrella term for feminism and “black power” movements, as well as ideology, identity politics, postmodernism, post-colonialism, and “all these academic ideas that have somehow taken over in the

universities,” which he frames as a form of fundamentalist “secular religion” (ibid.). For Nathanson, the problem is that woke ideologues do not want reform, but rather “to utterly change society and build on the ruins” (ibid.). Their ideas have moved from the university to the mainstream, where these “wokeists” have “been successful . . . in destroying a curriculum in which children are introduced to the heritage of great ideas in western civilization” (ibid.). Nathanson does not provide any specific examples or evidence of this pedagogical catastrophe. Nonetheless, he concludes that wokeism overlooks the fact that the “only form of racism and sexism that are still alive and well are sexism against men, which is misandry, and racism against white people” (ibid.). As with the other arguments presented above, Nathanson synthesizes feminism, leftism, and secularism (and other social justice movements) to posit white men as the real victims of western decline.

The “west” is thus synonymous with traditional masculinity and male authority and, as implied in some of the comments above, whiteness, heteronormativity, and religiosity. By corollary, feminism is antithetical to and seeks to destroy the traditions of white, masculine, heterosexual, pious western civilization. At the same time, however, feminism seems to have emerged from and been incredibly successful in this same western milieu. In an episode of the Honey Badger Radio (HBR) podcast shared via AVFM, for instance, Tieman claims that western societies have “a level of female security far above that in the Middle East or Africa or countries that are more war-torn,” and that “six, seven, maybe ten times more men die in western societies than women violently” (AVFM Video Source, 2021f, n.p.).<sup>62</sup> Hobson also maintains that “Western culture has had hundreds, if not thousands, of years of practice of prioritising women’s voices” (2021b, para. 32). In other words, these authors perpetuate postfeminist discourses that

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<sup>62</sup> She does not provide any evidence or citation to substantiate this claim.

feminism has achieved its goal of making women equal (if not superior) to men in western countries. Thus, men's rights often posit "the west" as white, masculine, heterosexual, religious, and rational, as contrasted with the parasitical/cannabilistic and irrational forces of feminism, leftism, secularism, anti-racism, and other so-called ideological identity-based movements that are overstepping the bounds of equality.

Moreover, countries and cultures considered non-western are often used as a foil for the west. Some references to non-western societies are vague, as in Sydney Watson's comment that there are cultures "out there" where women are devalued, treated as "second-class citizens," and are not respected "in the same way that we do [respect women] in the west;" by contrast, these behaviors and beliefs are not held by "too many western men" (A Voice for Men, 2021a, n.p.). In other cases, the "non-west" is named, as in Tieman's argument above about "the Middle East or Africa or countries that are more war-torn" as places where women lack security. Lamprey Milt, one of the co-hosts of *MGTOW Chats*, also claims that in "countries like Indonesia, Cambodia, Vietnam" are "always in a constant state of war and women can't have those type of luxuries [i.e. the travel and consumer habits of western women] when you're being bombed" (n.p.). By contrasting the privileged and protected lives of western women with women in "non-western" countries, these sentiments further reinforce postfeminist discourses about feminism's success in the west, rendering western feminists' and women's concerns irrelevant, exaggerated, or deceitful.

Furthermore, comments like these perpetuate superficial, ignorant western-centric attitudes about "non-western" countries as homogeneously war-torn and violent — again contrasting them with the implicit order, stability, and rationality of the west. Hobson concedes that while western "[w]omen have lacked rights in the past," women in "Islamic countries . . .

often still do” (2021b, para. 18). Later in this article, she claims that one would think that civilizations that have thrived on “unfactual stories” — like those that promote “violence over the divinely mandated length of men’s beards, or whether a woman’s mandated head covering is pleasing to the divine powers” — would “collapse and die out” (para. 61). However, much to Hobson’s disappointment, she notes that “it appears that those more rational civilizations who deconstruct myths have birth rates plummeting whilst cultures based in fanciful stories enjoy explosive birth rates” (para. #). Here Hobson is dog-whistling contemporary white nationalist narratives of racial imperilment and the “Great Replacement” (Feshami, 2020). Furthermore, she perpetuates the binary of the rational (and thus superior) west where feminism has outlived its usefulness and the irrational (inferior) non-west where sexism still exists.

However, in a bizarre inversion of this trope (i.e. that non-western women experience relatively less privilege and security than western women), Martinez claims that “Islam is a very gynocentric country” where “women are very well taken care of” (AVFM Video Source, 2021f, n.p.). Putting aside the fact that Islam is not a country, his reasoning is that “countries that are generally oppressive to women are also oppressive to men,” and that

in exchange for that security and that comfort, [women] give up some of their liberty. If you ask an Islamic woman or a Muslim woman about that, she will tell you that she’s not a prisoner and that she is happy because she is treated like a princess. (ibid.)

Thus, what may appear as a lack of rights for women is actually men taking on the responsibility of keeping them safe and comfortable.<sup>63</sup> During this same podcast episode, in which Tieman refers to the higher rates of violent death among men than women in western countries (despite

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<sup>63</sup> This is very similar to Spencer’s comment in Chapter 3 about how women were actually privileged when they were treated as their husband’s property.

non-western countries apparently being “war torn”), she also claims that “if feminism waved its magic wand and turned Muslim women into Muslim men tomorrow, they would be dying at three, possibly even four times the rate that they are now” (ibid.). In other words, western men die at higher rates than western women, but so do non-western men because non-western women are also coddled and privileged “princesses.” In this instance, being in the west apparently makes no difference to anyone’s quality of life.

It goes without saying that these kinds of observations are vague, ahistorical, unfounded, and often contradictory. Despite claims of men’s rights activists’ superior reasoning skills and use of evidence, as expounded by Hobson above, discussions like this between Martinez and Tieman (and others throughout this dissertation) demonstrate the opposite. Moreover, these authors never explain why ideologies like feminism and Marxism, which ostensibly emerge from a western context, are not considered part of the western canon or culture. Furthermore, these discourses around western civilization highlight the internal contradictions of men’s rights activists’ beliefs about gender. The west is a bastion of masculine rationality and enlightenment, but it is also fragile and vulnerable: it is easily “cannibalized” by the inferior and irrational “ideologies” of leftism, secularism, feminism, and identity. Western ideals, as Nathanson implies, are not ideological or identity-driven, despite being closely aligned with masculinity, whiteness, heterosexuality, and amorphously-defined “Judeo-Christian” values — i.e identities that are so normalized that they are considered the baseline for human experience, and not identities at all. Finally, non-western countries, where women may still experience sexism or lack legal rights, also privilege women by keeping them safe in exchange for their liberty and equality. The notion of “the west” can thus be leveraged to do whatever discursive work is necessary or convenient to vilify feminism.

## *Race Rhetoric*

Ultimately, any rationalization that posits men as oppressed and women as privileged seems to hold water in the movement, no matter how spurious, anecdotal, or decontextualized. The same applies to contemporary men's rights activists' discussions of race. Three interrelated themes appear here: 1) comparing men's lack of rights and dignity to the racism experienced by Black and Brown people; 2) leveraging an apparent concern for race-related issues to further posit *men* as victims; 3) and (implicitly) denying that racism is a problem while denigrating intersectional feminism and racial justice movements. Once again, in aggregate, these overlapping discourses around race work to further instill a sense of men's oppression *qua* men.

In the first instance, men's rights commentators compare men's oppression to that of ethnic minorities. Dent laments men's status as "second class citizens" (2021d, para. 7) and claims that we "live under a two-tiered justice system every bit as evil and bigoted as apartheid or the era of Jim Crow laws" (para. 1). He continues:

In some sense it is more insidious than either of those two criminal systems. The overt, blatant nature of the discrimination in South Africa and America ensured that people of conscience would respond to the horrific injustices being perpetrated upon black people and a back lash, a day of reckoning was almost a certainty. (para. 2)

For Dent, the racist violence of Jim Crow or apartheid policies is less subtle than the misogyny men face, and thus these racist systems were more easily resolved due to an inevitable "reckoning." For men, however, there are no "protests, marches and boycotts" to dismantle the unjust system under which they suffer (para. 5). Likewise, during his *MGTOW Chats* guest appearance, Elam argues that the convergence of gynocentrism and "romantic chivalry" in the

family courts has led to “the most horrific repeal of human civil rights since Jim Crow,” to which co-host Ayam Sirias replies, “man is the n----- of the world” (Wright, 2020, n.p.).<sup>64</sup> Here the historical (and ongoing) violence faced by African Americans is transferred to men in general.

In another article responding to the Brauer College controversy in Australia,<sup>65</sup> Dent makes a similar rhetorical move (i.e. transferring racism to misandry) by arguing that “Western society has never done anything other than revile any man or boy who rapes a woman” (2021b, para. 17). Here he reiterates the aforementioned trope that women’s equality has been achieved in the west while dismissing feminist critiques of rape culture and concerns about sexual assault. He evidences this statement by noting that during the Jim Crow era “hundreds of black men,” many of whom were innocent, “were lynched by mobs on the word of white women” (para. 18). Dent uses these lynchings (undoubtedly acts of racist brutality towards Black men) to stand in for the injustice faced by *any* man when feminists suggest that women face sexual violence in the west. Furthermore, he implies that historical racism in the U.S. had little to do with the white men (not even mentioned here) who were merely acting on the “word of white women.”

Wright makes a similar argument in “White supremacy: A euphemism for white woman worship” (2021c). First, he refers to increasingly prevalent discussions of white supremacy in the public sphere as “the much touted ‘supremacy’ culture” (para. 1) — implicitly belittling or dismissing concerns about a pervasive culture of white supremacism in the U.S. However, he goes on to explain that “men’s part” in this culture, to the extent that it exists, is “largely to the role of servicing white women, a role otherwise known as chivalry or benevolent sexism” (para.

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<sup>64</sup> Sirias is clearly riffing on the famous 1972 song, “Woman is N----- of the World” by John Lennon and Yoko Ono.

<sup>65</sup> In April 2021, male high school students at Brauer College were “asked to stand as a symbolic gesture of apology for the behaviors of their gender that have hurt or offended girls and women” (Cucchiara, 2021, para. 20). The incident was part of an apparent effort to address sexual harassment and assault. Understandably, both students and parents were upset by the incident, and the school principal later apologized for the “inappropriate” gesture.

2). Wright thus subsumes white supremacy and racism under gynocentrism and chivalry. He then evokes “Emmett Till, a 14-year-old African American who was lynched in Mississippi in 1955 after being falsely accused of offending a white woman” (para. 14), arguing that the white men who murdered Till did so to “showcase their ‘chivalry’” and keep “white women (and their white male protectors) at the top of the food chain” (para. 14). In other words, akin to Dent’s argument above, Wright implies that white men’s participation in racist violence is at the behest of white women and for the sake of maintaining gynocracy (not white supremacy).

I do not want to elide the role white women played, and continue to play, in upholding racism and white supremacy. Nonetheless, it is very convenient that white men are posited as passive participants here, as if they would not have carried out lynchings or other forms of racist violence without the instigation of white women. In some ways, this discourse echoes discussions above about men’s lack of choice in terms of work — i.e. they are coerced to participate in capitalism and racism by women. At the same time, the specifically racialized violence inflicted on African American men becomes a stand-in for the lack of rights and autonomy apparently experienced by *all* men. Here race is evoked only to be erased. Insofar as Black men experience violence, it is due to their gender more than their ethnicity.

This leads us to the second interrelated discursive theme involving race: when racial discrepancies are leveraged to further posit *men* as victims. For instance, in his article “The Untold Police Bias” (2021), Ted Manning states that it is actually *men*, as a demographic, who are more likely to experience police violence than people of color. Responding to the George Floyd protests that took place across the U.S. during 2020, Manning opens his article by saying that people “are now rightly horrified about the Tuskegee experiments” and that “one could hardly miss the current coverage about blacks killed by police” (para. 1). However, he continues:



What goes unmentioned, is that all of the victims of the Tuskegee experiment were men. Nor is there concern that the great majority of those killed by the police are male . . . while we have made considerable progress regarding the safety of blacks, the same cannot be said for men. (para. 1 - 2)

Manning's tactic here is similar to one discussed above: racialized violence is stripped of its racial content, and is used instead as a segue to talk about *men's* victimhood. He spends most of the article comparing statistics demonstrating that men are more likely to experience police violence and incarceration than Black people. He concludes that while there is "not enough information" to know that "George Floyd's killing was due to racism," it is not difficult to "imagine a white man being treated with the [same] brutality" (para. 19). He thus uses popular public conversations about police brutality against African Americans as an opportunity, not to foster solidarity with Black men within the men's rights movement, but rather to point out that all men are the real victims in our society.<sup>66</sup>

Other men's rights figures leverage race and statistics in similar ways. In an episode of *Regarding Men* featuring Warren Farrell as a special guest, Farrell cites multiple statistics about the number of unmarried women with children in the U.S. He claims that 32% of Caucasian families and 75% of Black families today have "no father involvement" (AVFM Video Source, 2021a, n.p.). Farrell, like many men's rights activists, cites "fatherlessness" (discussed above) as the root cause of multiple societal problems. He then argues that "what we often blame, in our unconscious minds, on blacks is much more accurately looked at by looking at lack of father involvement" (ibid.). While Farrell is correct that we should not "blame" race for the apparent effects of fatherlessness (like "inner-city crimes"), this conversation becomes an opportunity to

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<sup>66</sup> Interestingly enough, one of the "tags" for this article is "Feminist Governance," implying the feminist state is at fault for men's deaths and further deracializing the discussion of police violence.

link fatherlessness to the “social approval for permission for divorce” and to boys being raised in “female-only homes” (ibid.) — apparently the results of feminist governance in western democracies.

Elam also uses race-related statistics to similar effect. He argues that “abortion is a men’s issue” and that men’s rights activists need to be “much more vocal in [their] objection to the practice of murdering children” because “it is men’s natural instinct to protect children” (AVFM Video Source, 2020b, n.p.). At the same time, however, he says there is more to the “abortion issue than just sex”:

We set up Planned Parenthood clinics all across the United States, particularly in black neighborhoods because we’re a society that’s fond of terminating black pregnancies. And this of course comes originally from Margaret Sanger, the founder of Planned Parenthood, whose intention it was to use eugenics to weed out the black population. (ibid.)

After Hobson interjects to say that Sanger is now a “feminist icon,” Elam continues to argue that abortion is a “racial issue” in the U.S. because one in six “black babies have been killed over the past 50 years” and that

the first thing they had to do was disempower black men in black families, to kick them out. Our government pays women to have children while having a father removed from the home. And if they have too many children just abort them. (ibid.)

Elam does not specify who “they” are in this comment; instead, it is a nebulous government, assumedly feminist, that is purposefully removing or separating Black fathers from their children and encouraging Black women to have abortions. Buchanan responds that this phenomenon is “beyond a Holocaust” and that, in the U.K., there have been “10 million unborn children murdered” since the Abortion Act of 1967 was passed (ibid.); Elam retorts that it is “60 million

in the United States” during that same time period. Despite these apparently logos-driven claims, none of the participants in this conversation provide any evidence for these statistics. Moreover, by evoking race in this way, men’s rights activists like Farrell and Elam actually elide any nuanced discussion of the intersections of ethnicity, class, and single-parent households. Instead, they frame men and boys as victims of feminism, which undermines traditional, monogamous marriage and nuclear families.

Finally, while some men’s rights activists evoke race or race-related issues to further posit men as victims, others use race rhetoric to dismiss feminism and social movements for racial justice. This is already apparent in Wright’s article on white supremacy and Manning’s article about police bias against men, both of which focus on men’s victimhood while questioning the legitimacy of calls for racial justice. Similar tactics emerge elsewhere too. Hobson, for instance, claims that one of feminism’s “most ascendant” stories “involves intersections of privilege and oppression;” essentially, she argues that intersectionality is “designed to compensate for feminism’s increasingly blatant irrelevance in the modern West” by creating an “infinite number” of categories for oppression (2021b, para. 57). Similarly, Chris Votey posits that “[f]eminism is more about race than gender” and that the “few times males are brought into the conversation, it is either to blame them for all problems (especially white males) or they need to do more for women” (2021, para. 8). Nathanson, mentioned above talking about the decline of western civilization, also claims that society has “no room” for men unless they are “honorary women” (i.e. “either feminists or token black men or other members of marginalized communities”) and that “unless you’re one of those, you’re basically a demon, you’re the source of all evil and all suffering” (AVFM Video Source, 2021e, n.p.). Taken together, these comments reflect how men’s rights activists frame feminism as having achieved

or surpassed its goals of gender equality and must now take on issues of race and other forms of marginalization (i.e. dog-whistling intersectionality) to continue victimizing white men.

Similarly, in an episode of *Regarding Men*, Fiamengo points to the double standards at play when “BLM and Antifa groups” are “explicitly calling for violence and enacting terrifying violence, cheered on by media, enabled by big tech, condoned by government and law enforcement” while incels and Proud Boys are considered terrorist groups in Canada (Elam, Golden, & Fiamengo, 2021a, n.p.). Golden confirms Fiamengo’s observations, claiming that the Southern Poverty Law Center has “nasty crap” to say about men’s rights activists and incels, but no negative reporting on antifa and Black Lives Matter (ibid.). Elam then argues that the “bigger” problem is that the U.S. Department of Justice and Federal Bureau of Investigation are so corrupt that they will not prosecute antifa or BLM protestors, and instead “designate people who are trying to reduce violence as violent threats” (ibid.). Fiamengo concludes that one cannot “avoid coming to the conclusion that the agenda here is indeed to destabilize society to such an extent that a completely authoritarian or even totalitarian regime can come into power” (ibid.). Akin to Elam’s nebulous “they” aborting Black children above, Fiamengo does not specify *whose* agenda this is. Nonetheless, given persistent men’s rights discourses about feminist state capture, we can assume that Fiamengo is referring to a broadly feminist-cum-leftist agenda. Furthermore, the concerns about police violence against African Americans that precipitated these protests are not discussed at all — instead, the conversation continues to focus on the supposedly unfair treatment of all men at the hands of feminist governments.

Taken in aggregate then, discussions of race in my data set reveal the ways in which men’s rights activists respond to and capitalize on popular public discussions and timely news stories about race only to elide any meaningful discussion of racial politics and inequality.

Instead, these articles and conversations consistently return to framing women and feminists as powerful, hateful, and committed to the destruction of the family, if not western civilization itself. This is particularly interesting in the context of my ethnographic fieldwork, where I saw similar discourses leveraged for similar purposes. I began this chapter with an extensive anecdote from the International Conference on Men's Issues in 2019, where a panel touted as a discussion of the specific problems facing minority boys and men became another occasion to bash women, single mothers, and feminists. However, the panel also echoed some of the other race discourses I have discussed here.

After Schmidt challenged her co-panelists for stereotyping Black people as substance abusers, the Q&A continued with Fred Hayward, a movement stalwart,<sup>67</sup> asking the panelists to “comment on the Black Lives Matter movement and how it actively obscures men’s issues” (Justice for Men and Boys, 2020, n.p.). Martinez argues that “BLM is an intersectional feminist group” that “actually prioritize[s] black women over black men” despite the movement being founded because “black men . . . are being killed” (ibid.). Responding to feminist critiques of the men’s rights movement as predominantly white and largely eliding issues of race, he professes that he does not like “talking about men’s issues from a race perspective” because “the most important group is men” (ibid.). However, he continues, “if you want people to pay attention to men’s issues, you may have to point them to men who look like us [gestures towards himself and Sotomayor] and are suffering in order for people to start to give a shit about men that look like you” [points towards the predominantly white audience] (ibid.). Martinez then parallels

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<sup>67</sup> Hayward founded Men’s Rights, Inc. in 1977 in Massachusetts around the same time that Haddad founded Free Men (whose newsletter, *Options*, I analyzed in Chapter 2). According to the National Coalition of Free Men (NCFM), their organizations established a relationship during that period, with Hayward coming to “represent the political side of Free Men, while Free Men concentrated on gathering grass roots and organizing support groups” (Crouch, 2011, para. 7). This relationship further underscores the groupuscularity of the men’s rights movement and the existence of pre-digital networking of organizations and individuals.

Manning's article above, arguing that statistically it is men and not Black people who are more likely to die from violent crimes.

Schmidt answers Hayward's question next by espousing the same narrative as Elam: "if black lives really mattered, then they would rise up against the amount of black babies that are aborted with Planned Parenthood being planted in our neighborhoods, with the millions of black children that are being murdered every day in the womb" (ibid.). Finally, Sotomayor riffs on Schmidt's phrasing, arguing that

If black lives really mattered, all the shooting that's going on in Chicago, those Black Lives Matter people would come out and they'd say something about that, because the blacks are taking their own lives and there's no problem, there's no protest, no anything. Because you could start right there with what you're doing to yourself before you say what a cop does because you are more likely to get shot by another black person than a cop or a racist white person. (ibid.)

Here Sotomayor perpetuates the narrative of "Black-on-Black violence." As scholars have shown, this discourse, "while statistically correct, is a simplistic and emotionally charged definition of urban violence" (Braga & Bronson, 2015, p. 1) that often elides meaningful discussion of how race and class interact and is used to "unabashedly excuse or legitimize police violence against Blacks" (Jones-Brown et al., 2021, p. 325). Again, the overall effect of these moments is not to address the specific and complex social, political, or economic challenges facing African Americans or other ethnic minorities, but rather to posit *men* as continually oppressed by the all-powerful feminist state.

As with my analysis in Chapter 3, these discourses — from responsibility to the decline of the west to men as a racialized category — reinforce each other and present a vision of the world where men are exploited, oppressed, and victimized by women. Whether or not a "natural"

gynocentric impulse is to blame, women's worst tendencies are enabled and encouraged by malicious feminists who have captured the state, media, and other socio-political institutions. However, akin to my discussion in the previous chapter, men's rights discourses raises a number of contradictions and no clear vision for gender equality. In my conclusion, I return to these paradoxes by outlining the core discursive tenets of the men's movement, as explored in these analytical chapters. Furthermore, I try to make sense of why these discourses may have persisted and what ideological purpose they serve within the men's rights movement.

## CONCLUSION

### Male Tears and Capitalism

I think it really just boils down to capitalism. This division of labor keeps people divided, so it's just like a race to the bottom. Men have to work harder, longer, that also punishes women, too. Even though men are the ones expected to do the most dangerous work . . . And I think the men's rights movement as a whole is like a culture war, primarily. It is isn't really super focused on economics, it's just trying to gather people to focus on the superstructure, not so much the base.

— Lisa, interview (March 2020)

Men do not see the world like women do. The gaze of men projects outward into it; they see it, they take what they need from it, and they remake it anew. The gaze of women falls inward. The world becomes them, it exists for them. And thus, women do not build; they consume. It is not the vicissitudes of society or the education system that makes women like this. It is their nature. And, I hazard a guess that few others have made, that because of the consumptive nature of women and of men's desire to give them every comfort and convenience that we are eating ourselves alive . . . What will we be able to do, what wonders will we be able to build, when men are finally, for the first time in human history, truly free?

— Theodore Labadie, “Men Made This,” *A Voice for Men* (April 2022)

In September 2020, *Jacobin* published “A Portrait of the Breakdown of Hope and Meaning in America”: a reflection on the documentary *TFW No GF* (2020),<sup>68</sup> which sympathetically follows a group of self-identified incels. Both the film and article attempt to situate “inceldom” within a larger socio-economic context — namely, showing the documentary’s subjects as “not *just* woman-hating ‘shitposters,’ [but] also complex subjects born out of a post-economic crash United States, steeped in a culture of resentment” (Gabert-Doyon, 2020, para. 13). Overall, the documentary slipped under the radar (it was released online in April 2020 at the beginning of the covid-19 pandemic) and received mixed reviews, with critics’ responses ranging from

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<sup>68</sup> “GF” stands for girlfriend. “TFW” is Internet slang which stands for “the feels/feelings when” or “the face when.” The initialism is often used at the beginning of a phrase, usually to indicate a specific emotional reaction to a specific situation. For instance, “TFW you realize you’re explaining Internet slang to your dissertation committee.”



“disarming” and “troubling” to “irresponsible” and “problematic” (DeBruge, 2020; Dickson, 2020; Gilmore, 2020). What interests me here, however, is not so much the film or the attendant article, but rather the backlash that unfolded via social media. As a case in point, take the interaction on Twitter between *Jacobin* magazine and feminist author-journalist Jill Filipovic:



Figure 10: A tweet from Jill Filipovic responding to *Jacobin*'s article.

What is fascinating about this brief digital exchange is the way in which Filipovic reduces *Jacobin*'s two-part argument — that incel subcultures are misogynistic and reactionary, but that socio-economic factors play a *part* in their radicalization — to “just” economic insecurity as an excuse for misogyny and racism. *The Intercept*'s Glenn Greenwald joined the fray, arguing that a “core liberal/left principle” is to try to understand underlying causes instead of simply denouncing “people who do bad things,” and going on to claim that “media elites and establishment liberals” have failed to talk about economic deprivation and downward mobility as central to life in the United States (Greenwald, 2020). The public debate that ensued in response to Greenwald only reiterated the divide between those who seek an “economic” interpretation and those who posit misogyny as the determining factor in incelism:



Figure 11: Other Twitter users responding to Greenwald's tweet about underlying causes.

While I agree that we should be careful not to resort to oversimplified, economically-reductive explanations for the existence of these communities (or anything, for that matter), claiming that the cause of misogyny is misogyny is circular reasoning that lacks explanatory power.

Admittedly, some joined the conversation with more nuanced approaches, asking, for instance,

why some people are subjected to economic insecurity and do not resort to misogynist violence, or pointing out that Elliot Rodger (one of the most famous misogynist incels in the U.S.) came from a wealthy family. However, in general, the public discourse in this particular Twitter debate devolved into accusations of empathizing with fascists, explaining away racism and misogyny with economic reductionism, and reiterating that misogynists hate women because they choose to or because we live in a patriarchal society.

I draw on this anecdote in my conclusion for a few reasons. First, it raises some important questions about how we currently theorize misogyny, the manosphere, and men's rights groups. Although the specific example cited here concerns misogynist incels, this discourse permeates much of the liberal and "pop feminist" approach to the men's rights movement in general. If hatred and resentment of women is the motivating factor for men (and women) to join these communities, where does that hatred and resentment come from in the first place? If these attitudes have no connection to the larger context of how our lives are reproduced on a daily basis, then how do we begin to address them? Within this discourse, misogyny is framed as a transcendental problem with no connection to the "material" realm, or an individual choice by bad actors who do not have the fortitude to resist their patriarchal upbringing.

Let me be clear: I am not suggesting that misogyny is purely an "economic" issue, or that individuals cannot be held accountable for their actions, or that acts of violence and bigotry should be tolerated because men experience economic anxiety. Furthermore, it is necessary to criticize instances of economic reductionism when they occur, especially when they elide the intricacies of race and ethnicity, gender, sexuality, nationality, ability, and so on. But it is equally problematic to resort to a metaphysics of misogyny that does not name one of the most powerful forces that shapes our attitudes, behaviors, environments, institutions, and values every day:

capitalism. Tackling misogyny in our current milieu requires us to contextualize the men's rights movement in the systems that impact our lives. What is structural misogyny if not a part of the structure of capitalism?

In Chapter 1, I established a theoretical framework for my research grounded in dialectical approaches that highlight processes, relations, and structures of oppression. To try to argue that the men's rights movement is *either* "about" misogyny *or* "about" economics is a moot framework because it neglects the dynamic relationship between the two. Instead, I see my dissertation contributing to the work done by scholars like Rachel O'Neill (2018) and Shawn P. Van Valkenburg (2018, 2019), who demonstrate the ways in which men's rights communities' conceptions of masculinity are informed by neoliberal logics of success, competition, and economic individualism. However, unlike O'Neill and Van Valkenburg, I do not focus on the specific manifestation of capitalism we call neoliberalism. Instead, by carrying out this historical study, I reveal that socio-economic anxieties have always underpinned men's rights activists' reactions to feminism and informed their sense of men as a class of victims denied their rights. In the discussion section that follows, I return to the core themes that emerged in my analysis chapters to highlight both the persistence and malleability of men's rights activists' discursive tactics.

### **Paradoxes of the Men's Rights Movement**

When I began this research, I wanted to conduct an earnest investigation of men's rights activists' experiences and their explanatory frameworks. I aimed to keep an open-mind: perhaps all the discussion of the movement as a reactionary backlash against feminism was exaggerated

or only a partial truth? Maybe there was something to their claims of disenfranchisement? What I have learned, through my sustained engagement with this groupuscular movement, is, once again, more complex than an either-or approach can explain. During interviews and ethnographic fieldwork, I experienced an uncomfortable range of emotions: “fear and anxiety, interest and curiosity, frustration and indignation, and discomfort and complicity” (de Coning, 2021). I cannot deny that some interviewees, in particular, struck me as reasonable people. Some want the circumcision of children with penises to be recognized as unnecessary genital mutilation that denies children their bodily autonomy. Some (ostensibly) want more equitable divisions of labor and for fathers to be considered as adept at child-care as mothers, especially when it comes to divorce and custody proceedings. Some see statistics like those I cite in my introduction and ask, “how could this be a patriarchy?” It’s difficult not to empathize with them, or at least understand where these rationales are coming from, even when I disagree with their assessments of women’s relative power in society. Even as I remain critical of how my interviewees may be presenting a “favorable” version of their views during the interview process, I can’t help but see them as complex people with a range of motivations and experiences that led them to this movement.

At the same time, however, my in-depth analysis of men’s rights media (and my experiences at ICMI 2019) bolster arguments about the men’s rights movement as a reactionary backlash to feminism and minorities’ rights movements. I demonstrate that, as a collective, men’s rights activists do indulge in misogynist discourses that denigrate women. If my personal interactions with individual men’s rights activists make me reluctant to call *them* misogynists, my earnest investigation has led me to conclude that the movement, as a whole, is premised on misogyny and male supremacy. Furthermore, my focus on the nexus of gender-labor-rights anxieties demonstrates the ways in which this manifestation of misogyny relies on notions of

men as an oppressed class who are denied rights via their economic status, and women/feminists as an oppressor class with surfeit rights and undue financial security.

In other words, if the men's rights movement is a reactionary backlash to the gains made by women and minorities, it is a backlash that is inseparable from the hegemonic legitimacy of capitalism and liberal rights. As mentioned in Chapter 4, any rationalization that frames men as victims denied their rights by a feminist gynocracy (and, by extension, women as uniformly privileged oppressors) is valid in the movement, no matter how tenuous the evidence. This is why men's rights discourses are often contradictory or paradoxical: they cannot resolve the tensions within their own movement where dialectical discourses around gender, labor, and rights must constantly be reworked to support a worldview in which men are perpetually "enslaved to serious responsibilities" (Meigs, 2021, para. 37).

Men's rights activists want women to work and earn their own money, but they don't want women to compete with men in the labor market. The wage gap doesn't exist and women can walk into any job they want, but men must still be breadwinners. Or the wage gap does exist, but it is a result of innate gender differences and free choices — except that men have no choice. Men are naturally suited to perform difficult and dangerous labor, but they also resent men having to do this labor and elide the ways in which "women's work" is also often difficult, dangerous, and dirty.<sup>69</sup> Women deny men their rights by gaining rights, but men were also historically oppressed when women did not have formal rights. If women want the same rights as men, they must live up to masculine standards even though they are the weaker sex and should not try to be like men. Women oppress men when they have abortions, when they choose to be

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<sup>69</sup> For instance, much nursing, childcare, professional cleaning, service work and other forms of care work involve contact with bodily fluids and hazardous materials, and long hours spent on one's feet. The majority of garment workers are women subjected to exploitative and degrading working conditions.

single mothers, *and* when they have children in monogamous marriages. Stay-at-home mothers are parasites; working mothers are bad mothers. There is an epidemic of fatherlessness, but men should be able to opt out of parenthood while also denying women a right to abortion or welfare. Also, the crisis of fatherlessness persists while feminists are “murdering” hundreds of thousands of fetuses every day. Women are “hoes” who “oopsie” their way into pregnancies to enslave men or parasitize from the state, but men are never instructed in the proper use of prophylactics or encouraged to practice celibacy. Men are naturally more intelligent, capable, and ingenious — they built civilizations! — but they are also easily oppressed by parasitical women and conniving feminists who are weaker, less intelligent, and less capable.

These paradoxes result in an ideological catch-22. In other words, within a men's rights framework, gender equality seems wholly untenable. In fact, mutually supportive and fulfilling relationships among men and women are practically impossible. Men are perpetually exploited, oppressed, and enslaved. Women are almost always manipulative, hysterical, and parasitical. Everyone is miserable, all work is onerous and unfair, and all relationships are doomed to failure. In a nutshell, the men's rights movement provides more conundrums and quandaries than solutions to men's apparent oppression. That these paradoxical discourses persist across time and media platforms tells us something about the appeal of the movement: it is less about achieving gender equality than providing an explanatory framework that blames women/feminists (and not capitalism) for men's experiences of alienation and exploitation.

## Race and Civilization

A remarkable (but perhaps unsurprising) finding in my research is the use of racialized discourses that bolster or complement this explanatory framework. Although I was not “looking for” men’s rights activists’ discussions of race when I began my research, it became apparent during my sustained engagement with their media that the dual discourses of western civilization and man as “n----- of the world” (Wright, 2020, n.p.) are increasingly prevalent in the movement. This is certainly an area for further research: I would have to conduct more extensive archival research to confirm if they can be traced further back and the extent to which these discourses are deployed. Nonetheless, I want to discuss them here as the racial dynamics of the men’s rights movement are still largely understudied.

With regard to the “western civilization” discourse, men’s rights activists dog-whistle white nationalist sentiments (whether purposefully or inadvertently) when they espouse the notion that men created civilization and that feminism is a threat to civilization (by usurping men’s primacy). This is evident in comments like Hobson’s (mentioned in Chapter 4) that evoke the “Great Replacement”: a conspiracy theory about the encroachment of “non-Europeans” (i.e. usually Muslim and Middle-Eastern immigrants) into Europe and the United States. But the overlaps between men’s rights activist and white nationalist conceptions of the “decline of western civilization” are evident elsewhere, too.<sup>70</sup>

Writing between the 1850s to 1860s, for instance, German nationalist Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl complained that “sundry women . . . seeking to peddle ‘emancipation’” are a clear sign that

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<sup>70</sup> My thanks to Kevan Feshami for his assistance in finding the white nationalist texts I discuss briefly here.



civilization was in decline (1990, p. 280). American white nationalist and Spengler-devotee<sup>71</sup> Francis Parker Yockey argued that feminism “makes women man-like” while feminizing men (1948, p. 223), essentially resulting in the death “of race, nation and Culture” (p. 298). More recently, American white nationalists like David Lane and Andrew Anglin have connected the ascendancy of feminism to the decline of western civilization. Lane claims that “the decades since women were ‘liberated’ have castrated our males and led us to the brink of extinction” (1999, p. 28). Writing for *The Daily Stormer* in 2016, Anglin proclaims that

We have a system where [women are] told not to get married, and instead go pursue a career working in a bank or whatever. They are also encouraged to engage their most base drives, which are to get as much attention from as many men as is conceivably possible, and in this case, they’re not going to have long term partners . . . Bring back the patriarchy now for *success*. (para. 4 - 8).

Divorced from its context, this quotation could easily have appeared in my men’s rights data set. Furthermore, in another article, Anglin claims that feminism has nothing to do with liberating women; instead, it seeks to “obliterate healthy relationships, causing extinction-level birth rates and therefore destabilizing the West” (para. 7). Nonetheless, he urges his readers to “recognize that [women] have been victimized by Jews who told them they are capable of making their own life decisions” (para. 10) — here feminism is framed as a Jewish conspiracy to destabilize western civilization.

I am not suggesting that men’s rights activists and white nationalists are synonymous. To be clear: not all men’s rights activists are white nationalists, and not all white nationalists are men’s rights activists. But it is worth noting how often discourses of civilization and “the west”

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<sup>71</sup> Oswald Spengler is another noted German nationalist and conservative whose best-known work is *The Decline of the West* (1918).

were evoked in my contemporary data set. While the similarities and differences in how men's rights activists and white nationalist deploy discourses of western civilization's decline require further examination, scholars and journalists have begun to investigate the "cross pollination" occurring among the manosphere, alt-right, and white nationalism online (Anti-Defamation League, 2018; Mamié et. al, 2021; Romano, 2018). What my analysis makes clear is that men's rights activists disseminate and legitimize these discourses, further bolstering ties between white nationalism and men's rights activism, whether or not they consider themselves racial nationalists or even know that they are dog-whistling racist discourses. Furthermore, the discursive overlaps among these communities reinforces my reading of the men's rights movement as groupuscular/rhizomatic and connective.

The second racial discourse I mention above works in parallel to the discourse of western civilization. As seen in my anecdote about the "How We're Failing Minority Men and Boys Panel" at ICMI 2019, men's rights activists are quick to evoke race when it is expedient for their purposes while also espousing a "color-blind" approach to the problems faced by men. In other words, in our current political milieu, drawing on concepts like "minority men and boys," police brutality, lynching, or the "murder" of Black babies lends an air of legitimacy to their claims — which is, ironically, what they claim intersectional feminism has done (i.e. using racial politics to remain relevant in a world where feminism has presumably surpassed its goals). At the same time, however, they frame racism as secondary to misandry. To the extent that racism is even acknowledged as a problem, it is reframed as something that exists because (white) women use their power and privilege to victimize men; that some of these men happen to be Black or Brown is beside the point.

Again, a more thorough analysis of men's rights print materials is necessary to confirm whether men's rights activists were making use of this explicitly racialized discourse prior to the 1990s. Nevertheless, it is interesting that men's rights activists drew on the racialized language of slavery, indentured servitude, and Jim Crow in alt.mens-rights to align men's oppression with that of racial minorities. This discourse persists in the contemporary data set, but it also takes on new forms in response to current politics — for instance, claiming that police violence against men is a more pressing issue than police violence against African Americans. Ironically, while men's rights activists try to capitalize on the legitimacy of “social justice” or “diversity and inclusion” rhetoric in our current milieu, they erase the specificity of racial violence experienced by men of color by transferring this oppression to *all* men and claiming that women are ultimately their oppressors.

In other words, whether or not individual men's rights activists are conscious of how this discourse works, they essentially appropriate the oppression and violence faced by men of color (African American men, in particular), divest it of its specificity and racial content, and repackage it as the universal suffering of *all* men. While men's rights activists may eschew the label of “victim” (which puts them too close, ideologically, to the feminists they abhor), they simultaneously claim a victimhood status that may garner sympathy or at least a sense of legitimacy. This appropriation of racial justice discourse is reminiscent of Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital, insofar as men's rights activists frame men as having valid claims to “victimhood” (unlike women or other minorities, who are actually privileged) and the authority to impose the “‘correct’ and ‘legitimate’ definition of the social world” on others (Mahar, Harker, & Wilkes, 1990, p. 5). In other words, this discursive tactic is a means of gaining

recognition and “mak[ing] the world over in their own image” (Schirato & Roberts, 2018, p. 200) — i.e. a social world in which men have been oppressed, exploited, and victimized *as men*.

## **Final Reflections**

What remains to be seen, then, is how the men’s rights movement will continue to develop these discourses in coming decades. My tentative suspicion is that the ineliminable discursive components (antifeminism and the gender-labor-rights nexus) that have existed since the movement’s beginnings will continue to be deployed, and that appeals to popular contemporary discourses (like those around racial justice) will also be appropriated and leveraged when politically expedient. After all, these gender-labor-rights discourses speak to a broader “structure of feeling” (Williams, 1977/2007) where men do have legitimate reasons to feel trapped, dissatisfied, and exploited by their work and thus their lives. From a Marxist perspective, it’s not difficult to see how men are often coerced into unfulfilling jobs and alienated from themselves, their loved ones, and the fruits of their labor. As I hope I have made clear by now, we do need to consider men’s rights activists’ appeals and discursive tactics in the larger context of capitalist exploitation, gendered divisions and valuations of labor, and the zero-sum game of competition in the labor market. This is the whole way of life in which all of us, including men’s rights activists, operate on a daily basis: we all experience pressures and limits on the choices we can make (Williams, 1977), and most of us struggle to “find the balance” among our personal, professional, and familial commitments because divisions of labor and onerous work arrangements make such a balance nearly impossible.

However, accounting for this context does not mean that we need to take men's rights activists' claims at face value or downplay the misogyny at the heart of the movement. Ging (2019b) argues that mainstream media has largely accepted a "mancession" explanation for the rise of online misogyny, attributing men's "growing antipathy towards feminism to recent shifts in the economy" (p. 48) while ignoring the influence of post-feminist rhetoric. Instead of an either-or approach to men's rights discourses (i.e. the movement is either "a response to economic decline" or "misogynist backlash, nothing more"), we can easily see the relationship between these positions. The discourses I analyze here demonstrate how men's rights activists' oft-legitimate feelings of exploitation and alienation are easily channeled away from their larger context and towards women and/or feminists. As Van Valkenburg explains (2019), "[m]en don't have to critically examine their own deeply held conservative economic beliefs so long as they can scapegoat women for alienation, exploitation, unemployment, and precarity (p. 2).

Furthermore, while men have been affected by decades of economic crisis and the increased "feminization" of the labor market (Garrido, 2020), they are not the only demographic facing precarity. As I demonstrate in my introduction, women are also impacted by stagnating or declining incomes, bear the brunt of housework and care work, and — despite men's rights activists' claims to the contrary — earn less than men even when adjusting for differences in education or work experience. Moreover, men's rights activists' assertions that men are forced to be breadwinners for their families are, in fact, not that common. In 2020, roughly 60% of children under 18 are raised in a household where both parents work, with only 30% of children raised in a household where their father worked but mother did not (United States Department of Labor, 2021). These numbers differ for families with smaller children (under the age of 6), with about 56% of families having both parents employed and fathers working to support their

families in 34% of cases. However, this still begs the question: if women are so privileged in the labor market and can walk into almost any well-paid job with few, if any, qualifications, why aren't more men staying home to raise their children? Wouldn't it make sense for women to become breadwinners if there is no wage gap and they are more likely to find work than their male counterparts? Again, based on the discourses they espouse, one might think that men's rights activists would advocate for these divisions of labor — but they don't.

Instead, as mentioned above, the paradoxes of the men's rights discourse result in a catch-22 situation where there are no solutions to men's experiences of exploitation, alienation, frustration, and loneliness. The tenuousness of a men's rights framework is reflected in the personal narratives of two of my interviewees. The first two times I interviewed Alex, in 2017 and 2018, he seemed committed to men's rights activism. He told me that he came across the movement in 2012 while watching YouTube videos about religion and atheism and “stumbled upon” Karen Straughan's channel. Alex also shared his frustrations with feeling pressured to pursue a well-paying career that was not personally satisfying, and how he was the only man in his classes when he decided to retrain for a career he was passionate about. However, when we last spoke in 2020, he told me that he'd lost interest in the men's rights movement and was converting to Orthodox Christianity. He had attended ICMI 2019, too, and found it largely anti-climactic:

they have this event where people from all over the world who are interested in this kind of niche topic that is like not widely known, all get together, and then we all listen to talks that talk about the same content we're already familiar with . . . in addition to doing that, it would be a really constructive use of time if we were making plans and networking with each other about, like, who lives in different parts of the world, and how can we be working together and supporting the projects that each other are working on, and that kind of thing, where you're not having to convince people and educate people about issues. They're already

bought into it . . . I mean, most of these people don't have any funding, so it's hard to do things, but, at the same time, we could be doing more than we are.

When I asked him to clarify his reasons for moving on from the men's rights movement, he indicated that a "lack of action," "just complaining," and "victim mentality" had essentially turned him off the movement, which increasingly seemed like a "dead end" to him. Instead of "just being bitter and pissed off at the world," Alex wanted a space where he could devote himself to "improving relationships between men and women and helping them to have good relationships with each other," which eventually led him to traditional Christianity. From his perspective, Orthodox Christianity provides a "template" in which men and women have clear roles and responsibilities, and, in his own words, "male leadership of the family" and "wifely submission to the husband." According to Alex, his transition from men's rights to Orthodox Christianity "completely transformed [his] marriage": he left his passion-career (which did not pay well) to become the "primary breadwinner" (his wife was previously earning more than him), and instead of acting "pretty much like roommates," he and his wife became "more of a team who are working together towards a common goal." While I am reluctant to infer too much from our conversations, it seemed to me that Alex was looking for a structure, a "template" as he called it, for healthy and fulfilling gender relations. What strikes me here is that he did not find what he was looking for in the men's rights movement: a template for "good relationships" between men and women.

Similarly, Adam left the men's rights movement after a few years of engaging with its media. However, in his case, it was a sociology degree and not Christianity that eventually brought him to similar conclusions. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Adam discovered the men's rights movement when he found a copy of *Spreading Misandry* (2001) in a bookstore in the early

2000s. He told me that, as a young man, he was in a “toxic soup” of “generalized anxiety disorder, depression” and a “sense of victimization and frustration and rage” which was mostly based on “hypotheticals that [he’d] made up” and would get “worked up” about. He worked for a year after receiving his bachelor’s degree, but decided to return to university to study sociology specifically to research men’s issues from a men’s rights perspective. However, during an introductory Gender Studies class, he began to question his own assumptions and perceptions:

The next few weeks of that class were a wake-up call, they were really eye opening because I would make a claim about men’s oppression and [the professor] would be like, “Where’s your evidence?” And I’d be like, “Well, what about this and what about this,” and she’s like, “Um, fine. Here, write down the following articles” and she would just give me names, like, “Go read those.” And I’d read them and be like, “Oh shit, these are actual...this is empirical work that is challenging everything I believe.” And I couldn’t be honest with myself, I couldn’t — because I said I love evidence, evidence matters, evidence is important — I couldn’t hold true to those ideas and reject what I was reading . . . it wasn’t long until I started seeing the conspiratorial strands that were undergirding a lot of men’s rights beliefs . . .

According to Adam, by the end of the second semester, he had “explicitly rejected” his men’s rights beliefs because he “could not sustain them” with “all this empirical evidence” demonstrating that he was wrong about men’s victimization. In fact, Adam hypothesized that, like him, “most guys” in the movement only last for about three to four years because “they grow up a little bit, their priorities change,” and “they gain perspective maybe.” Like Alex, Adam did not find what he was looking for in the men’s rights movement: evidence that his sense of victimization and alienation were rooted in real phenomena where men are oppressed as a class. Instead, he admits retrospectively that he would “appropriate the perceived victimization of others” (the hypothetical situations mentioned above) and externalize his own anger, frustration, and toxicity.



I conclude with these two narratives because they support my own claims about the contradictions and tenuousness of the men's rights movement. While movement stalwarts and micro-celebrities, like Farrell or Elam, continue to profit from men's sense of aggrievement and even legitimate frustrations, it is not clear how many men's rights activists are committed to the cause long-term. This is an area for further research, but Alex and Adam's stories illustrate the ways in which men's rights activists themselves become disillusioned with their own movement, which cannot provide a coherent, well-evidenced vision of gender equality. At the same time, however, the tenacity of the men's rights movement and its discourses suggest that the movement is rooted in something more permanent, or at least persistent, than purely superficial or transitory grievances. While men's rights activists may externalize their anger or appropriate the victimization of others, they are clearly making use of socially legitimate discourses around concepts like rights, oppression, and equality.

Furthermore, the tenacity of the gender-labor-rights nexus indicates that efforts to challenge men's rights activism and misogyny, more broadly, cannot be limited to platform politics. In other words, although the affordances of digital technologies allow men's rights activists to network, interact, and build communities, the men's rights movement itself is not dependent on any particular media or platform to disseminate its discourses. Recent efforts to combat online extremism through quarantining and deplatforming,<sup>72</sup> for instance, have had mixed results (Copland, 2020; Rogers, 2020). Moreover, as Julia DeCook (2019) explains, platform-focused tactics to combat online extremism can be effective but limited. The unintended effect of deplatforming policies is often to "strengthen the group rather than to

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<sup>72</sup> Quarantining refers to Reddit administrators' practice of placing communities under "a form of probation" (DeCook, 2019, p. 3) that aims to "prevent its content from being accidentally viewed by those who do not knowingly wish to do so" (Reddit, 2020, para. 2). Deplatforming refers to the "removal of one's account on social media for breaking platform rules" (Rogers, 2020, p. 214).

discourage them” (p. 5), with core members “becoming more sophisticated and organized” (p. 253) as they migrate to new platforms and digital spaces. While I am not suggesting a completely laissez-faire approach to “toxic technocultures” (Massanari, 2017), we also cannot focus solely on limiting their presence on specific platforms. A recent policy brief on “misogynist incels,” for instance, calls for offline strategies like funding long-term projects that tackle “comprehensive sexuality education and education justice” to prevent “ideological violence through structural change,” as well as “preserving the ability of researchers and organizers to share their work in public” (Kelly, DiBranco, & DeCook, 2021, p. 30), in addition to platform-focused strategies.

But this is easier said than done. While I commend this policy brief for not simply calling for deplatforming, I am also reluctant to conclude with glib appeals to “education” — as if people who perpetuate misogyny, racism, etc. are uniformly “uneducated.” While Adam was able to earn a graduate degree in sociology, this is simply not a viable “solution” for many; nor would I suggest that one must have a graduate degree to parse out the contradictions at play in the men’s rights movement. Furthermore, men’s rights activists tend to be middle-class and are often college educated (Crowley, 2008; Gambill, 2005; Messner, 2016). In my estimation, then, efforts to combat misogyny via “education” must think critically about how to address the concerns raised, even disingenuously, by men’s rights activists (for instance, financial pressures and divisions of labor that create competition between men and women) as well as what “structural change” can look like. What would the world look like if families did not have to rely on exploitative paid labor to survive and raise children? How could we change divisions of labor to benefit men, women, and children — as well as non-binary and gender non-conforming people, who have largely been left out of this conversation altogether? What stereotypes and

expectations are harmful (emotionally, psychologically, physically, and financially) for men, and how do we combat them without eliding the oppression experienced by women and other minorities? Where does such “education” need to happen: in the home, in schools, via media outlets, state-funded agencies, private corporations, all of the above? And finally, how do these educational and outreach efforts avoid becoming absorbed, appropriated, and sanitized by hegemonic institutions, as we’ve seen with terms like “intersectionality” and “diversity” in academia?

I cannot offer any grand solutions here because the challenges of addressing misogyny are complex and manifold. Nonetheless, understanding the strengths and weaknesses of how men’s rights activists make sense of the world — and, in my case, how they rely on gender-labor-rights anxieties — to frame men as victims of a feminist conspiracy is a start. At the very least, we need to investigate how the men’s rights movement is part of a whole way of life in which people do feel alienated, lonely, angry, anxious, exploited, and oppressed, even when they inhabit the most privileged or secure positions in society. While misogyny is not a productive response to these feelings, we cannot ignore the larger context from which they emerge and how we all experience gendered roles and expectations under modern capitalism.

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## APPENDIX A

### GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

#### **Incels / Misogynist Incels**

The term “incel” is a portmanteau of “involuntary celibate” — in other words, incels define themselves by their *involuntary* lack of sexual and/or romantic relationships. The term was coined by an anonymous woman in 1997 when she launched *Alana’s Involuntary Celibate Project*: a website, mailing list, and support community for people who struggled to form romantic relationships (Taylor, 2018). Although “incel” initially applied to anyone who experienced “involuntary celibacy,” the term is now exclusively used to refer to men who express vitriolic resentment towards women for denying them their “right” to sex and intimacy. As such, the Institute for Research on Male Supremacism recommends using “misogynist incel” to highlight the specifically male supremacist manifestations of this moniker (Kelly, DiBranco, & DeCook, 2021). In public parlance, however, “incel” is typically assumed to be synonymous with the politics of male supremacist resentment (see the opening discussion to my conclusion, for instance).

Most misogynist incels desire relationships with women, but feel that their physical unattractiveness is a crippling setback. However, while self-loathing and masochistic peer criticism are norms within incel online communities, women are still held to blame for these men’s perceived failures in dating. It should be noted that while incels may desire sex and physical contact, a lack of love, intimacy, and validation are also discussed in their forums. However, most misogynist incels — some of whom may have tried pick-up artist or Red Pill strategies — have given up on relationships altogether. They are typically young and straight; they believe that women and gay men have an easier time finding romantic and sexual partners than straight, cisgender men who do not meet societal expectations of success and attractiveness. Many misogynist incel forums will thus ban women members altogether; similarly, bragging about one’s sexual experiences and virgin-shaming are vetoed in these online spaces. Some misogynist incels adopt a “black pill” philosophy, arguing that systemic problems (i.e. feminism and misandry) are not resolved by personal empowerment, thus dismissing the self-help mentality of other men’s rights or mansphere groups as disingenuous.

In recent years, we have seen a number of terrorist attacks carried out by self-identified incels: the University of California, Santa Barbara, shooting in 2014; the Umpqua Community College shooting in Oregon, in 2015; the Toronto van attack in April 2018; and the Tallahassee shooting at a yoga studio in Florida in November 2018. These attacks have brought public attention to both misogynist incels and the mansphere.

#### **Mansphere**

The “mansphere” refers to the groupuscular network of websites, blogs, forums, and wikis (collaborative, crowd-sourced databases) dedicated to discussions of men and masculinity, and specifically from misogynist and male supremacist viewpoints (Ging, 2019a; Marwick & Lewis,



2017; Rothermel, Kelly, & Jasser, 2022). I include men’s rights and misogynist YouTube channels, podcasts, and social media accounts as part of the manosphere.

This term has been taken up by scholars to discuss online manifestations of the broad, groupuscular men’s rights movement, as well as related groups and identities (see entries below). Marwick and Caplan (2018) note that members of the manosphere “pioneered” online harassment and networked harassment techniques — for instance, the #Gamergate controversy in 2014, “a contentious online campaign in which male gamers and MRAs [men’s rights activists] used social media to systematically attack feminists, female video game critics, and developers” (p. 547).

### **Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW)**

The MGTOW community emerged around the late 1990s to early 2000s from online men’s rights spaces (Rothermel, Kelly, & Jasser, 2022). They advocate for men to “go their own way” — in other words, to disinvest from gynocentric hegemony and eschew relationships with women. While some MGTOWs will pursue sexual or romantic relationships with women, they typically reject marriage. According to the now-defunct MGTOW Wikia page,<sup>73</sup> men who go their own way reject societal norms, especially around heterosexual relationships, but also reject the notion that they should pay taxes or be involved in activism at the legislative level. There are five “levels” of MGTOW: “level 0,” in their terms, is to “take the red pill” (see below) and develop “situational awareness;” level 1 is to refuse to marry, engage in long-term relationships, or have children; level 2 is to eschew even casual or short-term sexual/romantic relationships; level 3 involves economic disengagement (refusing to “earn more than is necessary” to “starv[e] the government of taxes” and pursue one’s own leisure; and level 4 is to disengage from society altogether, avoiding contact with others as much as possible (MGTOW, n.d.).

As such, scholars sometimes distinguish them from other men’s rights groups, arguing that they hold a uniquely libertarian and/or separatist ideology that puts them at odds with traditional men’s rights activism (Rothermel, Kelly, & Jasser, 2022; Wright, Trott, & Jones, 2020). However, as I demonstrate at points throughout this dissertation, the ideological boundaries among different groups within the manosphere and broader men’s rights movement are not easily maintained — especially as many self-identified men’s rights activists are not involved or interested in legal reform and, similarly, resent paying taxes to the purportedly gynocentric state.

### **Men’s Rights Movement**

Scholars often define the men’s rights movement as a reaction to or backlash against feminism (and other civil rights movements), concomitant with transformations in gender roles and law from roughly the 1960s, that focuses on men’s experiences of “reverse sexism” or tries to elevate, preserve, or reinstate men’s position in society (Gambill, 2005; Hodapp, 2017; Kimmell, 2013; Marwick & Caplan, 2018; Rothermel, Kelly, & Jasser, 2022; Schmitz & Kazyak, 2016).

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<sup>73</sup> In 2016, *Wikia* rebranded to become Fandom and focus specifically on providing a wiki-style platform for media and entertainment fandoms. However, the original MGTOW Wikia page is still accessible via the Internet Archive, which was captured by their Wayback Machine internet archival tool in 2015 (<https://web.archive.org/web/20150711131741/http://mgtow.wikia.com/wiki/MGTOW>).

Adding to this framework, I define the men's rights movement as the collective name for a diverse range of groups and individuals who believe the dignity and rights of men and boys are diminished, threatened, or nonexistent; it identifies feminists (and sometimes women in general) as the cause of men's suffering, oppression, and lack of rights (de Coning, 2020; de Coning & Ebin, 2022).

There is some debate as to whether the other subgroups included in this glossary are part of the men's rights movement or part of a broader constellation of anti-feminist and misogynist communities. However, as I note in Chapter 1, I am less concerned with taxonomical boundaries than the ideological flows and overlaps among these communities.

### **The Red Pill**

“The Red Pill” is both a metaphor for “converting” to a men's rights mindset, and a specific community with its own values and precepts within the manosphere.

In the first instance, the “red pill” is a reference to *The Matrix* (1999), in which the protagonist must choose between taking a blue pill (a return to blissful ignorance) or taking a red pill (an escape from his virtual reality — painfully, but not without attaining knowledge of the truth of his existence). Many men's rights activists thus use the metaphor of “red pilling” or “taking the red pill” to describe the process of coming to consciousness about gynocentrism: something that is painful and isolating, but also liberating.

In the second instance, The Red Pill is a specific men's rights online community exemplified by the subReddit r/TheRedPill (created in 2012). The key tenets of The Red Pill include mastering “game” (behaviors, attitudes, and techniques that increase men's attractiveness) and using evolutionary psychology to rationalize people's choices in dating, marriage, and sexuality. The purpose is to maximize men's sexual conquests; this attitude is exemplified by current top post: “How To Use The Desperation of Ukrainian War Refugees to Your Sexual Advantage.”

The Red Pill community also demonstrates the rhizomatic connections among men's rights and white nationalist ideologies. In its “Theory Reading” sidebar (a curated reading list for newcomers), r/TheRedPill includes a link to an article by F. R. Devlin, “Sexual Utopia in Power” (2006), published in *The Occidental Quarterly* — a white nationalist journal. At the time of writing, r/TheRedPill has been “quarantined” (a form of “probation” that makes it more difficult to access; see footnote in my conclusion) but is still active.

Lastly, *The Red Pill* (2016) is also the title of a pro-men's rights documentary produced by Cassie Jaye. The documentary evoked controversy, namely because post-production was largely funded by men's rights activists via a Kickstarter campaign, and because Jaye begins the film as a self-identified feminist but renounces her association with feminism by the end. The documentary's premiere was also canceled at a cinema in Melbourne, Australia (although local, crowdfunded screenings of the documentary have taken place across the United States and in other parts of the world). I attended one of these crowdfunded screenings, organized by local men's rights activists in Denver, as during the early phases of my research.

## **Pick-Up Artists (PUA) and the Seduction Community**

Pick-up artists (PUAs), sometimes referred to as the “seduction community,” share similar tactics and rhetoric to The Red Pill community — in particular, improving “game.” Nonetheless, there is some antipathy between these communities, at the same time that some use these terms (PUA and Red Pill) interchangeably.

As Rothermel, Kelly, and Jasser (2022) point out, PUAs do “not actively advocat[e] against the society and economy in which they live,” but rather subscribe to “an individualistic, self-help ideology” (pp. 125 - 126). Similar to Red Pillers, they frame sexual and romantic relationships in terms of the “sexual marketplace” and “sexual market value.”

## APPENDIX B

### LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

**Adam** is a Canadian man in his thirties. Having identified with men's rights activism in his twenties, he left the movement and eventually became a feminist. I conducted two interviews with Adam in 2016 and 2019.

**Alex** is an American man in his thirties. While working in the tech industry, he was exposed to men's rights activism and left his lucrative job to pursue a career he was passionate about. However, after becoming disillusioned with the men's rights movement and his lack of financial success in his new job, he converted to Orthodox Christianity and returned to the tech sector. I interviewed Alex in 2017, 2018, and 2020.

**Daniel** is an American veteran in his early thirties, and a divorced father. He discovered the men's rights movement when a post about father's rights was featured on the front page of Reddit. I interviewed Daniel once in 2019.

**Ellen** is an Australian woman in her thirties and a mother. She is deeply invested in intactivism — i.e. activism against male circumcision. She started to question the notion of patriarchy when she came across the Honey Badger Brigade on YouTube. I conducted one interview with Ellen in 2019.

**James** is an Australian man in his forties. He considers himself an egalitarian who others would call a men's rights activist, although he follows multiple groups connected with men's rights activism. I interviewed him once in 2018.

**Jordan** is an African American man in his twenties. He discovered the men's rights movement after other Twitter users accused him of being a men's rights activist in 2017. He identifies as a "human rights activist" because men's rights activism complements his involvement in other forms of race- and class-based activism. I interviewed Jordan once in 2019.

**Lisa** is an American woman in her twenties. Although she identifies as a leftist and socialist, she started to consider herself a men's rights activist in 2011 as she became aware of double standards that disenfranchise men. I interviewed Liz, twice, in 2018 and 2020.

**Matt** is an American man in his thirties who was previously incarcerated. After being released from prison, he came across Karen Straughan in 2015 while listening to YouTube podcasts during his work commute to and from his halfway house. I conducted one interview with Matt in 2019.

**Robert** is a gay American man in his sixties. Like Ellen, he identifies primarily as an intactivist and has been involved in anti-circumcision activism in his city. I interviewed Robert once in 2018.

**Theo** is an American man in his sixties, and a retired college professor. He identifies as “very much on the left politically” and less with men’s rights activism. His interest in the movement began when he started a Yahoo! discussion group for men. I interviewed Theo once in 2020.

**Toby** is a British man in his thirties; he has two children and a partner, and drives a truck for a living. He began questioning feminism during his late childhood, but only became “involved” with the movement when he saw Cassie Jaye’s *The Red Pill* (2016) documentary, which he discovered via YouTubers Blaire White and ShoeOnHead (June Lapine). I conducted one interview with Toby in 2019.